

Dr. Drummond has constructed a very readable and sensitive guide for couples, even families, to not only survive but to thrive in the aftermath of traumatic events that result in some manifestation of PTSD. By drawing on her own experience and that of her former-POW husband, she gives real examples of the psychological concepts she discusses. Consequently, she presents in clear words methods and practices that promote calm, healing, growth, and healthy functioning. As I read through this book, I often regretted that it was not available to me when I was first released from the prisons of North Vietnam.

I will recommend this book to anyone who is suffering the negative aftereffects of trauma (PTSD) resulting in dysfunction of any kind, whether the trauma came from combat, car wrecks, storms, sexual abuse or any other event. Somewhere in here is a method to begin the journey to renewed peace and joy.

—**ROBERT G. CERTAIN**

Chaplain, USAF (Retired)

Former POW, National Cdr. American Ex-POW's

Author of *Unchained Eagle*

The truth is that couples, especially when one or both are deployed, struggle with service-related PTS, depression and/or anxiety. They also face caregiving challenges, marital adjustments when a spouse is injured, feelings of isolation and resentment in the at-home spouse, infidelities related to long separations and the up and down rollercoaster effect related to deployment. That's why Jill Drummond's book, *Allies in Healing* is such an important addition to

the literature. Her book is a vital resource for couples and includes tools that can help them learn how to connect with themselves and each other, improve their communication and nourish intimacy and closeness while continuing to serve their country. Drummond's book needs to be in the hands of every military couple so they can understand that they're not alone in their journey. A must read for all couples where one or both are struggling with PTS!

—**RICHARD C. MILLER, PhD.**

Founder iRest Institute and author,
The iRest Program for Healing PTSD.

ALLIES
in
HEALING

A Couples' Toolkit of Resources for Recovering from
COMBAT PTSD

JILL DRUMMOND, PH.D.

**Allies in Healing: A Couple's Toolkit of Resources
for Recovering from Combat PTSD**

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This book is dedicated to all veterans, who sacrifice so much in the service of their country, and to our veteran friends whose lives are reflected in this book.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
PART 1: PTSD: The Basics.....	11
Chapter One: Understanding PTSD.....	13
Chapter Two: Living with PTSD	31
Chapter Three: Choices You May Face	58
PART 2: Healing Begins	81
Chapter Four: Turning on the Relaxation Response.....	83
Chapter Five: The Five Master Skills	99
PART 3: Resources for Recovery	127
Chapter Six: Do It with Others	129
Chapter Seven: Do It Yourself.....	158
Chapter Eight: Do It in Writing.....	185
PART 4: A Personal Look at Treatment and Recovery	203
Chapter Nine: A Healing Journey	205
Chapter Ten: Communicating with Your Partner.....	229
Chapter Eleven: Thinking About Your Use of Alcohol ...	253
PART 5: Post-Traumatic Growth.....	265
Chapter Twelve: Beyond Healing to Growth.....	267
Appendix One: How to Choose a Therapist.....	279
Appendix Two: The Changing Face of PTSD Treatment...	282
Appendix Three: Looking to the Future	285
Bibliography.....	293
Acknowledgments	296
About the Author	298

INTRODUCTION



Allies in Healing

THERE ARE ALREADY many helpful and well-written books about the stress and trauma that result from military combat. There are also lots of books about treatment for these conditions. You'll find several of them listed at the back of this book. So why do we need a book called *Allies in Healing: A Couples' Toolkit of Resources for Recovering from PTSD*? The answer is simple. No other book has emphasized the power of your relationship with a spouse or partner to help you recover from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

That's unfortunate because social support—especially the support of a loving, intimate partner—is a primary factor in recovery from PTSD. At the same time, PTSD and recovery have a powerful long-term impact on relationships.

In his book *The Evil Hours*, David Morris reported on the findings of one group of Veterans Administration investigators who reviewed and summarized 25 years of research on PTSD.

