Experiencing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as a Family:
A Guide to Thrive

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Introduction

Many of us have a family member or know someone who has experienced a traumatic event. While most people exposed to a traumatic event do not develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), some people will. This condition may be difficult for people who experience it and for those who care about them. Family members and loved ones play an important role in PTSD recovery as they provide support. There are many things supporters can learn to maximize their ability to provide help, including:

- Signs and symptoms of PTSD
- Possible impact on family and friends
- Where to get professional help
- How to encourage a person with PTSD to seek treatment
- How best to contribute to treatment

This booklet will introduce you to PTSD and provide helpful tips to achieve a healthy life with your loved one.

What is PTSD?

PTSD may develop after a person directly experiences, witnesses or is confronted with a traumatic event. Some examples of traumatic events that may lead to PTSD include:

- Combat
- Child abuse
- Terrorist attack
- Seeing seriously injured or deceased people
- Sexual or physical assault
- Serious accident (e.g., car accident)
- Natural disaster

A family member or friend may be thinking...

When I saw him get off the bus, I knew that things wouldn't be the same. Something inside of him had changed and I felt helpless. He was now a different person.

The Relationship of PTSD to Combat

PTSD is the current name used to describe a host of psychological health symptoms some people experience following combat-related traumas. Previous names reflected our understanding of the relationship of PTSD to combat at the time the names were developed, and included the following:

Soldier's Heart
following the Civil War

Combat Fatigue or
Shell Shock
following World War I

Battle Fatigue or
Gross Stress Reaction
following World War II

In the past, some believed PTSD only impacted the "weak." Today, we know that anyone is vulnerable to PTSD when exposed to traumatic events - whether in a combat setting or not. We also know that development of PTSD may depend on the level of exposure to trauma. Finally, those with a strong support network appear less vulnerable to the development of PTSD.

What Does PTSD Look Like?

There are no obvious external wounds like the loss of a limb, so people who aren't trained to recognize symptoms of PTSD may think the person is fine. PTSD symptoms may start soon after the traumatic event, or they may not appear until months or years later. While there are common symptoms of PTSD, people may experience different combinations of symptoms, and symptoms may come and go over time. If symptoms don't go away and disrupt a person's ability to function emotionally, socially and/or occupationally, he or she may have PTSD. Family members and friends need to pay close attention to their loved ones' actions and attitudes. If you notice your loved one exhibiting any of the common symptoms listed below, encourage them to seek help. Experienced health care providers are needed to determine whether or not a person has PTSD or another psychological health problem, as the PTSD symptoms below may be related to a separate psychological health condition.

Common Symptoms of PTSD:

- Reliving the event:
  - Experiencing feelings of threat or fear like those felt during the traumatic event
  - Having nightmares or feeling like they are reliving the traumatic event
- Avoiding situations that remind them of the event:
  - Avoiding situations or people that trigger memories of the traumatic event
  - Avoiding talking or thinking about the traumatic event
  - Finding it hard to express feelings
  - Finding it hard to remember parts of the traumatic event
- Feeling keyed up:
  - Feeling jittery or always on alert
  - Feeling always on the lookout for danger
  - Feeling excessive anger or irritability
  - Having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep

A family member or friend may be thinking...

He looks great. It looks like Afghanistan treated him well. Why does he seem so anxious all the time?

Common Reactions of Family Members or Friends

Sometimes, family members or friends are uncertain how to respond to their loved one's PTSD symptoms. The table below lists some common reactions you may have and how best to address them.

Family members who devote themselves to caring for someone with PTSD often neglect their own needs and the needs of others in the family. Be aware of your needs and those of other family members as well as the needs of your loved one with PTSD.

