

Oskar's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

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English 102

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April 19th, 2017

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In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, the story follows Oskar, an odd 9-year-old who recently lost his father in the 9/11 terrorist attack. He is described in this story as exhibiting odd behaviors that one would not expect from a 9-year-old, such as asking to kiss an adult, or refusing to go above the 9th story of a building. These behaviors, though they come off as quirky and interesting, when combined with the context of the novel lead to the suspicion that Oskar might have a deeper reason for these bizarre tendencies and interactions. In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Oskar has post-traumatic stress disorder, explained by the odd behaviors he exhibits throughout the novel.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is commonly referred to as PTSD, a condition caused by exposure to intense stress or trauma. Though anyone can develop this disorder, it is commonly associated with war veterans or troops, as they are a large group exposed to severe trauma. Other cases include survivors of natural disasters, physical abuse, or other traumatic events. 9/11 survivors and those effected by the disaster were prone to developing PTSD due to the severe and tragic nature of the event. "The major finding from the initial report by Galea et al. (2002) was that at 5-8 weeks following the attacks, the prevalence of current (i.e., past month) probable PTSD related to the terrorist attacks was 7.5% in Manhattan." (Resnick, Galea, Kilpatrick, & Vlahov, 2004). When looking at Figure 1, taken from the Society of Neuroscience, a significant increase in PTSD can be seen from the previous year, 2000.

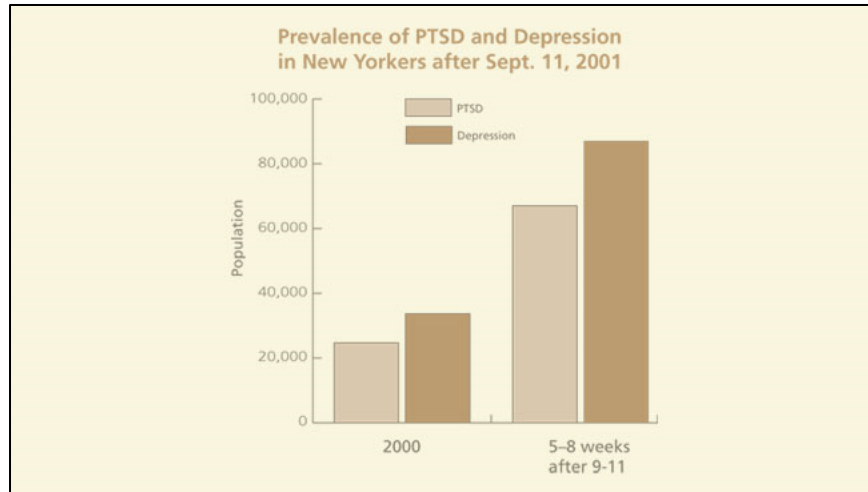


Figure 1 (Mehta, 2011)

PTSD is most commonly characterized by flashbacks of the traumatic event. “It’s a feeling. For me, the feeling is pure, unadulterated dread. The certain knowledge that something terrible is going to happen, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.” (detroidmechwords, 2011) These flashbacks can be intrusive and are often caused by reminders, such as anniversaries or similarities in setting as simple as lighting.

Though flashbacks are the most known symptom, those with PTSD also suffer with other symptoms such as bad dreams, pessimism, avoidance of associated objects or places, and outbursts of anger or sadness. “...somebody pointing a toy gun, or a real one, at me causes an instant feeling of anger now. It’s not a full-blown flashback, just a trained response that there’s very little I can do to block.” (detroidmechwords, 2011) Though these reactions can be dealt with and controlled with time, the people suffering with PTSD must deal with the symptoms daily.

Oskar Schell in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* exhibits many of the behaviors associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, the most obvious being his flashbacks to the messages his father left on the answering machine. These messages were left by his father in the moments before he died, and Oskar had not picked up the phone. After, he hid the messages,

keeping them from his mother. After this, he has flashbacks to the messages multiple times throughout the novel, at seemingly random times, such as when he left Mr. Black's apartment after turning on his hearing aid. "...the sound of his own voice made him cry the most. Message three. 9:31 A.M. *Hello? Hello? Hello?*" (Foer, 2005, p. 168). Though unrelated to the situation, Oskar has a flashback to his father's third message on the answering machine. It can be noted that when the reader is seeing the flashbacks from Oskar's perspective, the audio is clear and his father's words are not broken in the message, yet when his grandfather listens to the messages, they are written much different, with large spaces between the broken words and entirely in caps, as if Oskar's father had to yell to make himself heard over other sounds.

Along with the flashbacks, Oskar also shows other symptoms of PTSD such as bursts of anger, avoidance, and sleeping difficulties. To elaborate, a vivid vision Oskar had during a school play involved him beating one of his school mates with a mask.

