

Samuel Pepys and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

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Summary: Samuel Pepys's diary allows us an opportunity to see how a man of acknowledged ability and stability coped with the severe psychological trauma of being involved in the Great Fire of London in 1666. His self-monitoring provides an excellent record of the development of post-traumatic stress disorder and an account of his coping behaviour. Despite being one of the newest categories of mental disorder in the official nomenclature, post-traumatic stress disorder has obviously had a long existence.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is one of the newest categories of psychiatric illness to be assigned official status in the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 1978). Interest in the disorder has developed from studies of combat neuroses, pathological grief, motor vehicle and industrial accidents, rape trauma and syndromes following disasters. The essential feature is the development of characteristic symptoms after the experiencing of a psychologically traumatic event or events outside the range of human experience usually considered to be normal. The characteristic symptoms involve re-experiencing the traumatic event, numbing of responsiveness to, or involvement with, the external world and a variety of other autonomic, dysphoric, or cognitive symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 1978). Previous nomenclatures have been less specific. In the *Ninth Revision of the International Classification of Diseases* (World Health Organisation, 1978), there are a number of sub-categories under 'acute reaction to stress' and 'adjustment reaction' in which there is particular emphasis on depressive reactions following acute stress and on the brief and reversible nature of these reactions.

Since many of the new writings about post-traumatic stress disorder concern modern experiences and modern responses, which may be culturally determined, it might be reasonable to question the validity and the reliability of diagnosis of this new syndrome. One might query the temporal constancy of post-traumatic stress disorder and ask whether it has just appeared or if it always existed.

The Diary of Samuel Pepys (ed. Latham and Matthews, 1970–83) affords us an opportunity to examine the subjective feelings of an individual who experienced and chronicled two major 17th-century disasters, namely the Plague and, one year later, the Great Fire of London. His detailed recording of

events, social behaviour, feelings, insights and associative ideas make his account of the sequelae of these disasters worthy of psychiatric attention. Previous medical writers considering Pepys have dealt particularly with his surgical problems (Power, 1895; Riches, 1977) and his medical problems (Newman, 1980). His value to the psychological understanding of the healthy individual has been described by Stein (1977), but his response to stress has not previously been examined.

This paper deals only with the Fire: as a stressor it is more discrete, and more comparable to present-day disasters, than the Plague, which in any case appeared to cause him less subjective distress.

Pepys's account of the fire and its aftermath

Pepys's account of the Fire begins in the entry for Sunday the 2nd of September 1666, although the entry for the 1st of September hints at an unconscious association with the fire: 'my wife and Mercer and I to Polichenelly, but were there horribly frightened to see young Killigrew come in with a great many more young sparks; but we hid ourselves, so as we think they did not see us.' This entry may be explained by chance or premonition, or by Pepys's retrospective recording of events.

Under the entry of Sunday the 2nd of September, Pepys describes how his maids called him at about 3 a.m. to tell him of an extensive fire they saw in the City. Having viewed the fire himself, he thought that it was a safe distance away and that he could go back to sleep. At about 7 a.m. he looked at the fire again and thought that it was even further away. Soon afterwards he was told that about three hundred houses had been burned and that the Fire had taken hold in Fish Street near London Bridge. He walked to the Tower where he saw the fire for himself and was told by the

Lieutenant of the Tower how the fire was reputed to have started. He then took a boat to view the fire better and described it as 'lamentable', giving a graphic description of people attempting to remove their goods and being reluctant to leave their houses before the fire reached them.

He later made his way to the King's apartments in Whitehall. He records that he was summoned inside and told the King and the Duke of York what he had seen and suggested pulling down houses to stop the fire. The King commanded him to go to the Lord Mayor, Sir Thomas Bloodworth, and tell him to spare no houses in stemming the spread of the fire. Pepys went to do this, and eventually found the Lord Mayor 'like a man spent, with a handkercher about his neck. To the King's message, he cried like a fainting woman, "Lord, what can I do? I am spent. People will not obey me. I have been pulling down houses. But the fire overtakes us faster than we can do it".'

