

## Nonfiction Sample

*NOTE: This is a chapter from a nonfiction manuscript I edited for a prominent psychiatrist.*

### **Psychological Issues Due to Prolonged Isolation**

In 2010, thirty-three Chilean miners were trapped in a mine for a record sixty-nine days. After they were finally rescued, I received a phone call from a Los Angeles Times reporter asking me for my take on the psychological issues that the trapped miners may have gone through and what sort of trauma lay ahead for them. I was glad to offer my services.

After the phone call, I kept reflecting on the events of the miners. Except for telephone communication and a thin tube through which small items were passed, they were completely isolated in a small space. I do not know what trauma they experienced during the collapse or whether they had moments where they felt their lives were in immediate danger. I initially assumed that these miners should be accustomed to the risks of their profession. But as I ruminated on the subject further, I asked myself—can anyone ever really be prepared for such a traumatic event, even if they know of the possibility?

When people experience a traumatic event that is life-threatening to themselves or others, there is a good chance they will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If they are trained for a possible traumatic experience, it may help them mitigate the trauma, but it will not keep them from being immune to the effects.

While prolonged isolation in a mine appears to be unprecedented, there are certain professions in which prolonged isolation is an anticipated part of the job description.

### **Space Travel and Isolation**

Astronauts and cosmonauts may be isolated on space stations for long periods. Several years ago, a Russian cosmonaut wryly remarked, “All the conditions necessary for murder are met if you shut two men in a cabin measuring five by six meters and leave them together for two months.”

With a larger group, there will likely be less intense reactions between two individuals—but it certainly can happen. Reports have been divided regarding the psychological effects of

astronauts during prolonged periods of isolation. Their response to prolonged isolation usually goes through three phases.

During the first phase (about two months), they remain busy and successfully adapt to their new environment. In the second phase, there are clear signs of fatigue and low motivation. The astronauts become hypersensitive, nervous, and irritable in the final phase.

Many experts have expressed concern about the much-anticipated expedition to Mars, stating that even the slightest breach of the spaceship could cause death. The most likely cause would be a meteor or sun flare. However, an even more significant danger may stem from long-term isolation in small quarters.

## **I Can Just Leave, Right?**

Naval personnel on submarine missions and scientists collecting data in Antarctica are other examples of people being isolated for prolonged periods. The psychological problems in these environments stem from limited resources, unchanging social groups, social isolation, limited communication with the outside world, a self-contained ecosystem, the constant sense of danger, physical confinement, lack of privacy, and dependence on a machine-dominated environment.

This defines the anticipated psychological challenges facing a trapped miner. However, two significant differences exist between the trapped miners and scientists in Antarctica and the submarine personnel: the latter chose to be in isolation and could leave if they had to.

## **Treatment for Prolonged Isolation**

The first rule for treating people potentially traumatized by prolonged isolation is to give them the four basic necessities of life: food, water, clothing, and shelter. This is followed by much-needed contact and communication with others. The patient must know they are receiving honest information and communication and that someone is there for them.

People experiencing (or recently experienced) a crisis always want to know what is happening and what is being planned for the immediate future. While it is good to supply them with as much information as possible, sometimes it does not help to give them all the 'bad news'

upfront, primarily if it does not serve any purpose. Sometimes, it is best to ease them into information on a need-to-know basis.

It is challenging to anticipate each individual's psychological reactions to prolonged isolation; this is true for the duration of the event and the aftermath. Perhaps the best indication is how they have handled previous trauma. Notably, the presence of severe mental illness does not predict a severe reaction. For example, during World War II in Europe, there was a diminution of existing mental diseases compared to peacetime.

One universal response to an overwhelming trauma is to try to block it out, either by isolating the emotional reactions or the memory of the traumatic event(s). People will report that, amid a traumatic event, it seemed like something was happening to someone else. The degree to which they keep these memories and feelings out of their consciousness can be related to any subsequent symptoms they may have.

The most prominent symptoms of PTSD are flashbacks, nightmares, being quickly reminded of the trauma, reoccurring feelings, and going out of one's way to avoid any reminders of the trauma. When these problems occur, they can be very brief and transient. They may not appear until weeks or months after the traumatic event. However, when the symptoms become apparent, they may persist for years or even a lifetime if not treated.

## **Treatments**

CBT (Cognitive Behavior Therapy) has been used successfully in treating PTSD as well as OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). This is a therapy that seems to counter negative feelings about the experience, as well as teaching the patient relaxation techniques as they mentally re-experience some of their traumatic memories.

Other patients benefit from talk therapy, which helps them explore the psychological meaning of this experience, as well as deal with relationship issues and resultant substance abuse problems. However, most people in such situations will have the resiliency to put these events into perspective and return to functioning normally.