

PTSD and the Family



Because the symptoms of PTSD and other trauma reactions change how a trauma survivor feels and acts, traumatic experiences that happen to one member of a family can affect everyone else in the family. When trauma reactions are severe and go on for some time without treatment, they can cause major problems in a family.

Trauma symptoms can make a family member hard to get along with or cause him or her to withdraw from the rest of the family. It can be very difficult for everyone when these changes occur. In the sections below, many different types of reactions are described. A family may experience many of these reactions, or only a few.

Sympathy

One of the first reactions many family members have is sympathy for their loved one. People feel very sorry that someone they care about has had to suffer through a terrifying experience. And they feel sorry when the person continues to suffer from symptoms of PTSD and other trauma responses. It can be helpful for the person who has experienced the trauma to know that his or her family members sympathize with him or her, especially just after the traumatic event occurs.

Sympathy from family members can have a negative effect, though. When family members' sympathy leads them to "baby" a trauma survivor and have low expectations of him or her, it may send a message that the family doesn't believe the trauma survivor is strong enough to overcome the ordeal.

Depression

One source of depression for family members can be the traumatic event itself. All traumas involve events where people suddenly find themselves in danger. When this happens in a situation or place where people are used to feeling safe, just knowing the event happened could cause a person to lose faith in the safety and predictability of life.

Depression is also common among family members when the traumatized person acts in a way that causes feelings of pain or loss. There may be changes in family life when a member has PTSD or other symptoms after trauma.

Fear and Worry

Knowing that something terrible can happen "out of the blue" can make people very fearful. This is especially true when a family member feels unsafe and often reminds others about possible dangers. Very often, trauma survivors feel "on edge" and become preoccupied with trying to stay safe.

Guilt and Shame

Family members can feel guilt or shame after a traumatic event for several reasons. A family member may experience these feelings if he or she feels responsible for the trauma. For instance, a husband whose wife is assaulted may feel guilt or shame because he was unable to protect her from the attack.

Anger

Family members may feel angry about the trauma and its effect on their lives. They may be angry at whomever they believe is responsible for the traumatic event. They can also feel anger toward the trauma survivor. Family members may feel that the survivor should just "forget about it" and get on with life. They may be angry when their loved one continues to "dwell" on the trauma.

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Negative Feelings

Sometimes family members have surprisingly negative feelings about the traumatized family member. They may believe the trauma survivor no longer exhibits the qualities that they loved and admired. A person who was outgoing before a trauma may become withdrawn. A person who was fun loving and easy-going before a trauma may become ill tempered. It may be hard to feel good toward a person who seems to have changed in many ways.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Drug and alcohol abuse can become a problem for the families of trauma survivors. Family members may try to escape from bad feelings by using drugs or drinking. On the other hand, spouses sometimes abuse drugs or alcohol to keep their loved ones “company” when they’re drinking or using drugs to avoid trauma-related feelings.

Sleep Problems

Sleep can become a problem for family members, especially when it is a problem for the trauma survivor. When the trauma survivor stays up late to avoid going to sleep, can’t fall asleep or has nightmares, it is difficult for family members to sleep well. Often family members are also unable to sleep well because they are depressed and/or they are worried about the survivor.

What can families do to care for themselves and the survivor?

Family members of a traumatized person should find out as much as they can about PTSD and get help for themselves, even if their loved one doesn’t seek treatment. Family members can encourage the survivor to inquire about education and counseling, but they should not pressure or try to force their loved one to get help. Classes or treatment may also be useful for stress and anger management, addiction, couples communication or parenting.

While in the process of getting help, if family members feel comfortable, they should let their loved one know that they are willing to listen if the survivor would like to talk about his or her trauma. But the family should stop if anyone gets too upset or overwhelmed. If everyone is able, it is also important to talk about how the trauma is affecting the family and what can be done about it.

