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Stockholm syndrome -A self delusive survival strategy

Minu .S.Nair

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Abstract

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*Corresponding Author

Minu .S. Nair,
Asst.Professor(Department of Mental Health Nursing),
People's College of Nursing and Research Centre,
Bhopal(M.P)

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INTRODUCTION

Stockholm syndrome is a psychological phenomenon in which hostages express empathy, sympathy and positive feelings towards their captors sometimes to the point of defending and identifying with their captors. These feelings are generally considered in light of the danger or risk endured by the victims who essentially mistake a lack of abuse from their captors for an act of kindness.

HISTORY

Stockholm syndrome is named after the Norrmalmstrog robbery of Kreditbanken at Norrmalmstrog in Stockholm, Sweden. During the crime, several bank employees were held hostage in a bank vault from August 23 to 27, 1973 while their captors negotiated with police .During this standoff, the victims became emotionally attached to their captors, rejected assistance from government officials at one point and even defended their captors after they were freed from their six day ordeal. The term was coined by the criminologist and psychiatrist Nils Bejerot, consultant psychiatrist to the police when it happened

EXPLANATION BY EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGISTS

Evolutionary psychologists explain that the Stockholm syndrome can be linked back to our hunter gatherer ancestors.They stated that the women in those societies often faced the problem of being captured by another tribe.These women often had their children killed and they were put in several situations where their lives were at risk .By developing a bond to that tribe they would ensure their survival .Because of the frequency of these abductions capture bonding developed into one of the adaptive traits in the human population. The syndrome is encouraged in crime situations because it can increase the hostages' chances for survival but those experiencing it are usually not very cooperative during rescue or prosecution.

CAUSES OF STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

The exact reason behind Stockholm syndrome is very complex and many theories have been put forward describing the factors responsible for this psychological phenomenon. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) study of over 1200 hostage taking incidents found that 92% of the hostages did not develop Stockholm syndrome. FBI researchers then interviewed flight attendants who had been taken hostage during airplane hijackings and concluded that three factors are necessary for the syndrome to develop

- The crisis situation lasts for several days or longer.
- The hostage takers remain in contact with the hostages i.e. hostages are not placed in a separate room.
- Hostage takers show some kindness towards the hostages or at least refrain from harming them.

Normally kidnappers are expected to treat their victims very harshly which results into hatred, whereas a kinder treatment does just the opposite.

SYMPTOMS OF STOCKHOLM SYNDROME:

Like any other Syndrome, Stockholm syndrome too has symptoms. People with Stockholm syndrome report the same symptoms as those diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The symptoms are

- Insomnia.
- Nightmares.
- General irritability.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Being easily startled.
- Feelings of unreality.
- Inability to enjoy previously pleasurable experiences.
- Distrust.
- Flashbacks.

Apart from this some other symptoms are also found in the person. They are as follows

- Positive feelings toward the abuser.
- Negative feeling towards family, friends or authorities trying to rescue them.
- Support of abusers reasons and behavior.
- Inability to engage in behavior that may assist in their release.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF STOCKHOLM SYNDROME:

Stockholm syndrome is a descriptive term for a pattern of coping with a traumatic situation rather than a diagnostic category. Most psychiatrists would use the diagnostic criteria for Acute Stress disorder or PTSD when evaluating a person with Stockholm syndrome.

As for treatment currently there is no available medication or drug that can instantly cure Stockholm Syndrome. Some patients are given anti-anxiety medication or other prescriptions to help them with their nervousness and anxiety. The treatment is the same as for PTSD, most commonly a combination for short term sleep disturbance and psychotherapy for longer term symptoms.

Group therapy is the frequently used method. Victims will learn to deal with their emotions and form new relationships with others who have been through similar situations. They will learn to cope with their present and move on from Stockholm syndrome. Family therapy is also another common therapy where the victims will openly talk about their feelings and concerns to their family, so that their family can have a better idea about how to help them.

PROGNOSIS

The prognosis is generally good but the length of treatment needed depends on several variables like the nature of hostage situation, the length of time the crisis lasted and the individual person's general coping style and previous experiences of trauma.

