

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

In Volusia, Flagler police cases, PTSD and violence complex mix

Experts say disorder highly treatable, but substance abuse compounds problem

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Donna Lunsford, a nurse whose 19-year-old son was killed in a drunken-driving crash in 2000, said she suffers from post traumatic disorder and she believes associating PTSD with violent behavior stigmatizes her and others. NEWS-JOURNAL/NIGEL COOK



When retired deputy and military veteran Daniel Ruddell Jr. reportedly robbed a Daytona beach convenience store on Thanksgiving Day, then led officers on a three-county chase before being apprehended in St. Johns County, the possibility that he has "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" was noted in his arrest report.

"He closes his eyes and he gets images of Desert Storm," Ruddell's defense attorney, Mike Lambert, said recently. "He said he does have PTSD. I think it's the sole cause (for the incident)."

But the case of Ruddell Jr., who will be tried in a Volusia County courtroom on combined charges, is not unusual. Claims of PTSD in relation to violent or criminal acts are fairly common in Volusia and Flagler counties. Ruddell's case is just one of the latest, and perhaps most visible.

Some of the accused point to a diagnosis of PTSD as a criminal defense or an explanation for aberrant behavior. Others see the diagnosis as proof that someone has the capacity to commit violence. Yet it affects 7 to 8 percent of the U.S. population at any given time, not just military veterans or violent criminals.

One of those is Donna Lunsford of Palm Coast, a nurse whose son was killed in a violent accident.

Medical experts and officials with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD say the condition, on its own, does not cause violence. It's more complex than that.

"There is a big difference between being angry or more irritable and the extreme acts of violence we read about in the newspaper," said Paula Schnurr, the center's executive director. "The vast majority of people with PTSD don't commit violent acts and don't engage in the types of behaviors that we read about."

Schnurr said most people have experienced trauma. The center estimates the tally at 50 percent of women and 60 percent of men, higher for first-responders and those deployed in war zones. The traumatized include victims of terrible car accidents, sexual and physical assaults, natural disasters, or those who experience the sudden death of a loved one — especially if it's violent.

Most people experience at least some symptoms of PTSD, which include disturbing memories that recur, hyper arousal, avoidance of reminders of the trauma, and avoidance or numbing of memories of the event, Schnurr said.

"Having symptoms is not the same as having PTSD," Schnurr said. "In the majority of cases, the symptoms decrease or go away in the days or weeks that follow" a traumatic event.

To be clinically diagnosed with PTSD, someone must have experienced symptoms at a more severe level for longer than a month. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a relatively new diagnosis, formalized in the 1980s and updated in 2013 in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, or DSM-5.

Schnurr said PTSD doesn't have to be chronic and it's highly treatable through talk therapy, online self-help tools, medication and cognitive behavioral psychotherapy. Often, substance abuse can be a way that sufferers self medicate, but there are far more effective treatments for the distress that can be caused by the disorder.

LOCAL INCIDENTS

There have been several recent high-profile reports of crime in Volusia and Flagler counties in which Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has been mentioned as a possible cause or mitigating factor.

A neighbor told police that Michael Phillips, a homeless 19-year-old charged Jan. 6 with entering the Ormond Beach home of a married couple he did not know and stabbing them, suffers from PTSD.

Ruddell Jr., the retired deputy, had spent 21 years in law enforcement and was a well-regarded officer before retiring from the Flagler County Sheriff's Office in 2014.

Daniel Noble was arrested and charged in connection with an incident in which he left a Palm Coast bar then returned armed with "an Uzi-like weapon" and two knives and [dressed "like Rambo."](#) according to the arrest report. He injured two men after they jumped on him to keep

him from shooting, reports state. Noble's attorney said his client suffers from PTSD and a traumatic brain injury after serving in Iraq. At one point, Noble was declared incompetent to stand trial.

In November, Kevin Hamilton of Ormond Beach pleaded no contest to aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, domestic battery and child abuse following an incident in which his wife described him as going into a "PTSD rage." Hamilton had threatened to kill his family and himself in front of the couple's 4-year-old son, then barricaded himself in the house for several hours on Sept. 16. Hamilton is a military veteran, [according to police reports](#).

Last July, reports surfaced that Volusia County firefighter Eric Middlebrook, also a veteran, was suspended for two weeks without pay after he threatened to cut up his boss, saying: "[I'll go PTSD on you](#)."

While all of the men in those incidents, except Philips, are confirmed military veterans — police are checking out claims Philips went to boot camp — anyone can develop PTSD after a traumatic experience, medical experts say.

Donna Lunsford of Palm Coast, a registered nurse who specializes in psychiatric nursing, said she suffers from the disorder and believes associating PTSD with violent behavior stigmatizes her and others. Lunsford's 19-year-old son was killed in a drunken-driving crash in 2000.

Lunsford said she was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, but has since come to realize through her own training that she suffers from PTSD as well.

"I have PTSD from the tragic loss of my son. Does that make me violent? No, it does not," Lunsford said during a recent interview. "PTSD is caused by a traumatic event, and would not cause someone to murder someone or commit an act of violence ... Bottom line, people who commit an act of violence already have another form of mental illness ... It's just easier to blame it on that, or a good diagnosis for a defense attorney to use."

Dr. Sudip Bose, a PTSD expert, military veteran and physician who treated deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein after his discovery in a spider hole, agrees with Lunsford's assessment.

