

# Managing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Your Relationship

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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is discussed a lot in the veteran community. Some of the original research on PTSD as a disorder was done with veterans, and people who have experienced combat. We know more about PTSD and how it affects individuals than we ever have before, but every person's situation will be different. **A person's reactions, symptoms and experiences will always be unique, and treatments and strategies will always vary from person to person.**

### Understanding PTSD

Trauma can affect everyone, and **it is normal for individuals who have experienced a traumatic event to have reactions to that experience.** Such reactions can include feeling on edge, having unwanted and upsetting memories, having negative thoughts about oneself or the world, and many other symptoms. Again, these are completely normal reactions to any trauma.

**So, what is a trauma?** In the context of veterans, we often go straight to thoughts of death and injury. Perhaps you were injured yourself, saw others killed, or had to kill or injure someone else to stay alive. These, of course, are all traumas, but there are several other ways to experience a trauma. **If you were ever exposed to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, you have experienced a trauma.** And the event does not have to be directly experienced for it to be traumatic. **You could have witnessed it, learned that a relative or close friend experienced the trauma, or had indirect exposure to the details.** This definition of trauma encompasses a lot, and includes several incidents outside of the combat arena, such as a car accident, a natural disaster, or abuse (PTSD overview).



You may have heard the concept of **Big T and little t trauma**. When you have that direct exposure, that's a big T trauma. Indirect exposure is a small t trauma. You'll notice both are still a trauma, and **both can result in PTSD**. We may never experience a big T trauma in our lifetime, but may experience several small t traumas that can compound throughout our lives, essentially snowballing into a big T trauma (Barbash, 2018).

We all may experience some form of a trauma in our lifetime, and it's normal to have severe reactions to that event. **So, when do those normal reactions turn into something else? When these symptoms persist for more than a month after the traumatic event, and they create distress or functional impairment, such as not being able to work, or attend social functions, we have now entered the realm of PTSD.**



It's important to note that you may not experience these symptoms immediately after the event. If you're downrange, your body and brain may still be in the fight mode that serves to protect you from the effects of your experience. **You may not start to see symptoms until you're back home and your brain is able to turn off that self-protective defense mechanism** (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

## Symptoms of PTSD

PTSD can show up in four main ways. Not every person will experience all four, and different reactions can show up differently in different people (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

1. **Re-experiencing the event:** This can include intrusive and unwanted memories, flashbacks, nightmares, and emotional distress or physical reactivity (sweating, rapid heartbeat, ect.) to reminders of the traumatic event.
2. **Avoidance:** This refers to avoiding all situations or triggers that remind you of the traumatic event. This can include avoiding your thoughts and feelings internally, or by not sharing them with others, as well as avoiding certain stimuli - such as noises, smells, and places, that remind you of the traumatic event.
3. **Negative thoughts or feelings that began or worsened after the traumatic event:** These can include an inability to recall key features of the trauma, experiencing overly negative thoughts and assumptions about yourself or the world, blaming yourself or others for causing the event, having an overly negative affect (anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, fear), difficulty experiencing a positive affect (joy, optimism, enthusiasm, love), experiencing feelings of isolation, and disinterest in activities you used to enjoy.
4. **Arousal and reactivity that began or worsened after the traumatic event:** This can include irritability or aggression, risky or destructive behavior, hypervigilance - being jittery, alert, and always on the lookout for danger, being easily startled, difficulty concentrating, and difficulty sleeping.

PTSD symptoms can be frightening. **It can feel like you're losing control, or that you don't know what's happening in your own brain, or body.** It can be scary to watch someone you are close to experience symptoms that they cannot explain or understand.

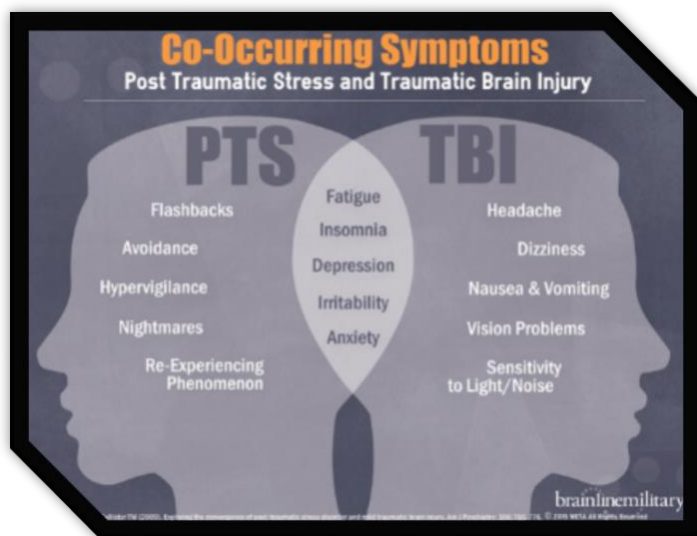
**It's normal to be scared, and worried, both as a survivor and as their partner.**

You may find that you have some of these symptoms, but not all of them. A PTSD diagnosis does not require that you have all the symptoms listed above. **Trauma reactions are going to look different for everyone, and it is important to seek treatment that is individualized to your experience and symptoms.** It's also important to note that you may have experienced a trauma, and not developed PTSD. If this is the case, it can still be helpful to seek treatment to work through that trauma.