The group concluded that “the major post-traumatic factor (leading to recovery) is whether the traumatized person received social support. Indeed, receipt of social support, which appears to be the most important factor of all, can protect traumatized individuals from developing PTSD.”

In August of 2012, a research team led by Candice Monson conducted a study of the effects of cognitive-behavioral couple therapy for PTSD. It was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The authors tell us, “There is increasing recognition that intimate relationships play a potent role in recovery from PTSD.” I hope you’ve picked up *Allies in Healing* because your relationship is important to you and because you want to draw on its great potential to help you recover from PTSD.

It’s important for you to know that people can recover from PTSD. With appropriate treatment provided by competent professionals, and with active engagement in the process, many people find that their symptoms are greatly reduced and life starts to feel good again. Others experience so much improvement that they even lose their PTSD diagnosis altogether. Over the past three decades, many researchers have been identifying the most effective treatment methods, and new methods are still being developed. But first things first.

We can probably all agree that fighting a war is traumatic. Combat deployments invariably result in high levels of stress and disturbance for the warrior. These initial reactions to combat exposure are referred to as “post-traumatic stress.” I’ll discuss typical stress reactions in Chapter 1. When this condition is not addressed promptly and effectively, it can begin to interfere with normal functioning. When this happens, it is referred to as “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD). For the sake of simplicity, in the following chapters, I’ll often refer to

the full range of reactions, from post-traumatic stress to more severe post-traumatic stress disorder, by using the term PTSD.

As you start to read this book, you may already be well acquainted with PTSD, or you may know very little about it. You could be recently home from a combat zone. On the other hand, your combat experience might have been years, even decades, in the past, but you're having a flare-up of symptoms now. You may be wondering where to turn to get the best available treatment, or you may already be in treatment. No matter how you came to pick up this book, it will help you better understand PTSD. You'll see that your symptoms make sense and that you're *not* crazy. You'll also learn how PTSD can be treated so you'll have the best chance of recovering your sense of well-being and reclaiming the pleasure of living a full, rich life.

If you are a combat veteran, you have been to war and returned. Honor the fact that this is usually a life-changing event. You've been through something most people will never experience. It took courage to go to war, courage to survive it, and courage to return to your family to build a future for yourself. Now you'll need that same courage to reach out to the healing resources that will help you recover from PTSD.

If you're the partner of a warrior, you may be confused by some of his or her reactions. You may also be noticing changes in yourself and in your relationship that don't feel good or healthy. That's all completely normal when a family member is experiencing symptoms of PTSD. It's normal because it's what often happens, and many returning warriors and their families go through it. But normal doesn't mean healthy. And the sooner you start to heal the symptoms of PTSD, the healthier you'll feel. I've already mentioned research showing that social support is one of the key factors in a successful recovery. This

means that the presence of a loving, supportive relationship enhances any treatment method.

If you're a combat veteran experiencing post-traumatic symptoms, your gut has probably been telling you that you don't want to feel the way you feel. You want to feel peaceful, happy, and OK about yourself and about life in general. That's a healthy instinct. But remember, there are many ways to satisfy this longing to feel a sense of well-being. Some, like alcohol or drug use, have costs; you gain a short-term feeling of calm or euphoria, but in the long run, you will actually be harming yourself. My goal is to help you become aware of many more tools that are available to help you feel better, more relaxed, alive, and engaged with your life and the people around you. That way you'll have lots of healthy resources to choose from.

I'm not speaking to you as a therapist who treats people with PTSD. Years ago, when I was a practicing psychologist, PTSD wasn't well understood and was rarely diagnosed. It wasn't something I knowingly encountered in my own practice. In hindsight, with today's knowledge, I can think of several clients who were probably suffering from undiagnosed PTSD. If psychologists had only known then what we know now, I might have treated them more effectively.

So, if I'm not speaking from my experience in treating people with PTSD, how do I know so much about it? I'm speaking as the wife of a man who has fought in a war and who has struggled with the aftermath of his combat and imprisonment experiences. In the chapters of this book, I'll tell you about our gradual realization that PTSD symptoms were causing problems for both of us. I'll share some of our personal experiences as we reached out for treatment and moved through the treatment process. And I'll speak honestly

about our missteps as well as some of the important and helpful things we learned.

