

SECONDARY STRESS



when love can hurt



PTSD: HOW I CAN HELP MY LOVED ONE THROUGH IT & HOW CAN IT AFFECT ME AS THE CAREGIVER

Being a caregiver of someone with PTSD deserves respect because you are working with a person that may lose their temper when least expected, act uncaring and non-responsive. They may seem mean and hateful while you are trying to help them get through things.

If you love the person you are attempting to help it can very well hurt you deeply in many ways as you proceed. It is not an easy task to be caregiver for those with PTSD and you deserve a lot of credit accepting this role. You may become the one person that the loved one feels comfortable to talk with, besides their counselor. If the PTSD sufferer is having a difficult time with certain issues, they may seem to take it out on you not knowing what to do for themselves. This can become a very strenuous time for you both and you need to understand that.

You may feel alone and as though they are not listening to as you suggest ideas to help make things easier. You may also think there is nobody else good enough to handle the job...because you know the person the best...or just because you feel you need to do it yourself.

As caregiver to your loved one, you may feel stressed out off and on. This can be a perfectly normal reaction because the tension builds up as time wears on. You may feel your loved one does not care what you are trying to do and that they may not be progressing as you feel they should be. But you are the one that needs to be there for him or her, and you feel you can handle things no matter how hard it gets.

As a person lives with PTSD, they have trouble handling their own needs, not thinking of the needs of the caregiver. You both need, the complete family needs, to understand about PTSD and ask for support, as things get tough. This is a necessary measure that must be taken. There will be times that things may become overwhelming as you try to get through it on your own. If you cannot find other family support you may need to seek a counselor's help, a support group that is going through issues along the same lines, or your religious leader. There are many families that are helping a family member suffering with the PTSD illness, yours is not the only one.

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP

Things you can do with or for your loved one can include:

1. **Someone to talk with:** listen without giving an opinion, without putting the person down, someone they can completely open up to without being laughed at or yelled at for what they are feeling. They must also feel safe, as you talk with your loved try to keep the atmosphere calm. At times they may become agitated or stop talking with you altogether about their difficulties and even seclude themselves instead of working thru things that will help them move on. Be honest with them, but do not be brutal, do not say “don’t worry” or “it’ll be okay.” If they are discussing what they went through while deployed, it is best not to say “I understand” because you do not and you never will totally understand what they have experienced.
2. **Realize your loved one is hurting:** they hear enough comments from people that do not understand what is going on. The PTSD sufferer needs someone that will support them even when difficult reactions come out of the clear blue sky. One minute they may be fine and the next fall apart or suffer an anger problem. They need someone they can talk to that understands this fact. They cannot just get over it, move on past it, get their mind off of it, push it to the back of their mind, or any of the other remarks they may hear or you may hear. They are suffering mentally, they want to improve, they want their old life back, but they do not know how to get that far. They need someone to understand all this and not put them down for what they are going through.
3. **Try to keep the family life normal:** when a loved one returns home affected by the war there are certain items they wish to stay away from. These items may include crowds, TV programs, driving at night, driving on highways, being in the center of a room, and there maybe others. You should attempt to keep your normal routines going but be sensitive to their insecurities about certain bothersome issues and attempt just to make the person comfortable while doing things. In other words if you want to go to a specific restaurant see if reservations can be made at a table near a wall, do not just cancel going. If they have problems driving on certain roads or at certain times ask someone else to drive. Try to keep a normal life continuing as much as possible or this may add to the problems they are going through.
4. **Realize that you both may be scared:** PTSD can come across as a scary illness/injury. Many things are taking place within the sufferer’s brain that they do not understand, they do not know how to control. You may feel your relationship has changed in some manner because of their symptoms and wonder if the old loveable person will ever return. You may come up with many different items that may scare you because of the way they act or how they may act differently than before affected. The person that is affected may

also be thinking they have not changed at all or thinking that you are the one that has changed.