These symptoms, in isolation, are normal reactions to a traumatic event. They are what keeps us safe while a traumatic event is occurring or in its immediate aftermath. **PTSD becomes a concern when these symptoms persist long after the danger has passed, and when they begin to get in the way of our ability to carry out daily tasks and enjoy life.** But that does not mean that PTSD is a permanent condition, or that a person who has PTSD is without hope. There are many treatments for PTSD that have been shown to be effective, and there are strategies and systems that can help manage the symptoms.

**PTSD does not have to change who you are as a person or make it impossible to enjoy life, to be loving and kind to the people around you, and to ultimately thrive.**

## PTSD and TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury)



For veterans who have experienced trauma that involved a brain injury, after effects and care can be complicated by the fact that symptoms of **PTSD and TBI often overlap or mirror one another.** Treatments for PTSD and TBIs are very different, so a misdiagnosis can complicate treatment. Additionally, it is common for many veterans to have both a TBI and PTSD, which impacts the recommended course of treatment (Lash, 2013).

## PTSD and the Relationship

Trauma changes us,  
whether we  
experience it on the  
battlefield, in  
childhood, in our  
home, or on the street.

The variety of symptoms experienced by those with PTSD can all have serious impacts on the relationship as well. We hear many spouses whose partner has PTSD echo the belief that **the person who came back from the war is different from the person that left.** Life experiences change us. As a partner of a veteran, you are also not the same person you were before your relationship, or before your partner separated from the military. **We**

**change over the course of our lives, and relationships involve growing together and allowing each other grace for those changes.** As a service couple, you may be dealing with serious changes that most couples will never have to face in their marriage, but working through those changes and extending that grace to one another can lead to a more fulfilling relationship.

The impact of PTSD on your relationship can cause frustration, especially if it makes communication and trust difficult. **It can be difficult to discern which behaviors are related to PTSD and which are within your partner's control to change.** There are many other ways PTSD can impact a relationship, and every relationship will react differently, just like every person will react differently.

### Communication Challenges

PTSD can cause a person to detach, or feel or appear emotionally numb, as a way of trying to avoid the intense emotions that may trigger the trauma. **Some survivors need constant reassurance, while others don't want to talk to anyone about any of it.** It can be complex and confusing to know how you can help your partner, and it can be difficult to express what one needs in those situations.

If you have PTSD, it can be difficult to focus on your partner and truly listen. If you feel hyperaroused, listening to what your partner is saying may not be where your attention is. Perhaps you don't feel comfortable talking about the details of your trauma. **You may worry you will burden your partner with the images and experiences you had downrange, if you share your experiences with them, which is understandable.**

However, your partner may feel that you are keeping things from them, or not wanting to connect with them which can lead to feelings of disconnection in the relationship.

Veterans are often taught to keep problems they might be having to themselves and may hide a lot of their symptoms. **A partner may not even be aware of the extent of their difficulties, or just how much they are struggling.** Similarly, the military teaches you to be strong and push through pain. Many veterans believe that they just need to practice mind over matter, and that it isn't a big deal.

**PTSD, however, is a serious condition, and mind over matter won't fully address it. If we break our leg, fighting through, or avoiding the pain will only make it worse. The same is true of PTSD.**

## Distrust

Distrust, caused by PTSD, can be one of the most difficult dynamics to tackle in a relationship. Trauma shapes the way a person views themselves and the world around them.

**Relationships rely heavily on trust, and a person who has trouble trusting the world and the people around them may find it difficult to trust their partner as well.** Similarly, a partner may interpret this distrust in their own way, causing them to respond with more distrust, which can turn into a vicious cycle. If you are not able to trust those around you, you might feel angry or on edge. You may feel out of control, irritable, or lash out, especially if it feels like your symptoms come on suddenly, and without warning.