"Does (PTSD) ... cause you to pick up a gun and shoot someone? Not necessarily," Bose said. "Just because you tied your shoes before you had a heart attack doesn't mean tying your shoes caused it. I don't think it's that simple."

Schnurr also agrees PTSD alone does not directly cause violence, nor is it associated with a higher likelihood of violence.

FORMULA FOR VIOLENCE

Schnurr says the formula for violence looks more like this: Substance abuse plus PTSD plus pre-existing disposition as an angry person.

"It is that triple combination that can be especially predictive of engaging in violence," Schnurr said.

Another mental health issue besides PTSD can add to the volatility.

"The scientific evidence suggests that the statistical association between PTSD and violence is really connected to substance use," Schnurr said. "If you look at people with PTSD who don't have a problem with substance use, the effects on violent behavior are really quite small to negligible."

In one study of veterans who served post-9/11, PTSD was associated with an increased risk of violence. However, when alcohol misuse was statistically controlled, PTSD was no longer associated with an increased risk of violence, according to a report printed in the British Journal of Psychiatry.

The prevalence of violence in those with PTSD is comparable to that among people with anxiety or depressive disorders, about 5 to 11.7 percent, but increases to 9.1 percent to 34.7 percent among those with PTSD who also have a problem with substance abuse.

"Furthermore, the more diagnoses someone has, the greater the likelihood of violence," Schnurr, Sonya Norman and Eric Elbogen wrote in a report on the center's website.

OTHER FACTORS

In three of the five cases mentioned earlier — Ruddell, the former deputy, and Hamilton, the husband, and Noble, "Rambo," — investigators said there appeared to be substances involved. There's no indication whether Phillips or firefighter Middlebrook had been abusing a substance or had been diagnosed with other mental health issues.

Noble, who dressed like Rambo, had been at the bar several hours before leaving and returning armed. His attorney said he had a brain injury as well as PTSD.

Police and a girlfriend have said that Ruddell, the deputy, might be suffering from drug addiction as well as PTSD.

The wife of Hamilton, who threatened to kill her and their two young children, told police that he snapped after drinking rum and Fireball whisky. Police reported that Hamilton suffered from PTSD and a neighbor who knows him well also said he sustained a brain injury during his service in Iraq.

While many downplay military service's connection to PTSD-related homicide, not everyone does. A military veteran and Iraq wartime reporter who wrote "The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," says there is a link between wartime service and violence.

David J. Morris wrote in an April 2014 article on Slate.com that "While it is inaccurate to say that PTSD causes violence, the unfortunate truth is that there is a link between PTSD and postwar homicide ..."

He envisions a chain reaction in which imperfect people join the military, experience terrible moral dilemmas and see awful things in war zones leading to PTSD, then come home and soothe the resulting distress with addictive substances. The disorder, plus the use of substances, makes violence more likely when they are drunk or high.

"Serving in a war zone exposes people to very serious moral challenges and the experience can serve as a catalyst, making some people less stable and more violent ...," Morris writes. "War is hell and the hell rubs off."

Recent local cases involving PTSD

There have been several cases in the news recently in which Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has come up. Here are a few:

Michael Phillips, 19

Police said that Phillips went into the Ormond Beach home of Adam and Chely Phillips and stabbed them several times the morning of Dec. 27. He did not know the couple and is not related to them. His parents told police their son has PTSD and anger issues. It's not clear whether Phillips has been diagnosed with the condition or has substance abuse or other mental health issues.

Daniel Ruddell, 45

Police said that on Thanksgiving Day, the military veteran and retired law enforcement officer robbed a Daytona Beach Circle K, then led officers on a multi-county chase during which he rammed a K9 vehicle and drove at a deputy standing by the side of the road. His defense attorney and girlfriend say he has PTSD and substance abuse issues.

Kevin Hamilton, 36

In November, Kevin Hamilton of Ormond Beach pleaded no contest to aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, domestic battery and child abuse following an incident in which his wife described him as going into a "PTSD rage." Hamilton had threatened to kill his family and himself in front of the couple's 4-year-old son, then barricaded himself in the house for several hours Sept. 16. Hamilton is a veteran, according to police reports. His wife told police that he snapped after drinking rum and Fireball whisky. A neighbor said he suffered a traumatic brain injury during service in Iraq.

Daniel Noble, 39

Daniel Noble was scheduled to appear in court March for a pretrial hearing in relation to an incident in which he left a Palm Coast bar then returned armed with "an Uzi-like weapon" and two knives and dressed "like Rambo," according to the arrest report. He injured two men after they jumped on him to keep him from shooting, reports state. He had been at Europa Lounge several hours before returning. Noble's attorney said his client suffers from PTSD and a traumatic brain injury after serving in Iraq. At one point, he had been declared incompetent to stand trial.

Eric Middlebrook, 48

Volusia County firefighter Eric Middlebrook, a military veteran, was suspended for telling his battalion chief he had considered killing him and "I will go PTSD on you. I will tear you up or I will cut you up." and "I will break you up into a thousand pieces." It's unclear whether Middlebrook has been diagnosed with PTSD or if substances or other mental health issues were involved.

Jason Pemberton, 28

Police said Pemberton, the recipient of three Purple Heart awards, shot and killed his wife Tiffany Pemberton, 25, and then himself in February 2012. He was described as suffering from PTSD. It is not clear if he had substance abuse or other mental health issues.

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