



Caregiver Partners: Understanding and Healing the Wounds of PTSD

There is a deeply powerful and emotional pride that wells up when we see our military in their pressed, dress uniforms, colorful ribbons, and medals shimmering, shoes shined and marching in order as one. The recognition of strength and sacrifice brings a tear to our eyes as we cheer their passing in the annual parades. In the presence of such ordered splendor, it is easy to lose sight of the chaos, terror, and trauma that many of our service members have endured. War is an ugly business and the suffering endured in the service of our country has wreaked havoc on the hearts and minds of many of our service members and their families. This is the back-story that isn't seen when our eyes tear at the sight of our proud and gallant service members.

The cost of this service can be seen in visible injuries as well as the invisible injuries of war. The invisible burdens of anxiety, anger, fear, guilt, grief, and heartache weigh heavily on many Veterans and services members who endure the hidden traumas of war. These hidden injuries may result in what is known as PTSD.

PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder has become a term widely used and has been the focus of extensive reporting and research particularly since the return of our Post 9/11 military. The experience of PTSD is not a new experience nor is it only a Veteran experience but may be a caregiver experience as well. Trauma has touched many of your lives and with it the potential result of the diagnosis of PTSD.

Between 50-90% of the general population has experienced an event that meets the criteria for trauma. What this says is that trauma is not a unique experience but is potentially a human experience. A high percentage of the population experiences trauma, but PTSD does not always strike those that have experienced a trauma. Only 7-8% of the general population will have PTSD at some point in their lifetime. Military Veterans experience a higher rate of PTSD than the general population ranging from 11-30%. We don't know why some develop it and others don't, but certainly the more you are exposed to trauma the greater the likelihood PTSD may result.

Many of you caregivers are living with a Veteran loved one who struggles to cope with the unresolved effects of military trauma. Many of you who are listening may also be living with your own history of trauma or your own unresolved symptoms of PTSD. For you caregivers who do have a history of trauma, this may be the first time you have really reflected on your history or realized how PTSD may also have affected you. Facing these painful experiences whether you are a caregiver, or a Veteran, can feel distressing or overwhelming. How does one recover from the debilitating distressing



symptoms of PTSD when one's psychological stability has been assaulted by traumatic events? How can you heal from your traumas and also be a source of support to your Veteran loved one who suffers from PTSD?

In this presentation, we hope to diminish some of the mystery of this disorder, and to help you find paths towards healing. There is a light at the end of the tunnel for those who struggle with PTSD. There is a way to make sense out of the experience of chaos for those suffering and for the loved ones that bear witness to the suffering. There is life beyond the trauma. There is relief available from the symptoms that continue to intrude on your present life. We hope to identify understandable, useful strategies that may bring healing for all those who suffer from the wounds of trauma; however these wounds may have developed.

Let's begin by shedding some light on what contributes to PTSD. The first component that is required to develop this diagnosis is that a trauma has occurred. What do we mean by trauma? A trauma is an event that you personally experience or witness, that threatens your life, causes serious injury, or is sexually violent. The trauma can be the result of physical or sexual abuse as a child or witnessing abuse between parents. The trauma may occur as the result of military service, a severe car accident, a natural disaster, a robbery, a physical assault, or the result of witnessing the effects of trauma such as what first responders face in their duties. The trauma may be a one-time event or may result from multiple episodes of prolonged trauma called complex trauma.

Complex trauma typically has its origins in childhood and most often is the result of a parent or caregiver whose interactions with the child are physically or sexually abusive, profoundly neglectful, or where the child is exposed to ongoing family conflict or violence. Complex childhood trauma can be compounded as an adult by such experiences as multiple combat deployments, intimate partner violence, or other traumatizing events.

Many service members and many caregivers may have experienced this kind of chaos in their childhood and may have been drawn to the military as a source of reprieve from the chaos, uncertainty, or lack of support in their earlier lives. The military may have appealed to an individual in need of structure, order and a sense of family. While the military may have provided many needed structures, it also invited further potential for exposure to trauma.