Pepys recounts various anecdotes of the Fire throughout that day, and people's terror and frustration at being unable to protect their property or stop the fire. By noon he was recording that 'we were in great trouble and disturbances at this fire, not knowing what to think of it'. He was nevertheless able to recall in detail various reactions and events, and the meals that sustained him during that day. By the evening he had begun to personalize the Fire as 'a most horrid malicious bloody flame, not like the fine flame of an ordinary fire'; and 'a horrid noise the flames made, and the crackling of houses at their ruins. So home with a sad heart, and there find everybody discoursing and lamenting the fire'.

Soon after arriving home he set about collecting his valuables in preparation for transportation or for stowing in his cellar, which he thought to be safe. This gave him some reassurance and he recorded on Monday the 3rd of September; 'I am eased at heart to have my treasure so well secured.' Nevertheless, the household got no sleep on the Sunday night, mostly because of their efforts to get their belongings transported to safety.

Evidence of the Pepys family's difficulty in coping is shown by his wife Elizabeth in her going to find Mercer, their servant, who had against all orders fled to her mother. When Elizabeth found her she beat her, which led to a row with the mother and to Mercer's being sent away.

Tuesday the 4th of September saw the members of the household continuing to move their goods. At the same time, Pepys, the good civil servant, set about making plans for protecting the Naval Office, the destruction of which would 'much hinder the King's business.' There is no hint of the severe distress of the 2nd when he had written 'so great was our fear.'

As always, Pepys carefully recorded his diet; 'a shoulder of mutton from the cook's, without any napkin or anything, in a sad manner but were merry. Only, now and then walking into the garden and saw how horribly the sky looks, all on a fire in the night, was enough to put us out of our wits; and indeed it was extremely dreadfull for it looks just as if it was at us, and the whole heaven on fire'. He later went to view the blowing up of houses in Tower Street, and those next to the Tower, because of the Fire's developing 'extraordinary vehemence'.

After three days of the Fire, on Wednesday 5th September, he recorded; 'I lay down in the office again upon W. Hewer's quilt, being mighty weary and sore in my feet with going till I was hardly able to stand. About 2 in the morning my wife calls me up and tells me of new Cryes of "Fyre", it being come to Barkeing Church, which is the bottom of our lane'. At this point he resolved to take his wife, gold and retainers away by boat. He found the city gates shut but unguarded, which worried him because of rumours of a French plot. Later that day he recorded 'and to Sir W. Penn's and there eat a piece of cold meat, having eaten nothing since Sunday but the remains of Sunday's dinner'. Given his anxiety and preoccupations, it is perhaps not surprising (or understandable) that he had forgotten the shoulder of mutton from the day before.

He had a good night's sleep on Wednesday the 5th, and the next morning recorded various unfounded rumours of French and Dutch plots. More significantly, he wrote: 'But it is a strange thing to see how long this time did look since Sunday, having been always full of variety of actions, and little sleep, that it looked like a week or more. And I had forgot almost the day of the week.' His appetite had not deserted him later that day when he dined at Sir R. Ford's: 'in an earthen platter a fried breast of mutton. . . as good a meal, though as ugly a one, as ever I had in my life'. He began to feel more relaxed and wrote that they were 'mighty merry, and our fears over'. However, on the night of the 7th he wrote: 'and did sleep pretty well; but still, both sleeping and waking, had fear of fire in my heart, that I took little rest'.

People had begun to blame and criticize the Lord Mayor for his 'simplicity', and Pepys was very anxious to understand the scapegoat phenomenon. He expressed alarm that there would be 'public distractions' because of people seeking to blame the French.