I'm also an educated consumer of a variety of services and practices that have helped us heal from PTSD. In addition to these personal experiences, I draw on my background as a psychologist, my understanding of psychological phenomena and current research, and my lifelong interest in what helps people suffer less and enjoy life more. This book is not a treatment manual. It's an offering of many resources that have been helpful to us or to other people. You can learn about and explore them as options for your own healing journey.

Part I of this book will provide you with information about PTSD. I'll talk about what it is, what it's like to live with it, and some important choices you may face. In Part 2 I'll offer you Five Master Skills that will help you activate your body's *relaxation response* so you can diminish your troubling symptoms and begin to feel better. They're important skills for anyone to learn, but especially important for those suffering from PTSD. Many of the treatments and healing practices presented in Part 3 will draw on these Five Master Skills. We'll explore a variety of treatments and practices that have proven to be helpful for treating PTSD. They include things you will do primarily with others, things you can do by yourself, and things you can do in writing. In Part 4 I'll talk about our personal experiences with treatment, including what we learned about communicating with each other and how we approached the issue of alcohol use. In Part 5 we'll explore the concept of "post-traumatic growth" and the possibility of moving beyond simply recovering to actually thriving.

Healing and Recovery

Throughout this book I'll use the terms "heal" and "recover" from your PTSD symptoms. I say "heal" because your nervous system has sustained an actual injury to its physiology. The word "heal" also reminds us of the remarkable healing power of the human body and nervous system. Once you remove what's getting in the way, the body's natural healing capacity is activated. Just as you don't have to concentrate and *make* your skin heal from a bad wound, you don't have to make your nervous system heal. You only have to minimize the things that keep irritating the injury and provide the things it needs to heal on its own. I also use the word "recovery" very deliberately. You can eventually recover your sense of yourself as a whole human being, recover your feelings of connection with others, and recover your vitality and enjoyment of life. This book will help you find the treatments that will get you there.

Using Available Resources

Now I want to speak primarily to veterans, but I want your partners to eavesdrop. When you were fighting a battle, fighting for your life or the lives of other soldiers, you were trained to use every resource available to get the job done. Sometimes, however, there were limits to what was available. Maybe there was no backup support. Maybe you ran low on ammunition and grenades. So you had to adjust to those limited resources. Our yoga teacher, Joan, often says something like this: "Bend forward and let your hands reach to the floor or to your ankles or knees ... or *whatever is available to you.*" What a relief to hear that it's fine if some position or some level of flexibility

is not available to me! In a world where we are encouraged to excel, to do things “right,” this is a lovely, freeing thought. Yes, we’re doing fine if we simply do our best using whatever is available to us at the time.

Take a moment to appreciate what you have already done for yourself. You have probably survived something terrifying. You’ve been protecting yourself from feeling the impact of it by using whatever was available to you at the moment it was needed. There’s nothing wrong with that—until it doesn’t work anymore or causes you more harm. Then you have to find what *else* is available.

I want to emphasize this point: *We are always doing the best we can in the present moment with the tools we have available.* When coping with difficult situations, we’re limited by what we already know and what is available around us. When we learn more, we have more and better resources available. Life is a process of gaining more inner and outer resources.

Even if there are unwanted consequences to your current coping strategies, they are your best efforts to help yourself feel better. Consider alcohol use, drug addiction, or risky adrenalin-seeking behavior. Psychologists call these “negative coping skills” because they are just short-term fixes. They don’t work in the long run and eventually harm us. But they *are* coping skills. They aren’t just bad behavior or weak character. They are our best attempts to cope with something that feels distressing, threatening, or overwhelming. Sometimes society even promotes negative coping skills. Take alcohol, for example. In American society, and in military culture especially, alcohol is promoted as a way to feel good and to relieve stress and other unwanted negative feelings. No wonder it’s a very common response to stress and trauma. It’s “normal,” but it’s not very healthy.