Interestingly, we tend to attach ourselves to partners that have similar backgrounds or whose personal qualities mirror our earlier childhood experiences with parental or caretaker relationships. Given this tendency, there is greater likelihood that if the Veteran experienced childhood trauma or complex PTSD, their caregiver may also have their own history of childhood distress and disruption. That is why this presentation focus is not just on caregivers coping with a Veteran's PTSD, but also helping caregivers who are coping with their own history of trauma.

Both Veterans and caregivers that experienced injuries in early childhood may not have had the opportunity, or support, to resolve these earlier traumas, and may continue to struggle to cope effectively. Caregivers and Veterans with a history of childhood trauma may now have the added burden of military service traumas and all of the chaos and disruptions in relationships that can result. Therefore, it isn't just the Veteran that is in need of finding a healing way forward, it may also be the spouses, significant others, and their children who may be grappling to find ways to cope with the current distress and uncertainty that these experiences bring.

Let's start by clarifying the symptoms of PTSD and try to make some sense out of why they occur. Making sense of what is happening can help everyone involved manage the symptoms. Understanding what is happening and why these symptoms make sense can also take away the added panic that you are going crazy or relieve the burdensome stigma that there is something weak, broken, or shameful about you that you are experiencing this. PTSD is an understandable set of symptoms that occur when you experience, or witness, a violent life-threatening event, a serious injury, profound neglect, or sexual violence. During these traumas, the individual becomes flooded with intense fear, horror, or helplessness. This trauma is an intrusive event or series of events that threatens your safety and wellbeing.

When a trauma occurs, you are biologically engineered to respond in that moment in specific protective ways. Your body is wired to respond at a moment's notice with waves of stress hormones that create the energy needed to fight or flee. These hormones flood your system causing a state of intense alertness or arousal so that you are prepared to protect yourself.

A change in your thought processing also occurs when confronted with trauma. In this state of intense agitation and alertness, your thoughts may focus very narrowly on pure survival. You may not process at all clearly, what is happening. Thought processes may be frozen, distorted, or you may not have full recall of what happened.



Not only are thoughts not processed in the intensity of the moment, your emotions are not expressed or processed. All of your energy and effort is devoted to simply managing the event. This may mean you shut down your emotions, withdraw emotionally, or become numb. These emotions related to the trauma cannot be adequately processed and worked through until you have the opportunity where it is safe enough to reflect on and experience your feelings

So, on the one hand you have a state of physical adrenaline, heart pounding arousal and alertness and on the other hand thinking and emotions are narrowed or shut down to cope with the event. Now, once you are no longer threatened or you return to safety, then your state of agitation will calm, and you may begin to think through what happened or allow the feelings related to this experience to surface and be released.

Recovery from the experience can occur once you are safe. Once safe, your physical system calms and you are able to think through and maybe talk through what happened. Once safe and particularly if you are given support, the feelings attached to this event have the opportunity to be recognized and expressed. This process of calming, thinking with more perspective, and releasing the feelings attributed to the event provides the psychological healing you need to recover from the event.

So, what happens when you are in a prolonged state in which your safety is at risk, such as growing up in an abusive or neglectful home or when you are a service member in a war zone? What happens if you don't have the opportunity to talk through or think through what has happened? What happens to you if there isn't a safe person or place to share your emotional upset? What happens to all of the feelings of fear, anger, sadness, betrayal, guilt, grief? Do they just go away, or disappear?

No, there are consequences to these injuries. They don't magically disappear in a cloud of pretending it never happened. PTSD occurs when you have not adequately processed the trauma you have experienced. These injuries are with you and when they have not been healed, they will continue to surface and affect your ability to function.

Sometimes these symptoms take months to emerge, sometimes years have passed, and something triggers them to surface. Maybe you experienced abuse as a child and you felt you got through it ok, but then find symptoms of your own abuse start emerging when your child reaches the age you were when it happened to you. Sometimes a loss or some change or challenge may cause memories and symptoms of



past injuries to emerge. The symptoms are a reemergence of the trauma wanting attention and wanting to be resolved more fully.

