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After a Grisly Trial, Jurors Are Left With Mental Scars and Few Resources

People who serve on disturbing cases can suffer the effects for years after a trial ends.

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By Liz Krieger

Liz Krieger spoke with jurors and mental health experts for this article, and also sat on a jury in a sexual assault trial last year.

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Chloe Beck was excited by the prospect of jury duty when she was called to serve on a trial in early 2018. It could be a much-needed break from work, she thought.

But the case turned out to be a gruesome trial that would change Ms. Beck's life for years to come. A nanny had been charged with stabbing two children to death in the bathtub of their family's Upper West Side apartment. As an alternate juror, Ms. Beck, then an administrator at New York University, sat alongside the rest of the trial's jurors as they listened to devastating testimony from the children's parents and examined grisly crime scene photos.

"To this day, I still see those images," said Ms. Beck, now 38. "The little orange toothbrush hanging on the wall, covered in blood."

But throughout the seven-week trial, Ms. Beck had little to no support, bound by the restriction that she couldn't discuss the case until it was resolved. "They just pluck you out of your normal life, show you these horrible things — and then tell you not to say a word about it," she said.

"All I could do was go to the movies after the day ended, sit in a dark theater and cry," she added.

After the trial ended with a conviction, Ms. Beck was still haunted by what she saw. She used to take baths to relax, but the tub became something to avoid. So did her kitchen knives. Perhaps most unsettling, she said, the case "continues to be a factor in whether or not I decide to have children." The thought of needing to have someone else watch her child terrified her.

A psychiatrist diagnosed Ms. Beck, who experienced months of severe anxiety and panic attacks after the trial, with post-traumatic stress disorder in 2019.

Those who work in the judicial system have long been aware that jurors, in the process of fulfilling their civic duty, can suffer mental health effects, especially in cases of violent crimes. One study found that symptoms of trauma — such as anxiety, feeling emotionally drained and sleep issues — occured in as many as 50 percent of jurors who served on difficult cases. For some people, these symptoms persisted for months or even years.

But there has historically been little support offered to jurors, or even recognition of the effects that some of these trials can have on them. That is starting to change, however, as more cities and states expand mental health services for jurors. In April, Philadelphia rolled out a program that offers post-trial counseling for jurors, and the North Dakota senate passed a bill in March that would provide similar services.

"As an everyday, average person, you can start reading a newspaper article, or a magazine article, or a book, and if it gets to a part you don't like, you can just skip it," said Sally Holewa, who as the court administrator for the state of North Dakota

testified in favor of that legislation. That is not possible as a juror, she said: “It’s your job. You have to hold details in your brain for days or a week or two weeks.”

Testimony Jurors Can’t Tune Out

Jurors who witness graphic testimony can develop secondary traumatic stress, also known as vicarious trauma, said Monica Miller, a psychology professor at the University of Nevada who has studied stress and trauma in the legal system. The syndrome can cause some of the same symptoms as post-traumatic stress disorder: sleeplessness, intrusive thoughts, despair, anxiety.

A 2024 study demonstrated how quickly these issues can manifest. Participants in a simulated murder trial experienced a fourfold increase in post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms just a week after viewing evidence that included skeletal remains.

“You might be at home and you’re making dinner and all of a sudden, you know, you hear your own child’s voice and it brings back the memory of a child who was testifying,” Dr. Miller said. “Or you just might be driving home and thinking about the shopping list, and then all of a sudden these intrusive thoughts come in, and you can’t leave that behind.”

When I was called last year to be a juror in a Brooklyn trial of a man accused of sexually assaulting his baby, I found one of the most challenging parts of the experience to be the restriction on discussing details of the case with anyone. My fellow jurors and I were asked to repeatedly analyze graphic photographic evidence of the alleged assault, and to listen to grueling testimony from the child’s mother, who described years of abuse.

But we couldn’t say a word about it to one another.

When we filed out into the hallway during the brief breaks between testimony, the silence would quickly surrender to small talk. We discussed pet ownership, coffee preferences and the gloomy weather. I couldn’t unpack my feelings at home, either.

At dinner with my husband and friends one night during the weeklong trial, I found it impossible to pay attention to the conversation. All I could think about was the photo of a little girl I'd seen only a few hours before.

I felt both overwhelmed and painfully isolated.

That lack of support during a trial can compound secondary trauma in jurors, experts said.

"You have to pay attention, but you can't talk about it with anyone," Ms. Holewa said. "The normal protective measures to keep this ugliness out have all been torn down."

Stronger Supports

Until recently, efforts to better support jurors have been piecemeal at best.

Jill J. Karofsky, the chief justice of the Wisconsin State Supreme Court and a former circuit court judge, recalled another judge's child pornography trial during which jurors needed wastebaskets nearby because more than one got sick.

"I kept saying, 'What can I do for my jurors?' And no one had any answers," Ms. Karofsky said. She started finding small ways to support them: During one trial, she had a therapy dog brought in during a lunch break. After some particularly difficult cases, she wrote a letter that she handed to jurors, sharing information about trauma reactions and offering free sessions she had arranged with a friend who was a therapist.

Beyond the efforts of individual judges, there are some other supports for jurors who serve on disturbing cases. In federal trials, jurors can qualify for free counseling through a federal employee assistance program. In the 2015 trial of Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, a federal judge extended the service of the jurors — who had heard difficult testimony from more than 100 witnesses — by an extra 90 days. By keeping the jurors on, the judge gave them access to free counseling for a longer time.

And in recent years, a handful of states and jurisdictions have started programs to address juror trauma and stress, including Alaska, Massachusetts and certain counties in California and Texas, in addition to those in Philadelphia and North Dakota.

The new program in Philadelphia draws from a concept called psychological first aid, which is used to provide support to emergency medical workers shortly after they encounter a traumatic situation. Psychological first aid aims to help people feel safe and secure and ease their immediate distress.

Patrick Martin, the jury commissioner leading the Philadelphia program, said jurors needed to hear that what they were experiencing was normal, and that they could get past those feelings. The program provides information on coping strategies like breathing techniques, as well as access to free counseling with student therapists at West Chester University.

Ms. Beck cobbled together her own support. She went to therapy, tried medication and yoga and even volunteered with the nonprofit organization set up in memory of the two slain children in the trial she served on. “Seeing that family’s resilience helped me find my own,” she said. But she still grapples with lingering thoughts of the crime.

“Sometimes, when I run baths or clean my tub, I cry because I get flashes of the photos that I saw and I have to sit on the floor to collect myself,” she said.

Any type of support might have helped during the trial, she said — counseling services, certainly, but even a visit from a service animal might have made a difference in acknowledging the difficulty of the experience.

“We get nothing but a ‘Thank you for your service,’” she said, “and then we walk away.”

A correction was made on Aug. 10, 2025*: An earlier version of this article misstated Justice Karofsky’s connection to a trial during which jurors became nauseated. She recalled the trial; she did not preside over it.*