From the novel, written in play script format,

[I pull the skull of my head. Even though it's made of papier-mache it's really hard. I smash it against JIMMY SNYDER's head, and I smash it again. He falls to the ground, because he is unconscious, and I can't believe how strong I actually am. I smash his head again with all my force and blood starts to come out of his nose and ears. But I still don't feel any sympathy for him. I want him to bleed, because he deserves it. And nothing else makes any sense. DAD doesn't make sense. MOM doesn't make sense ... The only thing that makes any sense right then is my smashing JIMMY SNYDER's face. His blood. I knock a bunch of teeth into his mouth, and I think they go down his throat. There is blood everywhere, covering everything. I keep smashing the skull against his skull, which is also RON's skull (for letting MOM get on with life) and MOM's skull (for getting on with

life) and DAD's skull (for dying) ... and the skulls of everyone else I know. THE AUDIENCE is applauding, all of them, because I am making so much sense.] (Foer, 2005, p. 146)

This kind of attitude towards others is seen at rare moments throughout the novel, Oskar is portrayed as someone that has struggles with his close family and acquaintances, but a drastic and vivid daydream such as this is out of character, and could be classified as the kind of outburst that is commonly observed in people with post-traumatic stress disorder. The other kind of anger that he demonstrates is also internal, such as when Mr. Black told Oskar that he would no longer search for the lock with him. "I got on my tiptoes and put my mouth next to his ear and shouted, 'Fuck you!'," No, I shook his hand..." (Foer, 2005, p. 254) This shows that though Oskar has these angry thoughts, he does show constraint. This of course, is not always the case, as he is seen yelling at his mother on more than one occasion, and not in a vision or thought.

Avoidance can be seen in several different ways, the most obvious being Oskar's fear to go up high in buildings, his anxiety around public transport, and his unwillingness to answer the phone. His fear of being high in buildings comes out during one of his first visits with people for Black as a last name. The man lived on the ninth floor of his building, and Oskar refused to go up that high, responding with, "It's not safe." (Foer, 2005, p. 90) when questioned about it. Because his father's death was involved with a terrorist attack on tall buildings, Oskar may be refusing to go that high because it reminds him of the event. Similarly, he mentions being afraid of public transport, and goes to desperate measures to avoid it. "It took me three hours and forty-one minutes to walk to Aaron Black, because public transportation makes me panicky..." (Foer, 2005, p. 87). Lastly, Oskar's refusal to pick up the phone is the form of avoidance that most clearly relates to post-traumatic stress. Listening to the phone messages of his father's last words

was the specific event that caused his PTSD and a similar situation, such as listening to new messages or answering it could easily throw him into an uncomfortable memory or emotional state. Oskar describes his feelings towards the phone saying, “Whenever it would ring, I’d scream, ‘The phone’s ringing!’ because I didn’t want to touch it. I didn’t even want to be in the same room with it” (Foer, 2005, p. 288). Because the phone was where he heard his father’s last words, right before his death, and it was what caused his traumatic stress, Oskar avoids the phone as much as possible, even finding it difficult to be in the same room as it. This is the most powerful case of avoidance, as the phone is what triggered his PTSD and is the object that is most related to the traumatic event.

The last of Oskar’s major PTSD symptoms, difficulty sleeping, is mentioned frequently throughout the novel. Oskar mentions having bad dreams, and needing to “invent things”. These inventions are usually for the purpose of helping people, many of which would have saved victims of the 9/11 attack. He also mentioned conjugating French verbs to attempt to fall asleep. Having nightmares and having difficulty sleeping is common among people with PTSD, providing another symptom to support that this is a disorder he suffers with.

Another factor that hinted to Oskar having PTSD was how other characters treated him, and interacted with him, the first being his mother. She knew that something was off, as she had seen the bruises that he gave himself and goes to a psychologist with him. Going to the psychologist suggests that something may not have been right with Oskar mentally, but added to that is the eavesdropped conversation about hospitalizing Oskar. This is a serious indicator, because it came from a professional that the family is seeing. Though Oskar’s mother vetoes the idea, it was still suggested and was considered, leading the reader to believe that Oskar may need it.

To conclude, Oskar's behaviors and other factors support that he has post-traumatic stress disorder from the messages his father left moments before he died. From these messages, Oskar could conclude that his father had died, which gave them significance. Listening to them then became the cause of his PTSD. People that have PTSD have characteristic symptoms that are common to the disorder, and can be used to identify it. Oskar demonstrates several of these symptoms over an extended period. Some examples of these being difficulty sleeping, experiencing flashbacks, avoiding objects or places, and so on. Throughout the novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Oskar Schell displays odd behaviors that support the conclusion that he has post-traumatic stress disorder.

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