

## Relationships and PTSD

Excerpted from: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/family/ptsd-and-relationships.asp> and <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/family/partners-of-vets.asp>

### How does trauma affect relationships?

Trauma survivors with PTSD may have trouble with their close family relationships or friendships. The symptoms of PTSD can cause problems with trust, closeness, communication, and problem solving. These problems may affect the way the survivor acts with others. In turn, the way a loved one responds to him or her affects the trauma survivor. A circular pattern can develop that may sometimes harm relationships.

#### How might trauma survivors react?

In the first weeks and months following a trauma, survivors may feel angry, detached, tense or worried in their relationships. In time, most are able to resume their prior level of closeness in relationships. Yet the 5% to 10% of survivors who develop PTSD may have lasting relationship problems.

Survivors with PTSD may feel distant from others and feel numb. They may have less interest in social or sexual activities. Because survivors feel irritable, on guard, jumpy, worried, or nervous, they may not be able to relax or be intimate. They may also feel an increased need to protect their loved ones. They may come across as tense or demanding.

The trauma survivor may often have trauma memories or flashbacks. He or she might go to great lengths to avoid such memories. Survivors may avoid any activity that could trigger a memory. If the survivor has trouble sleeping or has nightmares, both the survivor and partner may not be able to get enough rest. This may make sleeping together harder.

Survivors often struggle with intense anger and impulses. In order to suppress angry feelings and actions, they may avoid closeness. They may push away or find fault with loved ones and friends. Also, drinking and drug problems, which can be an attempt to cope with PTSD, can destroy intimacy and friendships. Verbal or physical violence can occur.

In other cases, survivors may depend too much on their partners, family members, and friends. This could also include support persons such as health care providers or therapists.

Dealing with these symptoms can take up a lot of the survivor's attention. He or she may not be able to focus on the partner. It may be hard to listen carefully and make decisions together with someone else. Partners may come to feel that talking together and working as a team are not possible.

## **How might loved ones react?**

Partners, friends, or family members may feel hurt, cut off, or down because the survivor has not been able to get over the trauma. Loved ones may become angry or distant toward the survivor. They may feel pressured, tense, and controlled. The survivor's symptoms can make a loved one feel like he or she is living in a war zone or in constant threat of danger. Living with someone who has PTSD can sometimes lead the partner to have some of the same feelings of having been through trauma.

In sum, a person who goes through a trauma may have certain common reactions. These reactions affect the people around the survivor. Family, friends, and others then react to how the survivor is behaving. This in turn comes back to affect the person who went through the trauma.

## **Trauma types and relationships**

Certain types of "man-made" traumas can have a more severe effect on relationships. These traumas include:

- Childhood sexual and physical abuse
- Rape
- Domestic violence
- Combat
- Terrorism
- Genocide
- Torture
- Kidnapping
- Prisoner of war

Survivors of man-made traumas often feel a lasting sense of terror, horror, endangerment, and betrayal. These feelings affect how they relate to others. They may feel like they are letting down their guard if they get close to someone else and trust them. This is not to say a survivor never feels a strong bond of love or friendship. However, a close relationship can also feel scary or dangerous to a trauma survivor.

## **Do all trauma survivors have relationship problems?**

Many trauma survivors do not develop PTSD. Also, many people with PTSD do not have relationship problems. People with PTSD can create and maintain good relationships by:

- Building a personal support network to help cope with PTSD while working on family and friend relationships
- Sharing feelings honestly and openly, with respect and compassion
- Building skills at problem solving and connecting with others
- Including ways to play, be creative, relax, and enjoy others

## **What can be done to help someone who has PTSD?**

Relations with others are very important for trauma survivors. Social support is one of the best things to protect against getting PTSD. Relationships can offset feelings of being alone. Relationships may also help the survivor's self-esteem. This may help reduce depression and guilt. A relationship can also give the survivor a way to help someone else. Helping others can reduce feelings of failure or feeling cut off from others. Lastly, relationships are a source of support when coping with stress.

If you need to seek professional help, try to find a therapist who has skills in treating PTSD as well as working with couples or families. Many treatment approaches may be helpful for dealing with relationship issues. Options include:

- One-to-one and group therapy
- Anger and stress management
- Assertiveness training
- Couples counseling
- Family education classes
- Family therapy

## **Partners of Veterans with PTSD: Common Problems**

A Veteran's PTSD symptoms can cause problems in family relationships. If you need support you can:

Get information at: [VA Caregiver Support website](#)

Call the VA Caregiver Support Line: 1-855-260-3274

For help with talking to a Veteran about getting needed care, you can contact VA's [Coaching Into Care](#) program: 1-888-823-7458.

## **What are the most common relationship problems for people with PTSD?**

PTSD can affect how couples get along with each other. It can also affect the mental health of partners. In general, PTSD can have a negative effect on the whole family.

Male Veterans with PTSD are more likely to report the following problems than Veterans without PTSD:

- Marriage or relationship problems
- Parenting problems
- Poor family functioning

Most of the research on PTSD in families has been done with female partners of male Veterans. The same problems can occur, though, when the person with PTSD is female.