This concept of using what's available is a very important one. It will help you appreciate how you've been trying to help yourself. And I hope it will encourage you to explore many new resources for healing and to find those that work best for you. This is such an important concept that we'll talk about it often throughout this book.

I want to say this again, so you can really take it in:

You are always doing the best you can in the present moment with the tools you have available. With the help of effective treatment, you'll gain lots of new tools.

What to Expect from Treatment

Here are some results you can expect from effective treatment for PTSD:

- You'll begin to make healthier choices about how you cope with difficult experiences, memories, feelings and thoughts.
- You'll feel less fear and less need to control everything around you.
- You'll feel more ease and calm in your life.
- Loved ones won't need to "walk on eggshells" around you.
- You'll begin to feel more trust in yourself and in the goodness of life and other people.
- You'll be less afraid of your emotions.
- You'll feel more freedom to share your unique gifts with the world.

Allies in Healing

If this seems like too much to expect, given how you're feeling right now, that's understandable. You might want to make some comments right on this list. Make a note next to the things you most dearly want to experience. Mark the things you have trouble believing could ever be true of your life. Then check back after six months or a year in treatment and see how you're doing. Sometimes we don't see our own progress as it gradually unfolds. We see it better in hindsight when we're further down the road to the life we want.

Finally, as the two of you begin your journey toward healing from PTSD, I hope this book can help your relationship become a stronger and more loving partnership that supports each person's recovery and growth. Remember, whenever one person in a relationship or family changes for the better, it affects the whole system in a positive way.

I wish you both a transformative journey as you become allies in healing.

PART 1



PTSD: The Basics

Introduction

Whether you're a combat veteran or the partner of a vet, one of the most important things you can do for yourself is to learn about post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic stress disorder. With understanding comes the relief from confusion and the hope of eventual recovery and healing. In Part 1 we'll explore what PTSD is and help you make sense of the symptoms you may be experiencing. Then I'll talk about what it's like to live with PTSD or to be in a close relationship with someone struggling with PTSD. Armed with this new knowledge, you'll be better prepared for the decisions you'll be making about treatment. We'll explore some important choices you may face as you move along the road to recovery.

CHAPTER ONE



Understanding PTSD

I t had been almost 40 years since my husband, David, was shot down in Vietnam, so it took a while for us to realize what was wrong. He'd been successfully treated for flashbacks and "anniversary reactions" several years before, and we thought his PTSD was a thing of the past. But now, over the previous two years, new symptoms were developing. He was impatient and angry, easily upset, had bouts of road rage and had started drinking to numb his feelings. He seemed depressed, disconnected, and unable to enjoy life. Fortunately, he no longer experienced flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts, which are the most dramatic and well-known symptoms of PTSD. But, as we discovered, the subtler mood and personality changes that happen with long-time untreated PTSD can be just as troubling.

ALLIES IN HEALING

Most of this was hidden from the eyes of our friends and family, and these changes had happened so slowly that I'd gradually gotten used to them. I once read a somewhat gruesome metaphor that described my situation well. If you try to put a frog into a pot of boiling water, the story goes, it will react so quickly that it jumps out as soon as its foot touches the hot water. But if you place it in a pot of cold water and gradually turn up the heat, it doesn't get alarmed. It doesn't try to get out of the pot. The frog ends up cooked!

I was a frog in a pot of gradually heating water. I didn't recognize David's increasing symptoms as a warning signal. All I knew was that I was unhappy. So I did the only thing I could think of at the time: I got some good therapy for myself. As I started feeling better and more clear-headed, it seemed as if a pair of blinders had fallen from my eyes. I could suddenly see what we'd been up against. So I started reading books about military combat, PTSD, and trauma. What a huge relief to read about exactly what we were going through! And I say "we" because PTSD affects both the person who experienced the trauma and the people close to them.