Let's explore the main symptoms of PTSD and look at how they are, in a sense, a recreation of the original trauma. First, there are groups of symptoms that are intrusive. Traumas are intrusive; they take you off guard and invade your space. Just like the shock of the traumatic event, these intruding thoughts or memories, nightmares, flashbacks, and intense distress when cues or triggers remind you of the event, are all examples of the event intruding again.

The next set of symptoms is related to attempts to avoid the trauma. Remember your reaction at the time of the trauma is fight or flee, in essence to get away from it. With these symptoms, you may be expending a great deal of psychic energy attempting to get away, avoid memories, thoughts, or feelings, and avoid activities, people, places, or situations associated with the trauma. Many may find themselves wanting to avoid close relationships or loved ones because being close may stir up all those feelings that you are desperately trying to avoid.

The next set of symptoms relates to having negative changes in your thinking and feeling. At the time the trauma occurred, your thoughts or feelings were narrowed or shut down in order to cope with the risk. You may have trouble remembering, have very exaggerated, or negative beliefs about you, or the world around you, such as; the world isn't safe, I am bad, it's all my fault. Just as when you were in the trauma, your feelings may remain numb or shut down. It may be difficult to feel close to anyone or to feel happy about anything.

Finally, there are the set of symptoms that occur when your body goes into the fight or flight response during trauma. It's as if with PTSD the body never got that chance to calm down and remains perpetually on high alert. You may experience being on edge, hypervigilant, or keyed up, as if always readying yourself for danger. You may have trouble concentrating, sleeping, or you jump or startle easily. You might remain constantly ready for a fight without much provocation or have angry outbursts. Therefore, even though the trauma is over, you are still living as if you are in danger.

In a way, all of these symptoms are really evidence that something terrible happened to you. Something you witnessed or experienced injured you deeply, and you have not healed the injury, it is frozen in its original state. Your body, mind, emotions, your spirit is recreating the event in an attempt to get your attention, to heal



this injury, so that you don't remain stuck in the horror of this intrusive experience, reliving it over and over again.

Many believe to make the symptoms go away you just need to try to forget, avoid any triggers, shut off your feelings, stay on guard and protect yourself more. You may find if you drink alcohol or take drugs you can forget or calm down. You might think: I'll just blow off steam by raging at people or drive like a maniac. You might think that if I just stay away from people or don't get too close to anyone, I will be ok. All of these reactions are completely understandable. The problem is these strategies not only can create further problems, but they suck a lot of energy and interfere with actually living your life to the fullest.

Not only have you suffered a trauma, but now you also may have the trouble that drug and alcohol abuse can bring. Not only have you suffered a trauma, but now you may be shutting yourself up in the house stuck in isolation and loneliness. Not only has this trauma interfered with feeling safe in the world, now you can't seem get yourself to go out and get involved in doing the very things that could keep you interested and invested in living. Not only have you been traumatized but now your anger and irritability are driving away the very people and supports that you need.

These unsuccessful coping strategies may deaden the trauma of the past, but significantly interfere in the present. That is the double injury that PTSD symptoms can bring. These symptoms are robbing you again, in the present, of having the life and the relationships you need and deserve.

So now what, what is the path towards recovery and healing? Remember, first and foremost, these symptoms are understandable; they are not a reflection of your personal strength of character. They are not a sign that you are weak or that you are broken. They are actually a healthy sign that your system is attempting to let you know that you have been injured, and in order to move forward from a state of being stuck in a trauma, or stuck in events of the past, the trauma needs to heal.

Healing and recovery are possible. Healing requires letting go of the unsuccessful or negative coping strategies that may bring you relief but, in the end, keep the symptoms alive and really limit your quality of life. Strategies such as, substance abuse, shutting down emotionally, hiding out, raging, staying on guard, isolating, and not engaging in living are coping skills that won't serve you well in the long run. These strategies make your world and your life smaller and keep you captive in the trauma.



