



KCBS In Depth: PTSD and Stress

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SAN FRANCISCO (KCBS) – Post-traumatic stress disorder has been a hot button topic recently, with the case of Army Staff Sgt. Robert Bales in the headlines.

Bales, accused of killing 17 Afghan villagers in March, is being held at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, pending a full military investigation. He has since described PTSD-like symptoms to his legal team.

Dr. David Spiegel, a Stanford Medical Center psychiatrist and expert on post-traumatic stress disorder, has a unique perspective on the case.

KCBS Interviews Dr. David Spiegel:

"These people suffer, they have nightmares and flashbacks, numbing, avoidance and irritability. But they're not psychotic. They're not unable to comprehend the meaning and nature of their acts or unable to understand that killing someone is wrong," said Spiegel. "So typically, PTSD is not a classical insanity defense. It may go to whether somebody pre-meditated or not, it may be a different situation in a court if somebody heard a loud noise and turned around and thought they were fighting the enemy and shot someone versus a situation where they stalked and planned for weeks ahead. So it may go to the type of crime, but usually, it does not constitute an insanity defense."

Spiegel said the situation involving Sgt. Bales is tragic but also warns that the vast majority of people suffering from PTSD don't actually inflict harm on others.

He said the military has changed the way it handles these cases.

"For awhile, the military was reluctant to acknowledge or recognize it because from their point of view, they need combat-ready troops and they don't want a large new category of people who are unable to participate or may be unable to participate, even if their arms and legs are working fine," said Spiegel. "Now, they are recognizing that somebody who is really suffering from PTSD may not be able to carry on the functions of their job and may do things wrong and needs attention."

Spiegel said they continue to learn more and more about PTSD each day but there is still plenty more to be done in studying the condition.