I loved my husband with all my heart and knew without a doubt that he was still there, buried under the symptoms of PTSD. We just needed to find a way for him to get out from under it all and back to the man he wanted to be.

What Is PTSD?

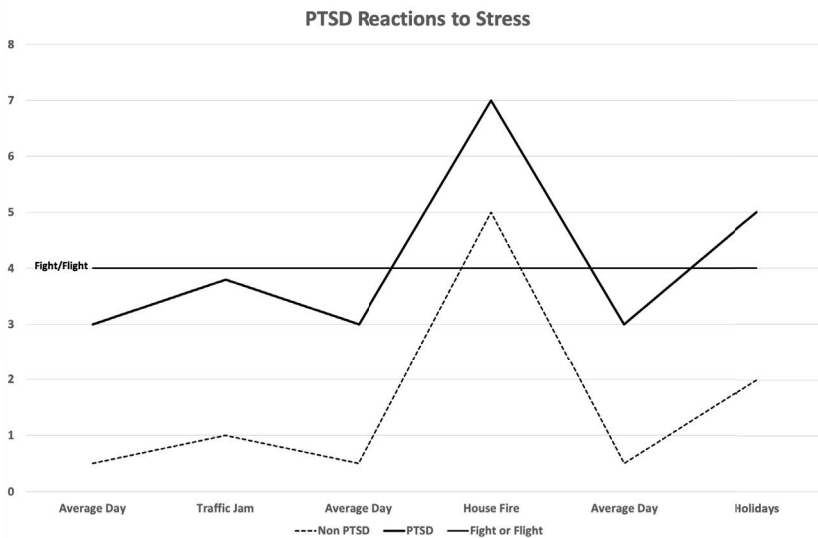
Many veterans and their families are struggling with the effects of wartime military service on their lives, careers, and relationships. These effects can surface immediately after a combat deployment, or they may take years, even decades, to develop. Despite how common these symptoms are, military culture often encourages people to “suck it up and get on with it,” to ignore or deny distressing emotions. In the heat of battle, of course it’s necessary to push feelings and normal human reactions aside in order to survive and get the job done. But while “Suck it up!” is a good strategy for becoming an effective fighting machine, it’s a poor strategy for becoming a healthy, fully alive human being.

As a result of this way of thinking, it’s often hard for combat veterans to admit that they could use help readjusting to life after combat or that they are feeling anxious, irritable, depressed, or numb. Many combat veterans continue to experience a whole range of unpleasant feelings once they return home. The reason is that they are human. Our human bodies are designed to function in certain ways that help ensure our survival. When we experience or witness something life-threatening or terrifying, our bodies react to protect us. This is the “fight-or-flight” response. We react by fighting, fleeing, or freezing. Our bodies are supposed to work that way to survive a horrific event.

So if our bodies are just doing what they’re supposed to do, why do we suffer later? As a result of accumulating research evidence, the Veterans Administration and many trauma experts consider post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to be an actual physiological injury to the brain and nervous system, not just an emotional or psychological issue. The reason is very simple. In many cases this fight-or-flight

response—especially if it is intense, prolonged, or repeated—leads to actual physical changes in the brain and nervous system as well as the endocrine system. Thankfully, this discovery has led to recent improvements in treatment methods.

The physiological changes involved in PTSD work like this: Our brains have a certain baseline level of alertness, which is our usual “arousal level.” This is determined by the autonomic nervous system (ANS). (I’ll explain in more detail in Part 2.) But simply stated, when a person *without* PTSD is relaxed, their arousal level is low. When something upsetting happens, it spikes up higher and then settles down again. This is the body’s stress response. When the brain gets a spike in arousal, it doesn’t usually go all the way into the red zone of the fight-or-flight reaction. You can see this illustrated by the dotted line in the graph below.