## Navigating the World Around You



PTSD can impact where you can go and what you do together. Many are triggered by crowds or loud places, and avoid activities that used to be easy to do together. Navigating other relationships with friends and family can be complicated if you or your partner is triggered while socializing. **Having to explain to friends, family, or the people around you why you or your partner reacted in a certain way can feel embarrassing or even isolating when it seems they don't understand.**



A person suffering from PTSD may feel like they ARE the disorder - that it is all anyone sees, and takes up all the space in their relationship.

For both partners, it is not easy to embrace a new normal that includes PTSD. **Some partners of veterans have said it feels like PTSD takes all of their partner's attention, leaving less for the people around them.** It can feel like you are fighting the disorder for attention. You may both feel like you have to walk on eggshells so as to not exacerbate symptoms. Many have said they ultimately feel like there's no room in the relationship for their needs, or feelings.

### When Stressors Lead to Resentment

**It is natural to be upset, angry or resentful about the trauma that caused PTSD, and of its disruption to your life.** For veterans, PTSD can cause a feeling of resentment towards the military, or even members of their unit. They may miss the life they used to have, and feel angry at the circumstances that caused this situation. Anger at the cause of the trauma is normal, and sometimes that can turn into anger at oneself, or at the people who were around when the trauma occurred.

**For partners, similar resentment can build. You may come to resent your partner for the way things are, not because you blame them, but because you don't know where else to direct your grief.** We often take our negative feelings out on those we love because they seem the safest. You may miss the person your partner was before, and feel cheated by what happened. A partner may also feel resentment towards their veteran for how these changes have affected their relationship, or the things they used to be able to enjoy together.

You may know, rationally, that there is no actual blame to place - no one asks for a traumatic experience, or for it to develop into PTSD - but it is still easy to be upset about how much your lives have to be rearranged and how much focus and energy this disorder can take up.

Resentment can be difficult to deal with, and is one of the easiest paths to unhappiness in a relationship, as it grows and festers over time. Being aware of any resentments is the first step in helping you work through it together. **Making the effort to let go of the way things were before, extending your partner grace for the situations they cannot control, as well as being aware of how one feels and sharing those feelings with one another, are all huge steps in combatting resentment.**

It's hard to admit that some things are never going to be as they were, but what can give you hope moving forward is recognizing what you can control, and all the resources and support you have at your disposal to move forward with strength.

### Managing PTSD in Your Relationship

Not everyone with PTSD has relationship challenges, but it can interrupt or create a real strain on the relationship. Having a good education and understanding of PTSD is a huge first step in smoothing out its impact. **Things can be especially scary and feel exceptionally out of control when we don't understand what something is or why it's happening.** Being able to determine what actions and behaviors are a product of the PTSD, versus the individual's own decision, can help with **extending grace** for a partner who is suffering, and take some of the pressure off of both of partners.



## Tips for Managing PTSD in the Relationship

- Look for resources that discuss how to set healthy boundaries in your relationship for when PTSD symptoms are impacting your relationship.
- Communicate! Talk to your partner about what you're experiencing. It is easy for both of you to hide what you are going through out of fear of causing more stress or being a burden. While this is understandable, it makes it harder to find connection, and to be able to understand each other's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Walking on eggshells makes everyone stressed, and using your communication skills can reduce that stress and bring about more connection and understanding in your marriage.
- Choose an intentional time to talk about how PTSD is affecting your relationship. Plan in advance so that you can both prepare.
- Brainstorm strategies together to help manage PTSD symptoms. When symptoms flare up, what works to keep you grounded? Is there a way your partner can help you with these strategies? Maybe they can hold your hand, or talk you through it. Maybe they need to give you space, but can remind you of things that have worked to calm you in the past.
- Extend grace to yourself and your partner - it's no one's fault that this is happening. Aspects of your lives right now are outside either of your control, and that's ok. Admit what's outside of your control and don't try to control it. Determine what you can control, and focus on that.
- Acknowledge that while what you're experiencing means a big change, every relationship has changes, and every person changes to some degree throughout our lives. The person you love is still there. Take off the PTSD goggles as often as you can and see your partner and yourself for the whole person that they/you are. This is one piece of the story. One piece of who they are, of who you are as a couple. It does not define them, you, or your relationship.
- Consider seeking support outside of the relationship, both as a partner and a veteran. Whether this support is from a professional counselor, community group, or close friend or family member, it's important to have someone to talk to that you trust.
- Peer support can be helpful. Look for other veterans and partners who are going through what you're going through, and talk to them. They may have strategies that could work for you too. It's valuable to have support systems outside of the relationship, so all the pressure isn't on each other.