OVER-PROTECTIVE FEELINGS	You may feel concerned for what your loved one is going through. It may help your loved one to know that you empathize with them. Being supportive without being overly protective may help your loved one. With treatment, they can feel better.
NEGATIVE FEELINGS	PTSD can make someone seem like a different person. If you believe your family member is behaving differently, it may be hard to feel close to them. Educate yourself about PTSD and its symptoms. Even if your loved one is reluctant to get treatment, you may benefit from attending a support group or meeting with a health care provider.
AVOIDANCE	People with PTSD may avoid situations and reminders of their traumatic event. This avoidance may affect others in their lives. Don't neglect things that are important to you even if the person with PTSD doesn't want to participate. Remember to pay close attention to your loved one's symptoms and encourage them to seek care. You can seek professional help to learn when and how to encourage the person with PTSD to stop avoiding situations or treatment.
FEELINGS OF SADNESS	Feeling sad is common among family members when a loved one has PTSD. When PTSD lasts for a long time, you may lose hope that your family will ever "get back to normal."
GUILT	You may experience guilt related to the way you feel or respond about things over which you have little or no control. If this is the case, consider professional help.
HEALTH PROBLEMS	Unhealthy habits like drinking, smoking and not exercising can worsen when coping with a family member's PTSD symptoms. Exercise, sleep, a good diet and avoiding bad habits like smoking and drinking will help you cope.
CONCERNS ABOUT SAFETY	Some symptoms of PTSD may be upsetting for you and your loved one. You may feel concerned for your safety or for the safety of your loved one. Educate yourself about some of the behaviors your loved one may exhibit; this will help you be prepared. If anger ever leads to violent behavior or abuse, go to a safe place, ensure children are also in a safe place, and call for help right away.

Family Connection to Therapy

There are many effective treatments for PTSD. It is important that you are aware of the different treatments available in order to better understand the process and progress of your loved one's care. Treatments require time commitments because they often involve homework. Understanding the time and energy involved in various treatments will help you support your loved one.

Treatment Options

Recent research demonstrates that for most people the rate of recovery from PTSD is greatly improved with effective treatment.

Psychotherapy

- Psychotherapy refers to a process of treatment in which patients meet regularly with a trained professional to talk about symptoms and stresses, and learn to use various tools to manage their symptoms.
- Psychotherapy treatments shown to help reduce PTSD symptoms include:
  - Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
    - Cognitive processing therapy (CPT)
    - Prolonged exposure (PE) therapy
  - Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)
  - Stress inoculation training (SIT)

Medication

- Medications are also helpful in the treatment of PTSD, especially to treat sleep problems.
- Providers may prescribe medications alone, or in combination with psychotherapy.
- It is important that family members be aware of the medications your loved one may be taking due to potential side effects and possible impact on recovery.
- The two most effective types of FDA-approved medications in the treatment of PTSD are:
  - Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as sertraline (Zoloft), paroxetine (Paxil) and fluoxetine (Prozac).
  - Serotonin–norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) such as venlafaxine (Effexor).
- Providers may prescribe other medications at their professional discretion.

A family member or friend may be thinking...

Ever since she came back from Iraq, she's been avoiding me. I don't understand why she's acting different. What did I do wrong for her to avoid me like this?

Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM)

- CAM therapies that may help reduce over-stimulation or stress include:
  - Mindfulness
  - Yoga
  - Tai Chi
  - Massage
- CAM may be used alongside medication and psychotherapy.
- Consider acupuncture to help alleviate pain.
- The use of CAM alone is not recommended as a first treatment step for PTSD.

Psychotherapy

The previous page and the table below list types of psychotherapy that have demonstrated they may reduce PTSD symptoms. However, there are more treatments available. Remind your loved one to talk to their health care provider for more information. People who have PTSD are likely to benefit most from types of therapies that include exposure and/or cognitive restructuring or stress inoculation training. Examples of these types of therapies are below.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (CBT) can be an effective treatment for PTSD. CBT usually involves meeting with a therapist once a week for three to six months. There are different types of CBT that may be effective for PTSD.