The trouble is that for a person with PTSD, the original trauma or the continuous nature of the traumatic events actually *resets* the baseline level of arousal. The brain has been

changed. So even when it is as relaxed as it is capable of being, the brain of someone with PTSD is at a much higher level of arousal and readiness to react than it was before. It never gets back down to the same resting level it enjoyed before being exposed to the trauma. Take a look at the solid line in the same graph. When something upsetting occurs, even ordinary everyday stressors, the PTSD brain has an increase in the arousal level, just like a brain without PTSD. But you can guess what happens. It's already more aroused and ready to react. And that ordinary-but-upsetting event just pushed it into the red zone. Fight-or-flight!

It doesn't take much if the brain is already at a heightened level of arousal. In this hyperaroused state, the amygdala (part of the limbic system that regulates our emotions) hijacks the prefrontal cortex (the seat of our logical thinking and planning). Our rational mind stops thinking clearly and we feel emotionally overwhelmed.

In the past, combat PTSD had been called "shell shock" or "combat fatigue." Most early research on PTSD and trauma involved studies of male veterans of the Vietnam War. Even though combat PTSD has been studied for years, it may surprise you to know that it's not only combat veterans who experience these aftereffects of trauma. The traumatic event could also be a natural disaster; serious accident; violent crime, such as rape or assault; childhood physical or sexual abuse; or even merely witnessing a horrifying event happening to someone else, especially a loved one. Emergency first responders, who must immediately respond to such traumas, can also be affected. And if you live with a spouse or parent who has PTSD, you may experience what is called "secondary PTSD" as a result.

When someone has gone through a horrifying experience, it's normal to feel tense or anxious, to have disturbing

memories of the event, nightmares, trouble concentrating, and disrupted sleep patterns. Initially, it may be hard to focus on ordinary daily activities, like work, school, or interactions with family and friends. This “post-traumatic stress” is truly a normal reaction to the stresses of war and other terrifying experiences. For some people the disturbance lasts only for a few weeks or months before they feel better. If you’re still having these symptoms after a few months, or if your symptoms are getting worse and interfering badly with your everyday functioning, you may be given a diagnosis of PTSD.

According to the Nebraska Department of Veterans Affairs website, “About 30 percent of the men and women who have spent time in war zones experience PTSD. An additional 20 percent to 25 percent have had partial PTSD at some point in their lives. More than half of all male Vietnam veterans and almost half of all female Vietnam veterans have experienced “clinically serious stress reaction symptoms.” It’s estimated that among people who are victims of a severe traumatic experience, 60 percent to 80 percent will develop PTSD.

We now know that there are many people walking around with such an injury to their nervous system. They may have flashbacks or nightmares, feel anxious, disconnected, and depressed and not know what’s happening to them. They may not even be able to say how they feel. The good news is that the Veterans Administration and the Department of Defense, along with other trauma researchers, have been studying the symptoms, causes, and treatment of PTSD for decades and can now offer a variety of effective treatment services to veterans suffering from these painful but treatable symptoms.

It’s important to remember that PTSD is not just a psychological issue. It involves a physiological injury, a wound to the nervous system. It’s an invisible injury because it can’t be

seen on the outside of the body like a missing limb or a bleeding wound. It also has something in common with traumatic brain injury (TBI), which is damage caused to the brain by severe or repeated external force. TBI can result from the concussive injuries experienced by combat veterans who have been involved in explosions. The changes in a brain suffering from PTSD, like TBI, can actually be seen on a brain scan image. These changes are a major cause of the psychological distress that forms the symptoms of PTSD.

The Symptoms of PTSD

Are you wondering if you or a loved one is experiencing symptoms of PTSD? I'm glad you're wondering because the first step toward getting needed help is *awareness*. So let's take a look at several categories of symptoms that make up this complex reaction to trauma that we call PTSD.

Re-experiencing Symptoms

The most dramatic symptoms of PTSD, and the ones we seem to hear most about, are the "re-experiencing symptoms." PTSD affects people who have experienced or witnessed a terrifying event, often involving violence. The memory of such a traumatic event might return at any time. Here are some examples of re-experiencing symptoms:

- Unpleasant intrusive memories that come on unpredictably.
- "Flashbacks," where a person feels as if they are actually going through the event again. They might feel the same emotions (fear, horror) and body sensations (racing

heart, rapid breathing, sweating) that they experienced at the time the event took place. This is the “fight-or-flight” response.