5. **Do not expect too much at certain times or events:** certain holidays or events can really affect a person suffering with PTSD. They wish to be alone, not in crowds, and often they are not joyful. They may not want to have all the hugs that accompany the holidays or events because that means their comfort zone has been intruded. You must listen to them, they are not comfortable, but you can make small changes so they can still enjoy the day. They can make promises that they will be able to handle it, but then realize they cannot. Let them try, but do not make them feel bad if they cannot and have to leave.
6. **Stay calm, be patient:** PTSD follows its own course, it may take a short timeframe to get some issues under control or it may take a long time. No matter how much you or your loved one wish to move forward you cannot control it to your estimated agenda plan. You can only take one day at a time and do not get upset when things are not accomplished immediately. This also goes for you, the caregiver. You must focus on the issues that come up that particular day or you too will find yourself falling into turmoil, let down, and you may start into your own drowning process.
7. **Take care of yourself:** You are strong! However, as you go through day-by-day issues with your loved one you may start watching out for them and not pay any attention to yourself. You need to keep yourself together to get through each issue or he/she will fall apart, but if you continue with everything, every single day the stress will catch up with you also. You must eat correctly, get rest, and exercise so you can stay strong. Take care of your own physical and mental needs. Do not let yourself get caught up so bad that you suffer yourself.

The most important thing you can do for your loved one that is suffering is support them by being there for them. They will feel lonely and you may also, but they need to know someone is there for them if they want or need help with no communication problems.

I am sorry; there is no magic cure for PTSD. You did not cause your loved one to suffer with it. Nor can you fix it, no matter how much you want to help your loved one.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN IF I BECOME SO INVOLVED THAT IT STARTS AFFECTING MY OWN LIFE?

While you are so busy with caring for your loved one you may start ignoring what your own body is telling you. You may realize you are tired and worn out but decide that you can rest later; you have to take care of things for your loved one first. Then time goes by and you are still taking care of your loved one and still no rest comes or no time for yourself.

When this takes place your own body may start wearing down, your mind may start thinking of ways to make things easier so you can both make it to the next day, and the next, and the next. Each day may bring on new issues for your own body to handle. Some things may cause emotional difficulties or they may cause physical difficulties. Either way just as we say the PTSD sufferer needs help, if you are starting to have difficulties you may also need stop and decide if you yourself may need some help or at least slow down. What you could possibly be facing if you do not ask for help or take time out to help yourself is called secondary traumatization.

SECONDARY TRAUMATIZATION

**Also known as Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder (STSD),
Compassion Fatigue (CF), and Vicarious Stress**

Though secondary trauma is common or normal, it is just like post traumatic stress it cannot be avoided or eliminated. Though it is a normal part of helping someone that has been through a traumatic event, it can be reduced & modified. Every parent or loved one of a deployed or redeployed member will have some problems. Many may suffer with mild symptoms and then move on. Other people will suffer through many symptoms as they care for their loved one. With combat related PTSD when a deployed member returns with few changes than their loved one might not recognize any problems of any manner. We all understand no one returns home unscathed totally from a warzone, there will be changes, what level of severity is the main question.

Combat PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) is caused from a horrendous trauma. The number of events that were witnessed, or that they took part in, may very well have an affect on how strong their symptoms may be or may become. Someone that is facing Secondary stress has not been directly exposed to any trauma. It occurs as you care for a person that does suffer from PTSD and you hear their horrifying stories or you see the pain written on their faces and you become connected more than you ever have been with this person. Secondary is not the same thing as burnout. Burnout takes place as you go through every day hassles and stress that is usually predictable that builds up and usually can be fixed with a vacation or a break. Secondary is where there is stressful tension built

up because you are so busy helping a person get through a highly stressful re-experiencing of a traumatic event, that it can numb your own feelings. You may get to the point that you are actually feeling and seeing what you think they have been through in your own mind. In other words, you are absorbing everything your loved one went through. If you care for a PTSD sufferer on a day-to-day basis, you may start to struggle to keep functioning as a caregiver.

