

Shell Shock: A Sad Side-Effect of WWI

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Shell shock was one of the major side effects of WWI. Many soldiers suffered from it, as it was caused by the heavy explosions and constant fighting associated with the war. Troops suffering from shell shock struggled with sleep. They panicked on hearing gunshots, loud noises, shouting and similar. Sometimes it affected their ability to walk and talk. Shell shock was a scary thing.

Shell shock usually applies to WWI. After that war, a similar illness became known as “combat stress reaction.” So what exactly does it do to you? What are the symptoms?

History

Symptoms related to shell shock began to appear in the early stages of the war. British troops were one of the first to start reporting the effects. Common issues were tinnitus, which is hearing sounds when there is no actual sound to hear; headaches; dizziness; amnesia; and tremors. Troops also advised they were sensitive to noise (one of the biggest issues associated with shell shock). All of these could be related to a head injury, but most of the men lacked the physical signs of a head injury.

By 1914, the number of British troops reporting these symptoms had reached 4%, while for officers the number was 10%. Shell shock was first mentioned in the media in 1915.



Shell shock was a side-effect commonly associated with the constant bombardment of WWI

As the war moved on, the number of shell shock cases grew. However, doctors still thought it was connected to some sort of physical damage the troops were experiencing in battle. Some claimed that explosions were causing shockwaves, which were injuring the soldiers' brains. Others thought that carbon monoxide, from explosions, was causing the brain damage.

The idea that it may be an emotional issue and not a physical injury came about as troops who were not near shelling, began reporting similar symptoms. Officials, however, continued to believe it must be physical. One of the biggest problems with proving that idea wrong was that whether someone was near shelling or not was rarely reported in a casualty related to shell shock. Many people, therefore, viewed shell shock as something that was related to cowards.



The man on the left side, with the white sling around him, has the stare commonly associated with someone who has shell shock

How Were Acute and Chronic Shock Handled?

As shell shock cases started to roll in, men were taken out of the frontline as quickly as possible. That became a logistics problem. As troop size increased, so did the shell shock cases. That was when the military powers began to try and develop ways to alleviate the problem.

The soldier was given a few day's rest. Then it was recommended that his officer monitors him in the trench. If things were quiet, it was suggested the officer talked to him about anything; the war, family, etc., and reassure him.

If the problem were more severe, victims were sent to a casualty clearing station for several weeks. If they had still not recovered, they were sent for further observation. At this point, the issue was becoming chronic.

Those who developed chronic shell shock could be stuck with it for life. Reports indicate that as late as 1960, former British soldiers were still being treated for it.

Victims or Cowards

Some victims were viewed as cowards. British soldiers suffering from shell shock were put on trial for cowardice and desertion. It was considered if you “claimed” shell shock, and it continued for longer than was usual, you were suffering from a lack of character or manliness.

It was not commonplace for British troops to be executed for war crimes, but it did happen. In total, there were 240,000 court martials carried out. Of those, there were a little over 3,000 who received a death sentence, and only 346 of those were carried out. 18 were for cowardice but desertion was the main reason for executions, amounting to over 260.

How Was it Treated in the Early Stages?

At first, sufferers were given time off, but there were other ways it was treated, some of which were quite harsh. Public shaming and causing pain to the soldier were some of the most commonly used methods to get troops over shell shock.



This is one of the ways electric shock therapy was administered around the time of WW1. By Otis Historical Archives National Museum of Health and Medicine – CC BY 2.0

Electric shock therapy was also used, to cause seizures in the body. The intention was to allow the body to have some relief from psychiatric illnesses, including shell shock.

Banned

The word shell shock was banned from being used, by several different countries. Late in the war, the British Army banned it from being used for a diagnosis. They also instructed it was not to be used in the media or journals and should be censored out.

Many Names

Since WWI, the ailment has taken on many different names. Today, one of the common side-effects of war is post-traumatic stress disorder. Both issues carry some of the same symptoms, but they are not quite the same thing. None the less, some form of shell shock will continue to wreak havoc on soldiers for as long as wars continue.