The aftermath of the fire and the impact it made upon Pepys is also recorded in his entry for Friday the 7th: 'walked thence, and saw the town burned, and a miserable sight of Paul's church, with all the roofs fallen, and the body of the Quire fallen into St. Fayths . . . my father's house, and the church and a good part of the temple the like . . . it is a proper time for

discontents—but all men's minds are full of care to protect themselves and save their goods. The Militia is in arms everywhere'. Subsequent days were busy, and there are only meagre recordings in the diary, but these indicate considerable activity and observation. On Saturday the 15th of September he recorded going home to bed 'and find, to my infinite joy, many rooms clean, and myself and wife lie in our chamber again'. Despite the reassurance of seeing things returned to their usual obsessional normality he recorded: 'but much terrified in the nights nowadays, with dreams of fire and falling down of houses'. He continued to complain in his diary about the poor quality of food being offered at friend's houses, indicating perhaps some displacement of his anger and discontent.

His subjective distress continued, and on the 11th of November he recorded: 'Woolly's wife a silly woman and not very handsome, but no spirit in her at all—and their discourse mean. And the fear of the troubles of the times hath made them not to bring their plate to town since it was carried out upon the business of the Fire, so that they drink in earth and a wooden can, which I do not like. So home, and my people to bed. I late to finish my song, and then to bed also. And the business of the firing of the City, and the fears we have of new troubles and violences, and the fear of the fire among ourselves, did keep me awake a good while, considering the sad condition I and my family should be in. So at last to sleep.'

He went about his business during the subsequent month and continued his usual lively recording of detail, there is no further mention of concern about the Fire until December 1st, when his anger emerged on meeting Lord Mayor Bloodworth. Perhaps Pepys felt a hint of reproach in the Lord Mayor's 'complaining that now (as everybody did lately in the Fire) everybody endeavours to save himself and let the whole perish'. Pepys countered with: 'but a very weak man he seems to be'.

On the 24th of January 1667, Pepys wrote: 'While we were sitting in the morning at the office, we were frightened with news of fire at Sir W. Batten's by (a) chimney taking fire; and it put me into much fear and trouble, but with a great many hands and pains it was soon stopped'. This is a marginal note, which may indicate that he had forgotten the event during the initial recording of his diary.

By the 3rd of February 1667 he was writing philosophically of the Fire, quoting Nostradamus's successful prophecies of events. He went on to recall the discussion at dinner with Sir Geo. Carteret, when Lady Carteret herself 'did tell us how, (during the fire) abundance of pieces of burnt papers were cast by the wind as far as Cranbourne; and among others, she took up one, or had one brought her to see, which was a

little bit of paper that had been printed, wherein there remained no more nor less than these words: "Time is; it is done." He had begun to think, as others did, that the Fire had been in some way predestined and inevitable—a not uncommon mode of defence against the anxiety and recrimination which follow disaster. Despite this effort, his diary entry on the 13th of February displays residual anxiety: 'a foul evening this was tonight, and mightily troubled to get a coach home; and, which is now my common practice, going over the ruins in the night, I rid with my sword drawn in the Coach.'

On the 24th of February 1667, in the context of discussing the rebuilding of the city, he wrote of his enquiry about the Frenchman who had confessed to being hired to start the fire and had been hanged for it. There was, of course, a great deal of uncertainty about the start of the Fire. Pepys mentions the baker's family in whose house the fire was reported to have started: 'They are, as they swear, in absolute ignorance how this fire should come—which is a strange thing, that so horrid an effect should have so mean and uncertain a beginning.' Two sentences later (perhaps because of affective association) he refers to an account by his waterman of how the mistress of the Beare Tavern committed suicide by drowning. 'It appears hath had long melancholy upon her.'

On the 18th of February 1667, six months after the Fire, he recorded: 'I did within these six days see smoke still remaining of the late fire in the City; and it is strange to think how to this very day I cannot sleep a-night without great terrors of fire; and this very night could not sleep till almost 2 in the morning through thoughts of fire.' On the 23rd of March he noted irritably: 'vexed with our maid Luce, our cook-maid, who is a good drudging servant in everything else and pleases us, but that she will be drunk, and hath been so last night and all this day, that she could not make clean the house—my fear is only the fire.'