- **Cognitive processing therapy (CPT)** is a type of CBT in which your loved one learns skills to better understand how a trauma changed their thoughts and feelings. It may help you see how your loved one has gotten "stuck" when thinking about the trauma. It helps your loved one identify and change trauma-related thoughts so they are less distressing.
- **Prolonged exposure therapy (PE)** is a type of CBT in which your loved one talks about their trauma repeatedly until the memories are no longer upsetting. They are also encouraged by the therapist to enter situations that they may have been avoiding because the situation reminds them of the trauma.

EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITIZATION AND REPROCESSING (EMDR) is a therapy in which your loved one focuses on distractions–like hand movements or sounds–while they talk about the traumatic event. Over time, it can help change how they react to memories of the trauma.

STRESS INOCULATION TRAINING (SIT) is designed to teach your loved one skills related to breathing retraining, muscle relaxation, assertiveness training and rehearsal of coping skills through use of imagination and behavioral practice.

Recovery Strategies for Living with PTSD

EDUCATE YOURSELF: Learning about the different types of medications, psychotherapies, new research and resources available to you and your loved ones is helpful. Reliable information about PTSD can be accessed from the resources listed at the back of this booklet.

PROVIDE SOCIAL SUPPORT: Social support is critical in PTSD recovery. Support groups or psychotherapy may be a good way to learn how to communicate with your loved one and cope with their PTSD symptoms. Health care professionals may also help you find the best way to encourage your loved one to get help if they haven't already done so. Support your loved one and help them remember all appointments.

REMAIN HEALTHY: It is important for you to take care of yourself, both for your own good and to help your loved one cope with PTSD. People with PTSD may try to feel better or deal with problems in ways that may cause more harm than good. This is called negative coping. One common example of negative coping is to abuse drugs, by either taking illegal drugs or by misusing prescription medication, or by drinking a lot of alcohol (please see niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health for more information on alcohol abuse). Help your family member or loved one remain healthy by finding positive ways to cope. The National Center for PTSD has self-help and coping information at ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/fslist-self-help-cope.asp.

UNDERSTAND THE DISORDER: Family members can do a number of things to help cope with a loved one's PTSD. First, it is important to understand that behavior does not necessarily reflect true feelings. For example, a person with PTSD may want to go out and socialize but is afraid to recall upsetting thoughts and memories. You can work with a health care provider to encourage your loved one to better understand why he or she may feel this way and to fully engage in the hard work of treatment.

KNOW THE TRIGGERS: It is important for you to know what may trigger symptoms of PTSD in your loved one. If you have questions, ask if you can speak with them to their provider about supporting their treatment relating to symptom triggers.

ADJUST: Family members and friends may also need to change their routines based on a loved one's symptoms. Flexibility is an essential part of healthy support for their loved one.

REMEMBER: Recovery from PTSD is not instant; it can be an ongoing process. Healing does not mean forgetting about the traumatic event or feeling no pain when thinking about it. Support and understanding are two of the most important parts of your loved one's journey to recovery.

Recovery Strategies Worksheet

1. Decide how to further educate yourself.

List the resources recommended from this tool or your provider that look interesting or helpful to you:

2. Plan healthy, relaxing and fun activities to do with your loved one.

People with PTSD may try to deal with problems with negative coping. Help your loved one by planning positive and healthy activities.

Sample activity plan:
I will plan to go on a long walk on Thursday at 5:00pm at the park across the street from Chris's office.

My activity plan:

I will plan to (insert activity)

on (date and time)

at (location).

3. Keep track of all health care provider visits, psychological health engagements and any treatment, as needed.

Offer to go to visits with your loved one. Keep track of any medication and therapy, as needed. Be there for support.

Sample schedule:
My wife's provider appointment: Monday at 11:00am
My caregiver support group session: Every other Tuesday at 2:00pm
My wife's CPT appointment: Next Wednesday at 11:00am

Appointment schedule:

4. Share your thoughts and feelings openly.

Sometimes it is difficult to say what we feel and remain positive. Writing down some responses can help you better communicate with your loved one.

