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| Survivors  No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain  Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.  Of course they're 'longing to go out again,' —  These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.  They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed  Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—  Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud  Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride...  Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;  Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.  -Siegfried Sassoon |

Wilfred Owen – Mental Cases

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?

Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,

Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,

Baring teeth that leer like skulls’ teeth wicked?

Stroke on stroke of pain, – but what slow panic,

Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?

Ever from their hair and through their hands’ palms

Misery swelters. Surely we have perished

Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

– These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.

Memory fingers in their hair of murders,

Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.

Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,

Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.

Always they must see these things and hear them,

Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,

Carnage incomparable, and human squander

Rucked too thick for these men’s extrication.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented

Back into their brains, because on their sense

Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;

Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.

– Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,

Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.

– Thus their hands are plucking at each other;

Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;

Snatching after us who smote them, brother,

Pawing us who dealt them war and madness

Shell shock – BBC Education Article: Inside Out

The First World War devastated the lives of a generation of young men. But the trauma of war didn't end when the guns stopped firing ...

Thousands of soldiers returned from the battlefields and trenches of the First World War reeling from the sheer horror of the conflict.

By the end of the war, 20,000 men were still suffering from shell shock. Thousands more had experienced its symptoms during their military service.

Inside Out Extra looks at the condition and visits Seale Haynes, a medical centre ahead of its time in dealing with the trauma of shell shock.

On the front line

Across the country, doctors were mystified by a condition that they hadn't seen before. Soldiers were returning from the trenches blind, deaf, mute or paralysed.



But doctors couldn't find any physical damage to explain the symptoms.

The term 'shell shock' was coined in 1917 by a Medical Officer called Charles Myers. It was also known as "war neurosis", "combat stress" and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

At first shell shock was thought to be caused by soldiers being exposed to exploding shells.

Medical staff started to realise that there were deeper causes. Doctors soon found that many men suffering the symptoms of shell shock without having even been in the front lines.

A shock to the system

In the early years of World War One, shell shock was believed to be the result of a physical injury to the nerves and being exposed to heavy bombardment.

Shell shock victims often couldn't eat or sleep, whilst others continued to suffer physical symptoms.

Many soldiers found themselves re-living their experiences of combat long after the war had ended.

Officers suffered some of the worst symptoms because they were called upon to repress their emotions to set an example for their men.

War neurosis was four times higher among officers than among the regular soldiers.

The war poet Siegfried Sassoon, himself a victim, describes the psychological pain of shell shock in his poem Survivors.

He writes of soldiers with "dreams that drip with murder" and their "stammering, disconnected talk".

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| **Shell Shock - The symptoms**  Hysteria and anxiety  Paralysis  Limping and muscle contractions  Blindness and deafness  Nightmares and insomnia  Heart palpitations  Depression  Dizziness and disorientation  Loss of appetite |

Victims of shell shock

By 1916, over 40% of the casualties in fighting zones were victims of the condition.

At the end of the war over 80,000 cases of shell shock had passed through British Army medical facilities.

The huge number of shell shock cases was completely unexpected. By 1915 there was a shortage of hospital beds for sufferers.

Many county lunatic asylums, private mental institutions and disused spas were taken over and designated as hospitals for mental diseases and war neurosis. By 1918 there were over 20 such hospitals in the U.K.

Many shell shock victims served at the Battle of the Somme - official figures put the figure at 16,000 but military experts say that the true figure could be much higher.

No sympathy

At the time there was little sympathy for shell shock victims. Shell shock was generally seen as a sign of emotional weakness or cowardice.

Many soldiers suffering from the condition were charged with desertion, cowardice, or insubordination.

The unlucky ones were subjected to a mock trial, charged, and convicted.

Some shell shocked soldiers were shot dead by their own side after being charged with cowardice. They were not given posthumous pardons.

The road to recovery

Shell shock victims found themselves at the mercy of the armed forces' medical officers.

Treatment was often harsh and included...

solitary confinement

disciplinary treatment

electric shock treatment

shaming and physical re-education

emotional deprivation

The "lucky" ones were treated with a variety of "cures" including hypnosis, massage, rest and dietary treatments.

Images of Shell-Shock

 

 