## Getting Care

The decision to seek treatment for PTSD symptoms can be difficult, and it can be a big decision that is hard to reach. It is not uncommon to want to avoid talking about your PTSD with anyone, much less a stranger. In fact, avoidance includes not wanting to even think about the traumatic experience. But getting help for your symptoms is an important step towards recovery.

**Research shows that PTSD treatments do work.** The VA website provides a useful tool called “Decision Aid” that can help you find the right care for you or your partner.

"Getting better" means different things for different people, but people who get treatment often see improvements in their quality of life. **While PTSD treatment may not get rid of your symptoms entirely, treatment can give you the tools and coping mechanisms you need to help you function in a healthy way and manage your symptoms effectively.**

Treatment can also help you:

- **Make sense of the trauma**
- **Learn skills to better handle negative thoughts and feelings**
- **Reconnect with people you care about**
- **Learn how to talk to them about your experience and symptoms, and**
- **Set achievable goals for activities, like work or school**

## Barriers to Care

There are many reasons a person might avoid seeking treatment, including:

- **Believing you will get better on your own** – Everyone, including civilians, would love to believe we can handle it all on our own. This perspective can cause you to see your symptoms as trivial or that they can be remedied naturally or without support.
- **Not knowing how to find or choose the right treatment** – There are a lot of resources out there, but it can be difficult and overwhelming picking the best fit for you if you don't know where to look. If you don't know what treatments are out there, you may be less likely to seek care.
- **Previous bad experiences** - We all know that when we have a bad experience with anything, we're less likely to try it again. If you've had a bad experience with mental

health treatment, either in or outside of the military, it becomes easy to believe that all experiences will be negative.

- **Stigma** - American culture in general has a stigma around seeking mental health treatment, and is especially present in the military culture. You may have been taught that seeking help is a sign of weakness, and that you should be able to handle this on your own.

## How Can I Overcome Barriers to Care?

Making the decision to seek treatment is difficult when you don't know what to expect. **If you educate yourself about various PTSD treatment options and utilize supports that may already be around you, it will help you feel more in control of your own treatment.**

### Here are some steps you can take:

- Learn about PTSD and available treatments. Knowing that treatment helps and what options are available to you is important.
- Talk to someone you trust. Whether you talk to a family member, doctor, chaplain or clergy, or other service member or veteran, getting support is key to getting better.
- Talk to other veterans who have sought treatment. What was their experience? What worked for them?
- Contact veteran organizations or institutions like us for recommendations.

## How Can I Support My Partner in Seeking Treatment?

Supporting a partner with PTSD often means helping them through the process of seeking and completing treatment. As a partner, there are many ways you can support and be a part of the process yourself.

Here are a few tips to consider (Slayers, 2017):

- **Don't try to force the issue, and listen to your partner.** Oftentimes, the person experiencing PTSD may not understand what's going on with them, making it hard to communicate. They might not be ready to talk about it, or ready to seek treatment. **Listen to their concerns and choose intentional times to talk about options.**
- **Educate yourself about what it feels like to have PTSD.** Especially if you met your partner after they left the service, it will be important to do your best to empathize with his or her world. There are many videos and articles out there that describe a day in the life of a person living with PTSD.
- **Look for opportunities to help your partner focus on a solution he or she believes might address their current concerns.** Again, it's important to listen to your partner without judgement or offering solutions. **This requires a lot of patience, especially if you see your partner struggling and believe that therapy will help.** Listening without judgement is the most important form of help you can give your partner as they combat PTSD.
- When your partner is ready to problem-solve solutions to their PTSD, ask specific questions like "What do you think would work best?" Make it clear that they are the best suited to make this decision – not anyone else, but that you are there to support them. **It's also important to set healthy boundaries in your relationship.** If your partner's PTSD is going untreated and causing problems in your relationship, it's important to voice your concerns about that.
- These suggestions are aimed at helping your partner seek individual treatment for their PTSD. If you are also interested in couples counseling, make sure to separate that from PTSD treatment (unless you're doing Cognitive Behavioral Conjoint Therapy, which is discussed more below). **Couples counseling is very valuable if you wish to seek changes in your relationship; however, it's intention is not to treat an individual's PTSD.**
- Know when sitting back and listening without judgement is not the right solution. If you or your partner are in danger, take immediate steps to ensure your safety.

## PTSD Treatment

A lot of research and clinical work has been focused on the development and improvement of treatments for trauma and PTSD over the last few decades. There are a variety of treatments that are evidence-based and have been shown to have positive results. Research shows that **49-70% of those that engage in some evidence-based treatments for PTSD see significant reduction of PTSD symptoms** (Steenkamp, Litz, Hoge, & Marmar, 2015). Every person is different, and different treatments will be effective for different people. A few are listed below.

