Passivity as a Sequel to Combat Trauma

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ABSTRACT: The author has noted a pattern of posttraumatic passivity in some combat veterans. The regression to an ego-passive stance in those men who are unable to develop an integration of nonaggressive activity and intimacy is discussed. Vietnam combat was particularly difficult for the development of a mature superego. The loss of the ego-ideal in combat, combined with insufficient societal supports blocked the mastery of the posttraumatic repetition compulsion.

Aggressive, impulse-ridden behavior has been cited as a frequent symptom of Vietnam combat veterans, yet one phenomenon little discussed in the Post-Vietnam Syndrome is the patient's conflict about passivity. The phenomenon of passivity, as a sequel to trauma, is the focus of this paper. For some veterans this passive response involves many aspects of interpersonal relationships as well as identity in a helpless, powerless, complaining view of the world. In others, the struggle with passivity is reflected in withdrawal from social situations where Vietnam might be discussed. For example, one veteran returning from combat carefully avoided old friends and resisted making new ones. At work, he stayed away from casual conversation. His guilt about his role as a combat soldier engendered avoidance of all casual social contacts in which the subject of Vietnam might arise. The patient's inability to deal with this avoidance pattern made him feel passive and helpless.

Passivity is symptomatic in men who have overt problems with impulse control, and men who appear to have no such problems. Withdrawal as a response to the fear of one's own aggressive impulses, or the fear of another's aggression is a frequently noted phenomenon. As Hart (1961) notes,

The occurrence of passive-aggressive swings in normal childhood confirms the suspicions that an immature ego-structure finds passivity its only escape from rage and vice versa. (334)
One of the few reports of passive response is noted in the Lawton, Patriaid, and Kelbar (1976) study of temporary passivity with markedly reduced social interaction in nursing-home residents who suffered a change in living quarters. Titchener (1982) notes a passive response to trauma with helplessness and social withdrawal, calling it “Posttraumatic Decline.”

Passivity and Ego Passivity

Hart (1961) notes the frequent use of the term “passivity” and yet the almost complete absence of a definition. He concludes, therefore, that

the conventional meaning is known, clear and acceptable. In all languages, to be passive means to have something done to or for one, and never to be the agent, doing something to others. (331)

However, Freud’s use of the term changes throughout his writings. Initially, he uses it primarily in relation to sexual aims (1905), with the active drive as primary and the passive aim assumed to be a transformation. Activity is also related to mastery, while passivity is related to the physical experience of masochistic sexual gratification. This later shifts to a discussion of masculine aims as active and feminine as passive (1915).

Blos (1962) in his study of adolescence speaks of a fusion in the adolescent boy’s mind of passivity with aspects of femininity. Fighting against this, the boy moves toward action and self-assertion to serve as negations of their fears of passivity and femininity. Blos feels that adolescent boys equate passivity and femininity out of their identity confusion. Freud speaks of every instinct as active. Rapaport (1967) has modified this notion with the concept of ego passivity and ego activity, relating passivity to an ego insufficiently integrated to modulate instincts and viewing as active, the ego whose strength is able to modulate and control the instincts. He proposes a dual model of passivity. First, passivity is related to the tension of undischarged instinctual drives; second, it is related to gratifying tension discharge—that is, discharge not controlled by a cohesive ego. Rapaport’s construct is a substantial modification of Freud’s, particularly with regard to passivity as gratifying tension discharge. Whereas Freud conceives instinctual drives as active, Rapaport challenges this with the notion that instinctual drives are active only if they are modified and controlled by the ego.

Hart (1961) notes yet another model—passivity as the opposite of aggression. Hart finds that the “the passive-aggressive antitheses . . . present diphasic reactions characteristic of the poorly equipped ego” (p. 331). This