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Emotional Processing in Combat-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Comparison with Traumatized and Normal Controls

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Abstract—Emotional numbing (EN) symptoms are an important but poorly understood component of the response to trauma. To try to demonstrate EN, this laboratory study examined subjective and psychophysiological emotion responses to standardized visual stimuli in combat veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), combat veterans without PTSD, and nontraumatized controls. PTSD subjects showed no evidence of generalized reduction in subjective or psychophysiological emotion responses. In response to a subset of more evocative stimuli, PTSD subjects reported less experience of Positive Emotions, and more experience of Negative Emotions than controls. For controls, valence and arousal were uncorrelated, while they were negatively correlated for PTSD subjects. Verbal and nonverbal subjective emotion measures were positively correlated for all subject groups, but there was little correlation between subjective emotion measures and psychophysiological indices. Viewing time was positively correlated with Positive Emotions for PTSD subjects, and with Negative Emotions for combat controls. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Diminished or blunted emotional responding, sometimes called “emotional numbing” (EN), constitutes one of the central symptoms in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Horowitz, 1986). Symptoms of EN include diminished interest in activities, feeling detached or estranged from others, and restricted range of affect (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). While blunted emotional responses are defined in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) as part of the avoidance cluster of PTSD symptoms, their exact nature remains elusive (Litz, 1992). Recent findings that EN is best predicted not by the intensity of other avoidant symptoms, but by the intensity of self-reported hyperarousal symptoms (Litz et al., 1997), as well as factor analytic evidence that self-report items and structured interview responses focusing on avoidance may actually measure separate avoidance and numbing factors (Amdur & Liberzon, in press; King, Leskin, King, & Weathers, 1998), further suggest that the true nature of EN symptoms is poorly understood. The cause of EN is equally unclear. These symptoms might occur because PTSD subjects behaviorally or cognitively avoid stimuli that would evoke emotions, or due to “depletion of biological and psychological emotional processing resources” (Litz et al., 1997).

Along with EN, subjects with PTSD experience seemingly conflicting symptoms: intense affect states in which they feel overwhelmingly angry, sad, frightened, hyperaroused, and hypervigilant. It is unclear how EN and hyperemotionality co-exist in the same patient. It is possible that EN occurs cyclically, alternating with states of intense affect (as suggested by Horowitz, 1986), or that EN occurs concurrently with hyperemotionality, or that there are subtypes of PTSD, one with predominantly EN symptoms and the other predominantly hyperemotional. Furthermore, patients with PTSD often find it difficult to verbalize their emotional states (“alexithymia”; Hyer, Woods, & Boudwyns, 1991; Krystal, 1988; Krystal, Giller, & Cicchetti, 1986; Wehmer, Brejnak, Lumley, & Stettner, 1995). This suggests that there might be a discrepancy between the semantic report and the subjective or bodily experiences of the patient. Consequently, the present study employs both physiological and self-report measures of emotional responding.

EN, being a broad and loosely defined concept, has been difficult to study. Alternative conceptualizations of EN have been proposed, including: (a) a generalized deficit in emotional responding, (b) a deficit in emotional responding to positive events only, and (c) a deficit in certain emotion responses only (Litz, 1992). To further elucidate this complex phenomenon, an operational description of EN is needed that would include a set of measurable changes in specific response parameters, which occur in reaction to clearly defined emotional stimuli. This definition should specify whether there is a reduction in emotion frequency or intensity, and whether it occurs in subjective,

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