Sample Overview:
BE POSITIVE:
"This feeling will not last forever."
HELP YOUR FAMILY MEMBER PUT FEELINGS INTO WORDS:
"Are you feeling angry, sad or worried?"
ASK HOW YOU CAN HELP:
"Remember that I am always here for you. How can I help you?"
BE A GOOD LISTENER:
"I am here to listen whenever you need me."

Your overview:

5. Prepare for unexpected responses.

Sample plan:
If things become too overwhelming, I will say:
"Let's take a timeout. After we both calm down, we can come back and talk. Let's agree to a time we will return and continue the discussion. "

Your plan:
If things become too overwhelming, I will say:

6. Adjust to help your loved one remain most comfortable.

Sample adjustments:
When Joe wakes up, he feels jumpy.
I can help him by waking him slowly. I can make sure not to have any loud alarm clocks in the room and I can dim the lights.

Your adjustment:

7. Share your recovery plan.

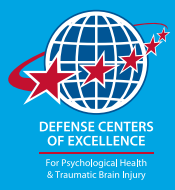
Sample Recovery Plan:
"Our family will be there for you no matter what. I can help you keep track of your health care provider appointments as well as any social activities you want to plan, and remember your medication or therapy appointments, if you need me to help you in this way. I will share all my thoughts and feelings with you, openly and honestly."

My Recovery Plan:

Helpful Resources

There are many resources for patients and family members. The Internet offers many helpful resources, but PTSD information should be viewed with caution; many sites are opinion-based and not factual or reviewed by medical professionals. Internet sites from established health care agencies or patient advocacy organizations are recommended over chat rooms, non-specialist or commercial sites. Recommended resources include:

- Military Medical Treatment Facilities. Most military and veterans hospitals and clinics have behavioral health providers trained to treat stress injuries.
- Military OneSource. Visit militaryonesource.com or call stateside: 1-800-342-9647, overseas: 1-800-3429-6477, or overseas collect: 1-484-530-5908.
- TRICARE. For information on TRICARE mental health benefits, families can visit tricare.mil or call their regional office.
- Chaplains and Service-specific family support offices offer a variety of services to assist you with PTSD.
- The Defense Link Deployment Health Support website deploymentlink.osd.mil lists service-specific psychotherapy services.
- Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) at va.gov/healthbenefits/ offers services for veterans, National Guard and Reserves. Service members returning home from deployment are eligible for cost-free health care and readjustment services through the VA for any conditions related to combat service for two years following active duty. After two years, services are still available for a co-pay based on income.
- Veterans' Centers offer readjustment and mental health psychotherapy and provide veterans and their families with resources for the experiences associated with post-deployment. Visit vetcenter.va.gov to find a Vet Center near you.
- The National Center for PTSD at ncptsd.va.gov has many resources for professionals and the public.
- The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at centerforthestudyoftraumaticstress.org advances psychological health through research, education, and consultation.
- The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies at istss.org promotes advancement and exchange of knowledge about traumatic stress.
- The National Institute of Mental Health at nimh.nih.gov promotes research and education.
- The Real Warriors Campaign at realwarriors.net is an initiative that promotes the processes of building resilience, facilitating recovery and supporting reintegration of returning service members, veterans and their families.
- AfterDeployment.org is a wellness resource for the military community.
- Military Kids Connect at https://www.militarykidsconnect.org is a new DoD-sponsored website to help military kids support one another and learn coping and resilience-building skills.
- Make the Connection at maketheconnection.net is a website that connects veterans and their friends and family members on issues affecting their health.
- PTSD Coach, the mobile application for PTSD, is available for your phone.
- Project FOCUS at focusproject.org promotes resiliency training for military families.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VA/DoD Evidence-Based Practice