

PTSD and its Impact on the Family

The Diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- A. The diagnosis of PTSD is made only when very specific criteria are met. The specific traumatic experience and the impact on the person and his/her loved ones are unique to each family. The diagnosis can be made only by a trained mental health professional.
- B. First, the individual experienced or witnessed an event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, and he/she felt very afraid or helpless.
- C. People may RE-EXPERIENCE the event in a variety of ways (e.g., distressing dreams).
- D. People may AVOID certain reminders of the event.
- E. People may report feeling NUMB.
- F. People may experience INCREASED AROUSAL (e.g., anger, sleep problems).

Treatment Options for PTSD

- A. Overall goals of therapy
 - 1. Examine and learn how to deal with strong feelings (such as anger, shame, depression, fear or guilt).
 - 2. Learn how to cope with memories, reminders, reactions, and feelings without becoming overwhelmed or emotionally numb. Trauma memories usually do not go away entirely as a result of therapy but become less frequent and less intense.
 - 3. Discover ways to relax (possibly including exercise).
 - 4. Increase pleasant activities.
 - 5. Re-invest energy in positive relationships with family and/or friends.
 - 6. Enhance sense of personal power and control in his/her environment.
- B. Components of treatment
 - 1. Psychiatric medications
 - 2. Education for client and family about PTSD
 - 3. Group therapy
 - 4. Cognitive/behavioral therapy (e.g., Prolonged exposure; cognitive processing therapy)
 - 5. Writing exercises

Tips for family members and friends on relationships with someone who has PTSD

A. Learn as much as you can about PTSD.



Books on PTSD:

Courage After Fire: Coping Strategies for Returning Soldiers and Their Families. (2005). K. Armstrong, S. Best, and P. Domenici. Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press.

Down Range: To Iraq and Back. (2005). B. Cantrell & C. Dean. Washington: WordSmith Books.

Trust After Trauma: A Guide to Relationships for Survivors and Those Who Love Them. (1988). A. Matsakis. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Recovering After the War. (1990). P. Mason. New York: Penguin Books.

Vietnam Wives: Facing the Challenges of Life with Veterans Suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. (2nd ed.) (1998). A. Matsakis. Baltimore: Sidran Press.

Books for Youth:

For Young Children:

Why Are You So Sad? A Child's Book about Parental Depression. (2002). B Andrews. New York: Magination Press.

Tell Me a Story, Paint Me the Sun: When a Girl Feels Ignored by Her Father. (1991). R. Chaplan. New York: Magination Press. American Psychological Association. (illustrated book describing a young girl whose father is depressed).

Wishing Wellness: A Workbook for Children of Parents with Mental Illness. (2006). L.A. Clarke. New York: Magination Press.

Daddy, You're My Hero! // Mommy, You're My Hero! (2005). M. Ferguson-Cohen. Little Redhaired Girl Publishing

Please Don't Cry, Mom. (1993). H. Denboer. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Inc. (illustrated book depicting young boy's experience of his mother's recurrent major depression)

For Teenagers:

Finding My Way: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has Experienced Trauma. (2005). M. D. Sherman & D.M. Sherman. Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press.
Available at www.seedsofhopebooks.com

Relevant Web Sites:

www.ncptsd.org – National Center for PTSD

www.patiencepress.com – Site with examples of the *Post-Traumatic Gazette*

www.sidran.org – Sidran Traumatic Stress Foundation

www.trauma-pages.com – David Baldwin’s Trauma Information Pages

www.adaa.org – Anxiety Disorders Association of America

www.giftfromwithin.org – Gift From Within: Resources for Survivors and Professionals

- B. Do not push or force your loved one to talk about the details of his/her upsetting memories. Try to avoid feeling jealous if your loved one shares more with other survivors of similar traumas or with his/her therapist than with you. Rather, try to be grateful that your family member has a confidant with whom he/she feels comfortable.
- C. Do not pressure your loved one to talk about what he/she is working on in therapy. Also, avoid trying to be his/her therapist.
- D. Attempt to identify (with your loved one) and anticipate some of his/her triggers (e.g., helicopters, war movies, thunderstorms, violence). Learn and anticipate some of his/her anniversary dates.
- E. Recognize that your loved one’s social and/or emotional withdrawal may be due to his/her own issues and be unrelated to you or your relationship.
- F. Do not tolerate abuse of any kind – financial, emotional, physical, or sexual. Individuals with PTSD sometimes try to justify their behavior (e.g., angry outbursts, destroying property, lying) and “blame” their wrongdoing on having this psychiatric disorder. People may try to rationalize their behavior by stating that they were “not themselves” or “not in control” or “in another world.” However, survivors should always be held responsible for their behavior.
- G. Pay attention to your own needs.
- H. Take any comments that your loved one makes about suicide very seriously and seek professional help immediately.
- I. Do not tell your loved one to just “forget about the past” or just “get over it.”

- J. Explore the available treatment options in your community, and encourage your loved one to seek professional help. However, respect that he/she knows if OR when he/she is ready to take this courageous step. Try to avoid nagging or excessive pressure.

Local Treatment Options for Veterans with Symptoms of PTSD

1. PTS Recovery Program
2. OIF/OEF Program
3. Men/Women of Courage sexual trauma groups
4. The REACH Project
5. Time-limited inpatient programs for veterans with PTSD (only at some sites)

Parts adapted from *Trust After Trauma: A Guide for Relationships for Survivors and Those Who Love Them* by A. Matsakis (1998).