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Effects of PTSD on Family

PTSD can make somebody hard to be with. Living with someone who is easily startled, has nightmares, and often avoids social situations can take a toll on the most caring family. Early research on PTSD has shown the harmful impact of PTSD on families. This research showed that Vietnam Veterans have more marital problems and family violence. Their partners have more distress. Their children have more behavior problems than do those of Veterans without PTSD. Veterans with the most severe symptoms had families with the worst functioning.

How does PTSD have such a negative effect? It may be because those suffering with PTSD have a hard time feeling emotions. They may feel detached from others. This can cause problems in personal relationships, and may even lead to behavior problems in their children. The numbing and avoidance that occurs with PTSD is linked with lower satisfaction in parenting.

Common reactions of family members

Family members of a person with PTSD may experience the following:

Sympathy

You may feel sorry for your loved one's suffering. This may help your loved one know that you sympathize with him or her. However, be careful that you are not treating him or her like a permanently disabled person. With help, he or she can feel better.

Negative feelings

PTSD can make someone seem like a different person. If you believe your family member no longer has the traits you loved, it may be hard to feel good about them. The best way to avoid negative feelings is to educate yourself about PTSD. Even if your loved one refuses treatment, you will probably benefit from some support. If you care for a family member with PTSD also see [Partners of Veterans with PTSD](#).

Avoidance

Avoidance is one of the symptoms of PTSD. Those with PTSD avoid situations and reminders of their trauma. As a family member, you may be avoiding the same things as your loved one. Or, you may be afraid of his or her reaction to certain cues. One possible solution is to do some social activities, but let your family member stay home if he or she wishes. However, he or she might be so afraid for your safety that you also can't go out. If so, seek professional help.

Depression

This is common among family members when the person with PTSD causes feelings of pain or loss. When PTSD lasts for a long time, you may begin to lose hope that your family will ever "get back to normal."

Anger and guilt

If you feel responsible for your family member's happiness, you might feel guilty when you can't make a difference. You could also be angry if he or she can't keep a job or drinks too much, or because he or she is angry or irritable. You and your loved one must get past this anger and guilt by understanding that the feelings are no one's fault.

Health problems

Everyone's bad habits, such as drinking, smoking, and not exercising, can get worse when trying to cope with their family member's PTSD symptoms. You may also develop other health problems when you're constantly worried, angry, or depressed.

Summary

Family members may feel hurt, alienated, or discouraged because your loved one has not been able to overcome the effects of the trauma. Family members frequently devote themselves totally to those they care for and, in the process, neglect their own needs.

Social support is extremely important for preventing and helping with PTSD. It is important for family members to take care of themselves; both for their own good and to help the person dealing with PTSD.

Sources

This fact sheet is based on a more detailed version, located in the "For Providers and Researchers" section of our website: [PTSD and the Family](#) and based in part on the [Iraq War Clinician Guide](#).