Secondary traumatization is a slow building process and usually the person showing signs does not see them nor does he/she see it becoming an issue. This is because this stress builds up at a very slow steady pace. It is hard to help those who suffer through PTSD daily. You feel because it is your loved one, which you are helping, get them through issues and you can control everything else. After awhile you may start losing that control.

All of these items cause stress on and within, mentally & physically, your own body and starts to take its toll. It is very difficult to hear what your loved one has gone through or witnessed. You can start losing control of yourself by experiencing their dreams, their fears, and you start suffering with them. After awhile you may think you are being hit from all sides by hearing of events, you may start to feel the events, you speak of the events, and you live with the events. You may also start witnessing hard-core reenactments or reliving of the events. All these items may take place even though you yourself never actually witnessed any of it in person. This stress is then added with the every day stress the caregiver is handling. It can become a complicated issue knowing where the sufferer stops and the caregiver begins.

If you think you are having a problem, you probably are. However, do not despair, as there are ways to keep or get things under control again. With the right guidance, care, and support you can bring your own life back into view. Understanding and taking these steps will help you, but you must accept the fact that you are having problems handling all the stress first. This does not mean you have to stop caring for your loved one that is suffering, it means if you can help yourself keep fit, you can continue to him or her. When you decide you have possibly gotten to this point it is time you give yourself some compassion so you can continue.

Caring for your loved one as he/she is working through all types of mental anguish is an honorable thing to do. You should feel gratification, blessed, and rewarded as you help them with combat PTSD. However, you must watch out for your own well-being. The only way not to be affected in any manner from what you are witnessing your loved one experiencing is to block everything out...and that is not the solution.

POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS OF SECONDARY TRAUMATIZATION

There is no single symptom that describes what secondary traumatization sufferers feel. These symptoms can range anywhere from mild to severe conditions. Keeping control of your life will take time and sometimes-hard work.

The symptom list can become endless, but the following are some that may come up.

Feeling worried	Ashamed
Helpless	Depressed
Anger	Decrease in appetite
Resentful	Confused
Tired: mentally and/or physically	Isolated
Anxious	Sensitive over things
Grief	Feel like no one understands
Difficulty concentrating	Medical issues: headache, joint pain, abdominal discomfort
Under pressure	Having bottled up emotions
Emotional drained	Compulsive spending, eating, gambling
Drinking, drugs issues	Hypertension
Alone	Work holism
Fearful	Hopelessness
Betrayed	High self-expectations
Stressed	

Occupied with the PTSD sufferer's pain & memories of their stories
To much caring for the PTSD sufferer and not enough self care
One can become very resentful
You are in denial about having a problem or that you need help

Some symptoms that can be classified as a type of survivor guilt:

Why is my loved one suffering?
Will he ever be happy again?
Am I helping in the right manner?
What can I do differently to get him over this?
Why is he not thankful for the help I am giving him?

These symptoms could mean there are or could be issues that are more serious:

You dream of what you are told about
You loose your fun loving side of life
You are preoccupied with PTSD sufferer's safety
You can feel guilt & pain because you cannot control things for your loved one
You withdraw from activities—especially ones the PTSD sufferer cannot feel comfortable with
You feel you are dysfunctional

You are mentally and physically exhausted
You can lose your own hopes, secure feelings, personality, and thoughts
You can develop a cynical attitude as a defense against yourself (doubting,
scornful, and lack of respect)

Putting it bluntly, you are not yourself.

What can you do to manage your stress?

If you are showing signs of stress then you need to be aware that it can lead to further issues if you do not take control. Remember, it is the simple things that can multiply without you recognizing the fact any of it is taking place.

A person must attempt to keep things under control for themselves and when signs are showing there is a problem there are ways to regain that control. If you continue and ignore the signs, eventually your emotions may take over and you can no longer ignore the fact that there is a problem. Often by this point psychological and physical issues are occurring.