- Nightmares, which can feel terrifyingly real.

Re-experiencing symptoms can be triggered by things that tap into the old memory. These triggers can include sounds, sights, smells, or almost anything that is similar to some aspect of the original event. Examples of common triggers are cars backfiring, helicopters flying overhead, unwanted sexual advances (for a rape victim), news reports, images in the media, and the smell of burning fuel.

Avoidance Symptoms

There is a natural human tendency to try to avoid situations that remind us of a horrifying event or that bring on distressing feelings and re-experiencing symptoms. A person may begin to avoid situations or people that remind them of the event and may avoid talking or thinking about it. Anything done to excess may become an avoidance behavior if its purpose is to push away unpleasant memories and feelings or to avoid certain situations. Some common avoidance behaviors include:

- Avoiding crowds
- Isolating from other people, emotional detachment
- Keeping overly busy and distracted to prevent thinking about the event
- Drinking or using drugs to avoid unpleasant feelings (“self-medicating”)
- Excessively engaging in any activity: shopping, eating, video games, TV

Hyperarousal Symptoms

Hyperarousal means that a person's nervous system is aroused to an unnecessarily high level even when there is no real threat present. A person with PTSD might:

- Feel always on the alert, on the lookout for danger
- Have trouble falling or staying asleep
- Be easily startled by loud noises or sudden movements
- Have trouble concentrating or staying focused
- Feel more comfortable sitting with their back against a wall in a public place
 - Feel anxious, jittery, irritable, and easily angered
 - React to small stressors with an exaggerated response

Negative Changes in Mood and Thinking

This group of symptoms deserves your particular attention. I think of this last category as subtler symptoms. They are less obvious than re-experiencing, avoidance, or hyperarousal symptoms because they can't always be seen in a person's behavior. They're not as easy to spot, and a veteran (or trauma survivor) may not be talking about them. The reason these symptoms are so important is that sometimes, during treatment, they take a back seat to the more dramatic symptoms. And if they aren't treated, they can become painfully unpleasant long-term consequences of PTSD, long after the more dramatic symptoms have subsided.

Let's look at some of these subtler symptoms. All the following symptoms can bring on feelings of depression and

hopelessness. Many people with PTSD experience negative changes in their emotions and thinking, which can leave them feeling devoid of the normal pleasure they once felt in being alive. They may:

- Think the world is completely dangerous and that no one can be trusted
- Experience a continuous sense of dread
- Have a hard time relating to and getting along with their spouse, family, and friends, especially with those who have never been exposed to military combat
- Feel disconnected and emotionally cut off from others and may begin to withdraw from close relationships
- Lose interest in things they used to enjoy
- Feel generally numb and have trouble feeling positive feelings at all
- Have trouble imagining a future for themselves
- Feel guilt at surviving when others didn't, which may rob them of the enjoyment of being alive

Many of the symptoms I've just described stem from the same underlying mechanism, the changes in the brain and nervous system caused by the traumatic events that led to PTSD. If a veteran is sleep deprived because of the fear of nightmares, or if there's a problem with substance abuse, the symptoms of depression often worsen. In some cases a PTSD sufferer may feel the only way out of their suffering is to end their life. It is a national tragedy that the risk of suicide is much higher among veterans than among the general population. And although suicides of active duty personnel are less common, there has been an upward trend in recent years. For these reasons

suicide prevention has become a major focus of the VA and the Department of Defense. I'll talk more about how the risk of suicide can affect your treatment decisions in Chapter 3 and offer some resources for help.