Attempts to avoid may keep the symptoms reoccurring and reminding you. The healing comes with processing what has happened. Let's focus our attention on what is known about this process of healing. What strategies support healing for a Caregiver with PTSD? How can caregivers without PTSD support healing in the Veteran?

What may seem difficult to grasp is that actually processing the trauma, focusing on what happened, allowing your feelings to be recognized and expressed, is actually, what will contribute to healing you. You may ask yourself, "why would I want to think about this, or feel this, or talk about this?" Isn't it just going to be terribly painful and make me feel worse? Well actually, the tough answer to this question is yes, in the short run you may feel worse. It is painful. It can be very painful to think about, talk about, feel, and express the feelings related to this experience. It can be very challenging to face the fears and anxiety that arise when you are trying not to shut down, withdraw, or give up on living your life. There is no getting around it being painful, but there is also potential for incredible relief.

Facing what is painful is one of the most powerful barriers to recovery. Facing the pain and not giving in to all of the tactics of avoidance takes grit. It takes great courage and strength to face your fears and face the pain of the past. It takes courage and patience to hang in there and work through the process of recovery. There is hope because we know that our Veterans and their caregivers are not a group short on courage.

Many have commented and questioned, why does it seem to get worse before it gets better? Just like a physical wound, you may need to clean the wound well in order for it to heal properly, and it hurts to clean it. Processing the trauma and resisting your natural instinct to avoid what may be painful, is like cleaning a wound so it will heal. In the end, you may have a scar, just like you will still have the memory, but the injury will heal, and your symptoms will subside.

What are some of these active coping strategies and actions that will clean and clear the wounds of trauma? The VA has identified a number of research-based therapy treatment intervention options. Medications may bring some relief from symptoms but ultimately cannot provide a cure. Many of the VA treatment options share or focus on different paths to process and heal from the trauma. The interventions in these therapies and the strategies developed to heal from trauma actually act to offset the trauma remaining frozen in time.



To offset this experience of intrusion and loss of control, it will help to learn about PTSD. Learning about what is happening to you or understanding what is happening to your Veteran loved one can help give a sense of control. You may not have been in control with the trauma but now you can say, “Ok I’m not broken or going crazy, what is happening to me makes sense.” It can help to learn what is triggering you so that you can begin to predict what may be difficult or plan out what may help you when triggers occur. Caregivers may also support their Veterans in understanding triggers and helping to problem solve ways to cope with them. Knowledge can clarify that these symptoms are understandable, and this can make them feel less intrusive and less frightening for all involved. Taking an active role in learning about what is happening, and learning about what helps, will empower you to feel less like a victim to the intrusive symptoms and can also help caregivers who don’t have PTSD understand what they are dealing with and what can be helpful.

So, for example, if you do wake from a nightmare it helps to know what will help you to feel better such as; you may get up out of bed, regroup, maybe have a glass of water, remind yourself you are safe, or reach out to a loved one for comfort. If you are overcome with memory flashbacks, or sudden bouts of anxiety, it helps to know what will calm you. Strategies like slowing your breathing, keeping your eyes open and noting where you are, reminding yourself: this is anxiety, you are not having a heart attack, telling yourself this is a memory and it is in the past, this feeling will pass, reminding yourself that you are safe. Some caregivers give their loved one space, provide comfort, and grounding by helping them come back to the present when intrusive memories emerge. When intrusive symptoms arise having the knowledge and the ability to communicate with each other can build your relationship bond.

We have spoken about the symptoms of avoidance and identified that for healing to occur, the trauma must be addressed. Many of the treatment interventions that VA supports encourage different methods of exploring and processing the traumatic event. This exploration must occur in an environment where the individual feels safe, a setting that respects the individual’s pace and tolerance for facing trauma. Seeking a treatment program or counselor that can provide the compassionate support that you need, can provide the safe space to process what has happened and support you in moving forward.

