

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF DETENTION

People who are detained, interrogated, and tortured often suffer many unhealthy psychological effects. The conditions of detention make people suffer bad pain, humiliation, degradation, and fear. Detainees often cannot sleep, eat, or exercise in their normal way. They cannot carry on with their normal, day to day relations with people. They are not allowed to enjoy their normal comforts.

People in detention therefore have no control over the most basic functions of their lives. This loss of control, together with the pain, discomfort, deprivation, and fear, make people very prone to become psychologically disturbed. These disturbances can come about while in prison, or even some time after leaving prison. The symptoms and psychological disability can carry on for many years if the person does not get treatment.

Post-traumatic stress disorders

It is possible that, under bad pressures, people may completely lose touch with reality and become psychotic (mad). Other people may become withdrawn, depressed, feel helpless about themselves, and even become suicidal. The most common disturbance that people get once they have left prison, is a state of anxiety called post-traumatic stress disorder. People who are suffering from post-traumatic stress often remember the traumatic experiences in detention, especially torture. These memories return at any time of the day or night in the form of nightmares, or even when the person is fully awake. The fear and fright which the person felt during the actual torture, come up again when the person remembers the events during detention. This is very disturbing to the person concerned. The people suffering from post-traumatic stress will find themselves suddenly and unexpectedly trembling, crying, and becoming very anxious. These memories come back on their own, or during normal daily events which in some way are similar to the situations that the person has experienced in detention. Events such as hearing a door slam, hearing someone shouting, waiting in a queue, reading a

headline can bring back the memories of detention. The person is often unable to control these memories and they become very distressing. They make people anxious about being together with other people. They often shy away from contact with other people because they fear that they might break down in company, which can be embarrassing and humiliating. They may also become withdrawn from family and friends for fear of showing their anxieties to others. They often become short-tempered and irritable when they are with others, even or especially with close family or friends. Often, they find it difficult to concentrate on work, or on reading, or on specific tasks. This kind of behaviour comes about because the person concerned is affected by the memories of detention, and by the fear that these memories may return. People who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders often get a fright at unexpected events like sudden loud noises (cars hooting or back firing, doors banging), seeing shadows, lights suddenly being switched on bright, or seeing unfamiliar people in familiar places.

Their sleep is often disturbed by bad nightmares and by fears of going to sleep in case the nightmares might come back, or in case they will not wake up again. The sleep problems can be very serious. They may make it even more difficult for people to concentrate on their work the next day because they are very tired.

Sometimes the symptoms of fear and worry may be so bad that people will feel unreal, as though they are not in touch with their bodies or the world around them; instead, they may experience everything as if they were in a bubble, cut off from the rest of the world.

People showing these signs of stress have difficulty working efficiently in their jobs or in their families, with friends, comrades, or in their leisure time.

Experiences of detainees in other countries

While all these effects are common, they are not always to be found in all people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders. How bad the signs of stress are depends mostly on how bad the torture was which these people experienced. It has been shown in many different countries that all people who are tortured have their

breaking point, no matter how strong they are , and no matter how committed they are to the struggle. Torturers know that if they continue increasing the pressure on detainees, even the toughest will eventually reach this breaking point and crack. It follows from this that when people do develop these signs of stress, it means only that they were pressurised and tortured very badly. People who have been detained and tortured by oppressive governments in South America, Indochina, Asia, and Europe have reported similar conditions and symptoms. This shows that the kinds of reactions to detention, pressure, and torture which we have shown, are very common. Sometimes as many as 70% of all detainees will develop the symptoms of this state.

As far as treatment is concerned, medicines often help to relieve some of the symptoms, like difficulty in sleeping. But medicines alone do not cure the condition; the signs of stress often come back once the medicines are stopped. It has been found that the best and most reliable cures result from talking treatments with trained (psycho-) therapists. This form of treatment can be done individually, or in groups of fellow-sufferers. The treatment usually is successful when sufferers come to understand that the behavior which they show is a completely normal response to barbarous and inhuman cruelties. People usually recover when they are able to have faith in themselves and in the rest of the world again.

People who suffer from these difficulties and need help, can contact the Detainees' Counselling Service in Johannesburg at (011)23-6664. The service is given free by trained therapists for anyone suffering the psychological effects of detention. It is important to remember that these effects may not go away on their own, and that they will carry on disturbing and handicapping the sufferers for many years, unless they get the right treatment and help.