

Living with PTSD & Effects on the Family

What is PTSD?


People suffer from PTSD or **posttraumatic stress disorder** when they have trouble recovering from a traumatic event they experienced, witnessed, or heard about happening to someone they love.

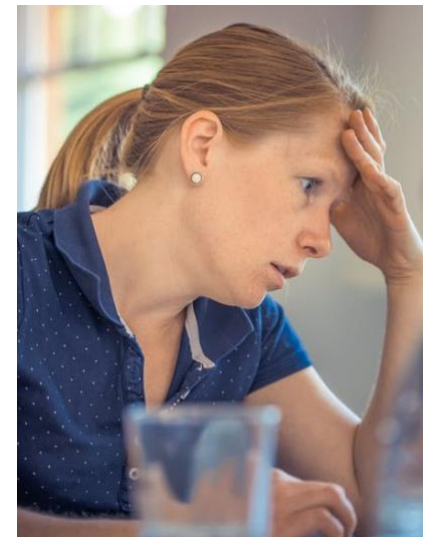
Many military families live with PTSD in their homes after their service member is exposed to combat or military training. However, PTSD may come from a variety of other traumatic events.

Some examples include:

- Violence (domestic, military, terrorist attack, training)
- Serious injuries (intentional or accidental: car crash, drowning)
- Sexual or physical assault and/or abuse
- Natural disasters (hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, floods)

PTSD can look different in individuals. One person may become more agitated while others become more distant and detached. It is also common to see two or more disorders in addition to PTSD like depression, anxiety, or substance abuse. See the table on the next page for symptoms.

 **Tip: Post-traumatic Stress (PTS)** is like PTSD without a diagnosis and lasts for about a month. Many servicemen experience PTS after deployment.





Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Symptoms

Intrusive Symptoms One or more of these:	Avoidance Symptoms One or both:	Negative Alterations in Cognition or Mood Two or more:	Reactivity & Arousal Change in two or more:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Upsetting memories and thoughts of the trauma ❖ Upsetting dreams of the trauma ❖ Unwanted flashbacks (reliving trauma; unaware of the present) ❖ Certain things cause emotional distress ❖ Physical reactions to things (jump, jerk, twitch, tremble, sweat, heart race, clench, cry, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Tries to avoid thoughts, memories, or feelings related to the trauma ❖ Tries to avoid external reminders that bring up memories, thoughts, or feelings of the trauma <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ People ❖ Places ❖ Objects ❖ Conversations ❖ Activities ❖ Situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Can't remember important parts of the trauma ❖ Consistently blames self or others for the traumatic event by mentally distorting the cause or consequences of the event ❖ Persistent negative emotions (fear, anxiety, guilt, horror, shame, anger) ❖ Less interest or participation in past hobbies, activities, or events ❖ Feels distant from others ❖ Can't feel positive emotions (happiness, love, satisfaction) ❖ Persistent exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations in oneself, others, or the world <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ "I'll never be fixed." ❖ "I'm just a bad person." ❖ "You can't trust anyone." ❖ "The world is completely dangerous." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Irritable or angry outbursts towards people or objects at little or no provocation ❖ Reckless or self-destructive behavior ❖ Hypervigilance (increased state of awareness) ❖ Problems sleeping ❖ Exaggerated startle response (Increased physical reaction to certain situations) ❖ Hard time concentrating

Note. This table was created based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th ed.

Effects of PTSD on the Family

Living with PTSD affects everyone in the home. In MCEC's webinar [PTSD and Its Effects on Military/Veteran Families](#), Dr. Stephen Cozza discusses common consequences of living with PTSD found in recent research:

In parenting:

- Poor family functioning
- Greater family distress
- Higher levels of family violence
- Disruption in parent-child relationships
- Decreased parent satisfaction with kid(s) & the way spouse parents
- Decreased parenting alliance
- Parenting challenges
- Negative parenting practices (decrease in parental engagement, consistency, & sensitivity)

In children:

- Increased anxiety and depression
- Behavioral problems like increased aggression
- Secondary trauma (to parent's PTSD)
- Increased stress in response to negative parenting practices
- Attention deficit
- Thought problems
- Social problems
- Academic challenges

Partners and couples:

- Poor couple adjustment
- Decreased intimacy satisfaction
- Negative communication
- Spouse PTSD
- Domestic Abuse
- Poor problem solving, communication, and involvement

Although PTSD increases the risk for factors mentioned above, families can find a "new normal" over time through professional help, family communication, and proactive efforts/activities. Some research even shows that partners affected by PTSD can grow through sharing their emotions with each other. Other experts theorize post-traumatic growth (PTG). PTG is the personal growth an individual can experience after turbulent psychological struggles relating to traumatic events. About PTG, Dr. Richard Tedeschi says:

"People develop new understandings of themselves, the world they live in, how to relate to other people, the kind of future they might have and a better understanding of how to live life."



Parents and guardians can help their military children learn more about PTSD through this worksheet: [For Kids: What is PTSD](#). Families living with PTSD can also find their "new normal" by following these steps and associated printables. Use this worksheet to understand and use these steps: [Strengthen Your Family Through Difficult Times](#). Modify or create your own plan, using the help of a professional if possible.

- Identifying Emotions: Feelings Color Zones
- Learning About PTSD and Triggers
- Coping Through the Levels of Anger and Aggression
- Create a Family Response Plan
- Family Goal Setting, Deep Breathing, & Journaling



Other Helpful Resources:

Videos:

- [How I Knew I had PTSD](#)
- [How PTSD Affects the People You Love](#)
- [PTSD is Like Living with this Overactive Alarm System](#)
- [The Emotional Numbness Will Just Tear Away](#)
- [TEDx Understanding PTSD's Effects on Brain, Body, and Emotions](#)

Other:

- [National Center for PTSD: Understanding PTSD: A Guide for Family and Friends](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Trauma and Your Family](#)
- [US Department of Veteran Affairs: When a Child's Parent has PTSD](#)

Resources

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