Facing your avoidance instead of reinforcing it is a tough balance. The person that suffers from PTSD needs to decide what challenges he or she is up for and only they know how much is too much, to push themselves to face their fears. Caregivers



can encourage and support but ultimately it is an individual decision to push forward. It's a tough balance to try to figure out when to push and when to respect that this is all the individual can do right now.

Keep in mind that it doesn't help the recovery process to provide only comfort or have no expectations to function as a result of the PTSD. Recovery means you have to engage in your present life to the degree that you are able. In the past, you may have avoided going to an event or spending time with family or friends, but it will help to take some small steps to reach out. Chances are, while grappling with the fear you will find out, "Hey, I did it, that worked out ok." When your fears rule, they win. Anytime you can face some of your fears, and engage more in living, you are reinforcing that you will be ok, and this supports your recovery. Caregivers can support by listening and encouraging small steps. Taking steps, however small, supports recovery.

Caregivers, Veterans, and their families can work as a team to support each other and to encourage each other to pursue recovery. Make some ground rules for supporting one another and for relating to one another with respect. PTSD symptoms are painful and can be overwhelming, but it is important to find strategies to calm and cope so that loved ones are not accommodating raging outbursts and abusive behavior. Just because someone is suffering doesn't mean they aren't responsible for their behavior. Strategies to help calm down, get space, or order, if there is chaos in your home, will be beneficial. Set expectations so that everyone is shown respect, and everyone contributes to the home, as they are able, despite PTSD.

For the symptoms related to thinking, many strategies can be helpful in the healing process. Because you may only have pieces of memory, or a chaotic memory of what happened, it can help you get more clarity, to put the whole story together. Some treatment tools encourage writing or recording the details, from beginning to end, clarifying the whole story. This reflecting, sharing, and hearing your own story can bring order to the chaos and can help you get perspective.

Sometimes during a trauma, you may have adopted some distorted beliefs or thoughts about yourself or the world around you. When you are able to reflect on the story with perspective, it can help you to see some of the distorted, unreasonable beliefs that you may have adopted. Despite being the victim, you may believe it's your fault, or that you should have been able to do something to change the events. Many times, young children who are abused come to believe that they are bad or deserving of this treatment.



Listening to your story, sharing your story can help give you needed perspective on the reality of what you did or didn't have control over. Writing, sharing and listening to your story can help to challenge those beliefs and you can begin to see what in fact you are, or are not responsible for, that you are not bad, that the whole world isn't unsafe. Listening to your own story can also help you have some compassion for yourself and for the painful, helpless, experience you endured. Veteran caregivers often hear these distorted beliefs in their Veteran blaming themselves for surviving when others didn't. Helping the Veteran to see these thoughts as frozen remnants of the trauma can bring some perspective.

A major component in the process of healing comes not only in sharing your story, but also in allowing the feelings that are connected to this story to surface and be released. The feelings attached to this story, to your memories, have a great deal of power and shutting them down takes a great deal of energy. Avoiding the painful feelings can result in becoming depressed, numb, or missing life's positive feelings as well. Finding a safe place to share your feelings and feel supported in the process will bring healing.

Sometimes when one has experienced trauma, especially as a child, identifying what you feel and learning to manage your feelings without avoiding them or acting them out destructively, were skills that you never learned. If you are flooded with feelings that are intolerable and have no support in coping, you may shut down, get comfort from addictive behaviors, or just act out your distress in rages or emotional tirades.

It is important to learn that acting out has consequences for you and for those around you. Abusive tirades should not be given the OK. Learning to not only identify and express your feelings, but also to tolerate them and calm yourself down will be important skills for healing. It can help to have a safe place to let these feelings come to the surface and to have support from others in providing comfort and soothing. Working with your loved ones, a counselor, or other recovery professionals can help you reflect on what you are feeling, to label it, learn to express it, release it, and then to learn to find ways to calm and soothe yourself so you are able to manage your distress without negative consequences.