To start helping yourself you need to see everything you are juggling at that time, mentally and physically, while getting through the days. Being a caregiver of a loved one is time consuming and can make you run yourself down....now how do you move forward? How do you make a change so both you and your loved one can keep moving forward?

- 1) Be Aware: be able to identify symptoms. Are there changes noticed by yourself or someone else?
- 2) Balance: put balance into your life, no matter how unrealistic it sounds. Relax, take a break, rest, have fun, laugh, take care of yourself, eat correctly.
- 3) Connect: find someone to talk with and talk freely with. Talk of your inner thoughts on what is taking place with your loved one and yourself. Is there a support group you can attend? Communication can help.

But How?

Here are twelve steps to help you regain control:

1. accept where you are on your path
2. be kind to yourself
3. attempt to have a positive outlook
4. Understand that the pain you feel is normal
5. Find someone to talk with: a friend, clergy person, counselor
6. Continue to learn about PTSD
7. Eat meals that are balanced, sit down to eat and do not eat on the run.
8. Start exercising: go for a walk, go bike riding
9. have some quiet time, meditate, read a book, listen to calm music
10. develop a hobby

11. take some time off
12. get some rest

How stress can affect children (When a child is close to a PTSD sufferer)

Stress also affects children of all ages. As they witness someone affected with flashbacks, dreams, anger problems, or any other problem it hurts them also. To them this person is supposed to be strong, they are supposed to be able to teach the child and protect them. They do not understand what is taking place but know something is wrong.

Sometimes you will notice the child start to withdraw, school grades start to drop, they can't sleep, their eating habits have changed, they seem to become aggressive with other children, they may regress in their development skills such as toilet training, or they may seem afraid of the person that is suffering. They may also seem confused....because they are, they may experience nightmares, or they may claim to be ill. They may also attempt to take care of the sufferer. They need to learn that it is not their fault the person is acting the way he/she is, and the person just has some problems they need help with. The child's life may seem to be turned upside down; they need to be able to understand what is happening.

How can you help a child?

1. The first thing you may want to do is try to explain, depending on the child's age, what Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is. This can be a challenge depending on their age.
Post means the person is feeling really bad after something really bad happened
Traumatic means it was very scary and this can make them have dreams or feel sick
Stress means it makes your heart beat fast, like if they were running really fast, but they weren't running at all and this can give them headaches
Disorder means something isn't right, it's messed up somehow
This illness can make someone really grumpy and not always nice. Even the person may not understand why they act this way
2. Try to keep a calm atmosphere, bring them for a walk
3. Listen to the child's concerns, they too may be scared. Ask what they are afraid of, what their dreams are about but explain dreams are pretend, let them speak of their own concerns
4. You should try to keep a normal routine going
5. Keep an eye open for school related issues
6. If they will not speak with you, or you feel they need to speak with someone besides you, ask if they would like to speak to another adult or you may feel you need to contact a professional
7. Make sure they know you love them and let them know their feelings matter.

The Hurting Mom

By: Nancy Spuerke

How can mom stand so relaxed and at bay
Knowing he served proudly, returning injured this way
Her son transforms preparing for missions and on guard
As she watches him suffer crying, “Why is it so hard”?

At times, she could scream, “take away all the dreams,
All the memories, the fears he goes through every day”!
But, on deaf ears is where her screams fall it seems.
As her mind and her heart want to take it away.

She sees fear in his eyes; his hopes seem to be gone
Take away his hurt and to mom put it all on
Knowing the pain that’s inside, she wants to stop all the harm!
With pain in her heart, she needs to scream in alarm!

As time goes by, it seems to stay all the same
Let him learn the control so his life he’ll reclaim
One day no problems, but how about the next?
The flashbacks, the dreams will leave him perplexed

So mom’s heart races on, the sleep she does lose
His combat time left him in confusion and bruised
Worried and wanting this darkness to leave
This mom will always worry and wear her heart on her sleeve.

So as you travel this road full of sorrow and pain
Keep your mind focused, relax, and try not to complain
This pain may continue through months or just days
Still, your loved one will treasure you today and always.

