

# Mean Tweets and PTSD: Facts, Fakers, and the Future

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Americans love labels. We look to distinguish ourselves by the physical labels in our clothing, on the cars we drive, on the bottle of beer we drink. It's interesting in a society consumed with "[not labling](#)" others, we are quick to label ourselves—and to make sure everyone else knows what our labels are. "I'm conservative..." "I'm African-American..." "I'm a Packers' Fan..." and the list goes on and on.

Labels are important, because they tell us who we are, they tell others who we are, and they tell us who others are. In short, labels are closely tied to our individual identity. But in the hashtag-and-selfie-driven world we live in today, labels do more than just establish our identity: self-labeling generates attention and sympathy. Labels can also excuse our bad behavior, or even make us money. And I've come to understand that there are no "bad" labels, as long as the label makes the individual in question look like a victim.

Case in point: self-described atheist and feminist Melody Hensley made worldwide headlines recently after she claimed the PTSD she was diagnosed with was "[on par](#)" with that of war veterans. No drama there; everyone knows that there are many ways someone can legitimately get PTSD, and veterans are usually loathe to try to "one-up" someone else's PTSD and the way it affects him or her. But what really got people fired up was how Hensley claimed she got PTSD: from reading mean tweets about herself that other people made on the Internet.

Think about that for a moment: she's basically saying "The Internet gave me post-traumatic stress disorder on par with that experienced by war veterans who experienced the absolute worst humanity has to offer in Iraq and Afghanistan because someone posted something that hurt my feelings." Interesting. We'll revisit that sentiment later. But first, if having mean things said about you is all it takes to develop PTSD, then consider this a trigger warning because a whole lot of people are about to get their feelings hurt... and it's not going to just be Melody Hensley.

PTSD is real. It is a real disorder with real consequences for those who suffer from it and the people who love them. I've been in the military almost 20 years and I've seen it plenty. But I also know that it only affects those who really have it. I've also come to learn that PTSD is the perfect tool for frauds and exaggerators because it relies almost entirely on self-reporting, and its symptoms can be easily faked. Oftentimes [doctors can't even tell](#) the real cases from the fakers, and a whole little "[cottage industry](#)" has cropped up to help people fake PTSD. There are [perverse incentives](#) associated with claiming PTSD, and very little chance of ever getting caught for a fraudulent claim.

Right now there is no "better" label for someone seeking attention or money than that of a PTSD victim. Need attention? Claim PTSD! Need to shut someone down who is getting the better of you in a political argument? Claim PTSD! Need an excuse for your own bad behavior? Claim PTSD! It's the cure-all label for what ails you. No one can criticize you after you say you have it, because you're a victim. People are reluctant to punish you for your misconduct, because you're a victim. Even better, the government will even pay you for it. You don't even have to prove you have it, you just have to apply that label to yourself, and \*poof\* instant gratification. Civilian first responders now regularly claim to be fully disabled [from having witnessed the aftermath](#) of traumatic situations, even ones in which they were never in any danger themselves.

And lest readers of this article think that the military community is immune from sketchy PTSD claims, consider [this example](#): "...she viewed large amounts of imagery showing insurgents being killed. That led to PTSD and severe depression. She will receive a small veterans payment because

*of her illness.*” PTSD from combat voyeurism, that’s a new one. I wonder if I can use that precedent to put in a claim from all those times I got my ass kicked in Call of Duty in between missions; it sounds like pretty much the same thing.

The potential for fraud is especially bad in the Veterans Administration (VA) which is perpetually (and quite correctly) under attack for not “doing more” to help out veterans. So what’s their solution? Over-diagnose everything—“PTSD all around!” And VA doctors are not the only ones that default to the PTSD diagnosis, as I experiences first hand. After suffering months of poor sleep, vivid nightmares, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating while in graduate school, I went to see a local civilian doctor who said my complaints were consistent with sleep apnea... until he found out I was a veteran. Then he wanted to diagnose me with PTSD.

While I’m proud of what I did during my multiple tours to Iraq and Afghanistan, I never experienced anything that would have caused me to develop PTSD. And, if they’re honest with themselves, I think most veterans would say the same. After going through the rather awkward process of convincing my doctor I did NOT have PTSD, I followed his advice for treatment of sleep apnea: I stopped having my usual nightcap of a double shot of Gentleman Jack before bed, I started getting more exercise, I lost weight, and I changed my sleeping habits. Although I still sleep like crap, my other symptoms went away. I never had PTSD.

But some people *do* have PTSD, and they’re not all in the military. In fact, the majority of people who have PTSD [aren’t vets](#). But regardless of how PTSD is acquired and how severe it is, everyone legitimately suffering from it (and especially those who are undiagnosed) suffer when spurious or suspect claims are made.

This brings us full circle to Melody Hensley. Not only do we not know for sure that she really has PTSD right now, we don’t even know for sure that she was even really diagnosed with it. All we know right now is that she CLAIMS she was diagnosed with PTSD; she carefully avoided naming the doctor who diagnosed her, or to offer any other supporting evidence. Yet everyone believes her anyway. I think that says something about us as a society.

Many people think that Melody Hensley is crazy for claiming that she got PTSD from mean Twitter posts, but I don’t think that at all. Whether or not she legitimately developed PTSD from mean tweets, I think she is shrewdly manipulating the wave of attention being thrown her way by attaching a sympathy-garnering label to herself and adroitly playing for sympathy by claiming to have a disorder that very few people actually know anything about. And the backlash that has been generated against her simply plays into her hands. All of the (largely justified) attacks against her merely make her “victim card” easier to play, and gives her even more attention and credibility in the communities in which she is seeking to make a name for herself.

Melody Hensley says “[I will not be silenced](#).” No one wants to silence you Melody, we just don’t want to hear you saying stupid things at the expense of those who are truly suffering, and whose PTSD can’t be solved by pushing the “off” button on their iPad.