Tolerating painful feelings without shutting down or acting out is not easy. One of the tools recommended to help with identifying and managing your feelings is a practice of mindfulness meditation. Practicing this meditation helps you develop the ability to be



attentive to thoughts and feelings that arise but can especially help you in learning to observe your thoughts and feelings with compassion and improve your ability to tolerate these feelings without overreacting or acting out. There are many meditations available on line and there is also one on our caregiver website. Practicing this routine, a little bit each day can help you learn to cope, and care for feelings particularly when they are powerful.

Finally, learning how to bring your body out of the state of perpetual fight or flight mode is an essential component to your recovery. Learning to calm yourself such as with meditation, breathing, and muscle relaxation exercises can help to bring your body back to a feeling of safety. If you are ramped up in rages or always on guard protecting yourself, it will help to learn how to slow down, calm down, take a break, step out, or away, until you get some composure and perspective. Finding ways to channel your energy productively can give you a sense of control and empower you.

Regular physical exercise is a great way to manage this energy and can have a surprising positive impact, not only on your physical calming, but can bring you emotional balance. Exercise not only burns off excess stress but can also reinforce your strength and ground you in your own body. So, take a walk, do some yoga, lift some weights, or stretch. A little bit goes a long way.

There are many ways to calm your physical body and spirit. Spending time outside in nature has its own healing magic. Walk in the park, sit by a lake, dig in a garden, build a fire, sit under the stars, lie down on the grass, or plant a tree. Nature grounds and soothes the soul and reminds us that the world can be a beautiful and safe place.

The process of healing most often includes the compassionate support of a caring other. Whether you get support from a treatment program, doctor, counselor, clergy member, family, friends, or a caregiver, recovery blossoms in the connections with those that support you. Traumatic memories can be very difficult and overwhelming but do not have to define you or continue to hold you hostage. Reaching out for the support that you may not have had at the time of the trauma, will be a significant source of healing in the present. Having the experience in the here and now that you are safe, cared for, understood, and accepted by another brings healing.

No one can ever truly understand what the experience was like for you because it is unique to you. A sibling may understand some of your shared experiences in an abusive home, but the experience will still be unique to you. A Veteran may have some



understanding of the experience of war, but the individual Veterans experience is unique to them. You don't have to have a shared experience in order to support someone in healing, whether it is offering a listening ear, setting limits on destructive acting out, having compassion for feelings, encouraging treatment and exercise, getting outside in nature, or providing comforting words or affection.

Facing these injuries takes courage. It takes tremendous psychological strength to face your trauma and the painful feelings that are woven together with your story. There is healing for those that seek the help they need to clarify the story and release the feelings, so that the injury heals. It takes supportive others and it takes reaching out even when you want to withdraw. Healing can occur when you continue to push yourself to face your fears at your own pace and continue to invest in living a life that matters to you. There is hope and help available.

If you find that your life is compromised by the traumas of early life, trauma that you experienced as an adult, or as a result of wartime experiences, there is hope for recovery. It may take time, courage, patience, and persistence, but help can bring relief to your suffering. The symptoms of PTSD are a healthy reminder that you are not broken but that you have been injured and need to heal. Healing these injuries can result in you developing enhanced resilience, coping skills, compassion for others, and a wisdom that others without this history may lack.

Seek help, support, information, and treatment. The VA PTSD web site has a great deal of information, apps, and resources. Explore local counselors and find someone with whom you feel safe to begin to attend to these injuries. The VA Caregiver Support Line has licensed social workers available to assist you in providing emotional support, information, or resources to help you towards recovery.

We believe in your recovery and we believe that while trauma may have left its mark on you or your Veteran loved one, there is life beyond the trauma. You deserve not to have these events continue to traumatize or define you. You and your Veteran loved one are not the sum total of your injuries; you are so much more. We are here for you and we are cheering you on as you courageously march forward.