## **Effects on marriage**

Compared to Veterans without PTSD, Veterans with PTSD have more marital troubles. They share less of their thoughts and feelings with their partners. They and their spouses also report more worry around intimacy issues. Sexual problems tend to be higher in combat Veterans with PTSD. Lower sexual interest may lead to lower satisfaction within the relationship.

The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS) compared Veterans with PTSD to those without PTSD. The findings showed that Vietnam Veterans with PTSD:

- Got divorced twice as much
- Were three times more likely to divorce two or more times
- Tended to have shorter relationships

### **Family violence**

Families of Veterans with PTSD experience more physical and verbal aggression. Such families also have more instances of family violence. Violence is committed not just by the males in the family. One research study looked at male Vietnam Veterans and their female partners. The study compared partners of Veterans with PTSD to partners of those without PTSD. Female partners of Veterans with PTSD:

- Committed more family violence than the other female partners
- Committed more family violence than their male Veteran partners with PTSD

### **Mental health of partners**

PTSD can affect the mental health and life satisfaction of a Veteran's partner. The same research studies on Vietnam Veterans compared partners of Veterans with and without PTSD. The partners of the Vietnam Veterans with PTSD reported:

- Lower levels of happiness
- Less satisfaction in their lives
- More demoralization (discouragement)
- About half have felt "on the verge of a nervous breakdown"

These effects were not limited to females. Male partners of female Veterans with PTSD reported lower well-being and more social isolation.

Partners often say they have a hard time coping with their partner's PTSD symptoms. Partners feel stress because their own needs are not being met. They also go through physical and emotional violence. One explanation of partners' problems is *secondary traumatization*. This refers to the indirect impact of trauma on those close to the survivor. Another explanation is that the partner has gone through trauma just from living with a Veteran who has PTSD. For example, the risk of violence is higher in such families.

### **Caregiver burden**

Partners have a number of challenges when living with a Veteran who has PTSD. Wives of PTSD-diagnosed Veterans tend to take on a bigger share of household tasks such as paying bills or housework. They also do more taking care of children and the extended family. Partners feel that they must take care of the

Veteran and attend closely to the Veteran's problems. Partners are keenly aware of what can trigger symptoms of PTSD. They try hard to lessen the effects of those triggers.

*Caregiver burden* is one idea used to describe how hard it is caring for someone with an illness such as PTSD. Caregiver burden includes practical problems such as strain on the family finances. Caregiver burden also includes the emotional strain of caring for someone who is ill. In general, the worse the Veteran's PTSD symptoms, the more severe is the caregiver burden.

### **Why are these problems so common?**

The exact connection between PTSD symptoms and relationship problems is not clearly known. Some symptoms, like anger and negative changes in beliefs and feelings, may lead directly to problems in a marriage. For example, a Veteran who cannot feel love or happiness may have trouble acting in a loving way towards a spouse. Expression of emotions is part of being close to someone else. Not being able to feel your emotions can lead to problems making and keeping close relationships. Numbing can get in the way of intimacy.

### **Help for partners of Veterans with PTSD**

The first step for partners of Veterans with PTSD is to gather information. This helps give you a better understanding of PTSD and its impact on families. Resources on the National Center for PTSD website may be useful.

Some effective strategies for treatment include:

- Education for the whole family about the effects of trauma on survivors and their families
- Support groups for both partners and Veterans
- Individual therapy for both partners and Veterans
- Couples or family counseling

VA has taken note of the research showing the negative impact of PTSD on families. PTSD programs and Vet Centers have begun to offer group, couples, and individual counseling for family members of Veterans. Overall, the message for partners is that problems are common when living with a Veteran who has been through trauma. The treatment options listed above may be useful to partners as they search for better family relationships and mental health.

### **Resources**

Matsakis, A. (2007). (Sidran Press, paperback, ISBN 1886968187). *Back from the Front: Combat Trauma, Love, and the Family*. Aphrodite Matsakis is a psychotherapist with a special interest in PTSD. Her book aims to help partners and Veterans understand the effects of combat trauma on relationships and family life. It also includes resources to help every member of the family.

Slone, L.B. & Friedman, M.J. (2008) (Da Capo Press, paperback, ISBN 1600940544). *After the War Zone: A Practical Guide for Returning Troops and Their Families*. Laurie Slone and Matt Friedman are in the

leadership of the National Center for PTSD. Their book is a guide to homecoming for returning Veterans and their families. The book suggests ways families can cope with the effects of trauma.

## Sources

Kulka, R.A., Schlenger, W.E., Fairbank, J.A., Hough, R.L., Jordan, B.K., Marmar, C.R., Weiss, D.S., and Grady, D.A. (1990). *Trauma and the Vietnam War generation: Report of findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Jordan, B.K., Marmar, C.R., Fairbank, J.A., Schlenger, W.E., Kulka, R.A., Hough, R.L., and Weiss, D.S. (1992). Problems in families of male Vietnam veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 60*, 916-926.