TWO POPULAR CASES OF STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

1. Patty Hearst's Kidnapping

The most famous case of Stockholm syndrome is probably the kidnapping of Patty Hearst. She was the granddaughter of newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst, and she was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974. Patty Hearst was held by them for over a year before she, and they, were captured by the FBI. During her time with them, Patty Hearst joined the Army and participated in robberies. She was sentenced to 35 years in prison in 1975 and released by President Carter in 1979. Later, President Clinton gave her a full pardon. It is believed that Patty Hearst suffered from Stockholm syndrome. According to Hearst's testimony, she was in a closet blindfolded with her hands tied for a week, during this time DeFreeze repeatedly threatened her with death. She was let out for meals and, blindfolded, began to join in the political discussions; she was given a flashlight and SLA political tracts to learn. After she had been confined in the closet for weeks, "DeFreeze told me that the war council had decided or was thinking about killing me or me staying with them, and that I better start thinking about that as a possibility." Hearst said "I accommodated my thoughts to coincide with theirs". Asked for her decision, Hearst said she wanted to stay and fight with the SLA, and the blindfold was removed, allowing her to see her captors for the first time. After this she was given lessons on her duties, especially weapons drills, every day. Angela Atwood told Hearst that the others thought she should know what sexual freedom was like in the unit, she was then raped by William Wolfe, and later by DeFreeze.

2. McElroy's Kidnapping

Twenty-five-year-old McElroy was kidnapped while taking a bubble bath in her father's home on the evening of May 27, 1933. Her abductors were brothers George and Walter McGee, Clarence Click, and Clarence Stevens. Walter McGee, a divorced ex-con from Oregon, was the gang leader. McGee and Stevens donned masks, forced their way into the house with a sawed-off shotgun, and allowed McElroy time to dry her and get dressed. She apparently did not take them very seriously; when told that \$60,000 was going to be demanded in exchange for her release, she joked "I'm worth more than that!"

McElroy was taken to a farmhouse in Shawnee, Kansas owned by Click, where she was chained to a wall in the basement.

The abduction and the subsequent fallout proved to be extremely traumatic for Mary McElroy, and she suffered several 'nervous collapses' in her years after the case. She remained on good terms with the McGee brothers, visiting them in prison and bringing them gifts. She never married and is known to have been addicted to opium. She lived with her father, Judge McElroy for most of her adult life. His death in 1939 devastated her, and she became increasingly reclusive.

On January 21, 1940, her maid discovered McElroy's body in her bedroom; she had committed suicide, shooting herself in the head with a small pistol. She left a suicide note which read: "My four kidnappers are probably the four people on earth who don't consider me an utter fool. You have your death penalty now - so - please - give them a chance. McElroy was 32. At the time of her death, Walter and George McGee (34 and 29 respectively) were still in prison, Clarence Click had been released in 1938, and Clarence Stevens was still at large.

CONCLUSION

Stockholm syndrome is a phenomenon where the victims exhibit positive feelings and emotions towards their kidnappers or captors, to the extent that they develop negative feelings towards their families, friends or those trying to get them rid of this captivity. Many hypotheses have been proposed but the most accepted one is that of the Evolutionary Psychologists who believed that Stockholm syndrome is a trait passed on from the hunter gatherer ancestors, where the women would develop a bond to a tribe outside their tribe so as to ensure their survival.

The causes of Stockholm syndrome are small kindness from captors, presence of a perceived threat to one's life, the perceived inability to escape the situation, hence the patient would show symptoms like positive feelings towards abductor, support the reasons and behavior of abusers. The treatment is similar to that of PTSD, family therapy and group therapy accompanied with counseling is often used to treat this syndrome.

Hence Stockholm syndrome is a self-defensive survival mechanism adopted by the victim to protect self from the extreme stress and fear of perceived threat from the abuser or abductor. Hence the victims believe that by developing an emotional bond with the abductor would ensure their survival and a small gesture of kindness from the abductor's part makes them see their captor in a more positive light.

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