### Individual Treatment Options

The VA offers three different evidence-based PTSD treatments. You can also receive these treatments outside of the VA. Below we will briefly overview each treatment type.

#### Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)

CPT is a trauma-focused therapy that works on teaching the individual how to evaluate and alter any upsetting thoughts they may be experiencing since their trauma. The theory behind this approach is that **if you can change the way you think about something, you can change the feelings that surround it as well** (Treatment for PTSD).

#### Prolonged Exposure (PE)

PE is a trauma-focused therapy that teaches the individual to gradually approach their trauma-related memories, feelings, and situations they may have been avoiding since the trauma. **By confronting these memories, through talking about the details of the trauma and confronting safe situations you may have been avoiding, you can decrease your PTSD symptoms and gain more control over your life** (Treatment for PTSD).

#### Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

EMDR is a trauma-focused therapy that can help the individual process any upsetting memories, thoughts, or feelings related to their trauma. After a trauma, many people have difficulty making sense of their experience. EMDR helps individuals process the experience so that they can begin to heal. If you haven't heard of EMDR, it may sound a bit peculiar, but has a

lot of evidence backing up its effectiveness at treating PTSD. **EMDR uses back and forth movement (like tapping a finger) or sound, while asking you to call the upsetting and traumatic memory to your mind, while listening to the sound, or following the movement. You will continue to do this until you begin to experience less distress when recalling the memory** (Treatment for PTSD).

## Couple Treatment Options

### Cognitive Behavioral Conjoint Therapy for PTSD (CBCT for PTSD)

CBCT for PTSD aims to **improve both the PTSD for the partner that is experiencing it, as well as enhance intimate relationship functioning**. CBCT assumes that PTSD symptoms contribute to couple distress, which then exacerbates the PTSD symptoms. The treatment focuses on three areas. The first area aims to educate the couple about PTSD and its associated impact on relationship functioning. The second area focuses on behavioral interventions that increase approach behaviors and enhance relationship satisfaction, and promote communication skills. The third area focuses on cognitive interventions that address unhealthy thinking patterns that serve to maintain both PTSD symptoms and distress in the relationship (Monson, Fredman & Adair, 2008).

Every person's experience of trauma is different. Years of research have led to a better understanding of how trauma affects the brain and a person's life, and what we can do to help people who are severely impacted. **Your experience is your own, but working with the people around you to improve your life can make a very real difference**. As the partner of someone with PTSD, your experience can be difficult in its own way. **Working together as a couple to move forward means you can move together into the next phase of your relationship, and not be defined by PTSD**.

## Caregiver Stress

For partners caring for someone with severe PTSD and TBI, **caregiver stress cannot be understated**. Your life has changed and you likely feel like you have sacrificed much of the life you knew before



Caregivers express many of the following concerns:

- My loved one won't seek help
- Counseling and/or drugs aren't fixing the problem
- The side effects that come with prescription drugs are making things worse
- Life has changed. What if we never get our old life back?
- My spouse has changed. What if I never get my spouse, or the relationship we had back?
- I feel like I'm my spouse's only lifeline and only support
- Navigating the complexities of the VA system and treatment is exhausting
- I feel like I am a buffer between my spouse and the rest of the world
- I have to be the one to help the kids understand and cope with our new life
- Navigating the impact of a mental health diagnosis on the individual and the family

**Caregiver stress is a state of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion that can severely impact your mood and ability to function. PTSD does not just impact the person who has the disorder - it can severely impact the person/people who love and care for them, as well.**



## Signs of Caregiver Stress

- **Withdrawal from friends and family**
- **Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed**
- **Feeling blue, irritable, hopeless, and helpless**
- **Changes in sleep patterns**
- **Insomnia**

- **Getting sick more often**
- **Emotional and physical exhaustion**
- **Excessive use of alcohol and/or sleep medications**
- **Irritability**
- **Changes in appetite, weight, or both**

## Strategies to Manage Caregiver Stress

Caregivers spend a lot of time and energy focused on caring for the person who has PTSD, and for the family around them. If this is your current role, **caring for yourself can feel like a luxury more than a priority**. You probably have heard how important self-care is many times, but it is crucial to your wellbeing and happiness.

**Here are a few reminders on what you can do to prioritize something for yourself:**

- **Go for a walk or run, or get a massage (physical self-care)**
- **Prayer, meditation, or joining a small group with your local church (spiritual self-care)**
- **Start a creative project, like making art or music (psychological self-care)**
- **Saying no to things that overwhelm you (emotional self-care)**
- **Ensuring you don't have too many responsibilities stacked in your day (professional self-care)**
- **Going out with friends or family for dinner (social self-care)**

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