Despite these references to his considerable inner turmoil, Pepys made no further mention of the Fire until the 14th of January 1668, when he visited his bookseller and fell into a discussion about the burning of the City. Thereafter he continued to record all that was told him about the burning of various buildings and churches. He was extremely critical of the Bishop of London's treatment of his tenants in charging them rent when their premises had been destroyed.

On the 21st of January 1668, Pepys referred to the psychological sequelae of the disaster for others. He was summoned to see the husband of Kate Joyce, his cousin, who was dying as a result of having 'sober and quiet', flung himself into a pond. He had been spotted, pulled out and resuscitated. 'He confessed his doing the thing, being led by the devil; and doth declare his

reason to be his trouble that he found in having forgot to serve God as he ought since he came to his employment (he kept a tavern): and I believe that, and the sense of his great loss by the fire, did bring him to it, and so everybody concludes . . . and there grew worse to this day.' Since death by suicide made a man's estate forfeit and liable to seizure by the Crown, Pepys was prevailed upon to take away some silver flagons which he had given them. This provoked him to considerable fear of being arrested 'though there was no reason for it, he (Joyce) not being dead'. (When Joyce eventually died, Pepys was fortunately able to use his influence with the King to obtain a grant such that the estate went to the widow and children). He notes, in association, that as he left there was a 'chimney on fire at Whitehall in the King's Closet but there was no danger'.

Discussion

The post-traumatic stress disorder described in the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 1978) has certain well-defined characteristics:

1. It occurs after a recognizable stressful experience which might be expected to evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost all individuals.

2. There is a tendency to re-experience the traumatic event. This may occur in several different ways:

- (a) As a series of recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event
- (b) As recurrent dreams of the event
- (c) The subject may suddenly act or feel as if the traumatic event was still occurring, because of some association of ideas or environmental stimulant

3. There is a tendency towards numbing of responses to the external world, or reduced involvement. This begins some time after the traumatic event and is demonstrated by at least one of the following:

- (a) Markedly diminished interest in one or more significant activities
- (b) Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others
- (c) Marked constriction of affective responses

4. The condition is confirmed by the presence after the traumatic event of at least two of the following symptoms, if they were not there before:

- (a) Hyperaltness or exaggerated startle responses
- (b) Initial, middle or terminal sleep disturbance
- (c) Guilt about surviving when others have not, or about behaviour required to achieve survival
- (d) Memory impairment or loss of concentration

- (e) Avoidance of activities that arouse recollection of the traumatic event
- (f) Intensification of symptoms on exposure to events that symbolize or resemble the traumatic event

Samuel Pepys, his family, his friends and his neighbours were exposed to a disaster comparable to modern catastrophes. After his initial reaction of disbelief, Pepys showed the constructive coping qualities of good judgement and steadiness which were eventually to bring him to high public office and general high esteem. He found that his constructive behaviour allayed his anxiety. Nevertheless, during his traumatic experience he described subjective fear and showed an understandable irritability and tendency to criticize others. He also personalized the menace that faced him. His considerable anxiety was accompanied by insomnia (see para 4(b)) and mild depersonalization (para 3(b)). He showed some evidence of memory impairment (para 4(d)) and self-defence against guilt about saving himself and his property (para 4(c)). His diary records the tendency for rumours to spread easily during times of public disquiet. He also had nightmares of the Fire (para 2(b)), and various ideas and physical situations brought forth anxious feelings associated with the Fire (para 4(f)): these are recorded as persisting for at least eight months, after which there appears to be no further mention of such symptoms.

Considering the severity of the stressful experience and the moderate degree of disability it produced in Pepys, one must conclude that he was psychologically very healthy. However, by his careful subjective monitoring he has helped to establish the temporal constancy of post-traumatic stress disorder.

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