Development and Preliminary Validation of a Brief Broad-Spectrum Measure of Trauma Exposure: The Traumatic Life Events Questionnaire

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This article describes the development and preliminary validation of a brief questionnaire that assesses exposure to a broad range of potentially traumatic events. Items were generated from multiple sources of information. Events were described in behaviorally descriptive terms, consistent with *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* posttraumatic stress disorder stressor criterion A1. When events were endorsed, respondents were asked if they experienced intense fear, helplessness, or horror (stressor criterion A2). In separate studies with college students, Vietnam veterans, battered women, and residents of a substance abuse program, most items possessed adequate to excellent temporal stability. In a study comparing questionnaire and structured-interview inquiries of trauma history, the 2 formats yielded similar rates of disclosure. Preliminary data on positive predictive power are also presented.

Traumatic events, such as exposure to warfare, disasters, serious accidents, sudden deaths of loved ones, and physical and sexual abuse, are commonplace. Epidemiological research suggests that at least two-thirds of American adults have experienced at least one traumatic event in the course of their lives (Norris, 1992; Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, Saunders, & Best, 1993). Almost one-fifth of American adults have been involved in a serious motor vehicle accident (Blanchard & Hickling, 1997). Five million American adults have lost a family member or friend to homicide (Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 1992). In a random sample of urban women, one in four had been physically assaulted by a male intimate, one in two had experienced rape or attempted rape, and nearly one-half had experienced sexual abuse before age 16 (Randall & Haskel, 1995).

By definition, traumatic events evoke intense fear, helplessness, or horror (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), and exposure to trauma is a risk factor for a host of mental health problems. In particular, individuals exposed to traumatic stressors often develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—a syndrome with debilitating symptoms, such as intrusive distressing memories, nightmares, loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities, insomnia, and loss of concentration (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). PTSD affects an estimated 10% of American women and 5% of American men (Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, Nelson, & Hughes, 1995): by conservative estimates, 2.5 million Americans have

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1 According to *DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), two elements must be present for a stressful event to qualify as a traumatic stressor: Criterion A1 stipulates that, “the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others” (p. 428); Criterion A2 stipulates that the person’s subjective response to the A1 event must involve “intense fear, helplessness, or horror.” Exposure to a traumatic event, as defined above, is a prerequisite for a person to be assigned a diagnosis of PTSD according to criteria set forth in *DSM-IV*. In this article, the terms trauma exposure, exposure to traumatic events, and traumatic stressors are used interchangeably as synonyms.