For a formal diagnosis of PTSD, a person must have a certain number of symptoms within each of the categories mentioned above. If you think that you or your loved one is experiencing PTSD, a mental health professional can make the diagnosis and get you connected with the help you need. Even if you don't meet the full criteria for PTSD, *any* of the above symptoms can be very unpleasant to live with. Counseling with someone who understands PTSD and trauma can be a life changer, especially if this person has experience working with veterans. Good counseling can help you understand PTSD and how it has affected you. It can alleviate or reduce many distressing symptoms and teach you tools for managing your own emotions and reactions. Because of the special value of support from loved ones, couple counseling can be enormously helpful in bringing spouses closer as a "team" in dealing with PTSD and addressing the partner's secondary PTSD.

The Priceless Value of Your Symptoms

I want to suggest a radical change in the way you think about symptoms of PTSD, or indeed any symptoms you ever experience—physical, cognitive, emotional, or behavioral. We usually see symptoms as something negative because they cause us to suffer. We don't want them. But there's a better way to think about them. Symptoms provide valuable information

that shows us where we are hurt and what we need to heal. They're like messengers trying to get our attention.

Symptoms of emotional or physical discomfort—such as rapid and shallow breathing, racing heart, anxiety, and tension—are signals that need your attention. In her book *What's in the Way Is the Way*, Mary O'Malley suggests we become a “tightness detective,” noticing and paying attention when we feel muscle tightness or tension. These indicators tell us that we are resisting something and can help us discover where we are hurting emotionally.

In their book *The Mind-Body Workbook For PTSD*, Dr. Stanley Block and Carolyn Bryant Block encourage readers to “befriend” the discomfort sensations we get when the arousal system in our body gets activated. By befriending these sensations, we can use this system as a compass. When we feel calm, we know we're headed in the right direction. When we feel tense, tight, agitated, and anxious, we can check to see if there's a real-life threat that we need to address. If not, we know we're veering off course. We can't reach our goal unless we know which direction we're heading. So we can thank our bodies for providing us with a sensitive compass that gets our attention by making us uncomfortable.

Someone once playfully suggested that when David feels the beginnings of an old, triggered fight-or-flight reaction, he might gain a feeling of control by seeing it as the enemy and shooting it down. It struck me immediately that it felt wrong to “kill off” an important part of yourself. I reminded him that these reactions were a part of him that kept him safe when he was in real danger. It turned on his fight-or-flight response when he needed it, and it kept him alive. Now it was just sending him false alarms. He thought for a minute and said, “Maybe I'll make it into an ally.”

No matter how you envision the physical and emotional discomfort of your stress response, which sometimes escalates to a full-blown fight-or-flight reaction, the truth is that it gives you important information. In Parts 2 and 3 of this book, I'll talk about methods for calming this response and changing the way your mind and body process this information so you can heal and recover from your PTSD.

The Search for Healing

Basically, there are two different perspectives on the question of whether PTSD can be cured. Some people believe that it can't be cured and the best you can hope for is to learn to manage it. The second perspective is that, because the brain is changeable (a process that neuroscientists call "neuroplasticity"), you can heal, recover, grow, and thrive after PTSD with treatment that helps your body and brain to change.

Tears of a Warrior, written by Janet and Tony Seahorn, is the book that first opened my eyes about PTSD. Because Tony Seahorn is a Vietnam veteran, the authors share a personal look at how PTSD affects veterans and their families. Although the authors say very little about treatment for PTSD, they do offer many practical suggestions to help veterans and their partners deal with the symptoms that impact their relationship. One thing I don't agree with is the authors' position that PTSD "isn't looked at as a condition that can be cured. It's a condition that can only be managed or kept under some degree of control." I've heard and read that exact phrase, "can't be cured but can only be managed," repeated by numerous writers. I suspect most people who say that are basing their statement on the same original source, perhaps written many years ago. We've

come a long way in brain research and trauma treatment since then. I believe an effective counselor is one who has faith in the human capacity to heal and who knows the most recent developments in research and treatment.

I've looked into this question of cure as thoroughly as I could, reading statements by the National Center For PTSD, speaking with people who treat veterans suffering with PTSD, reading books by trauma and PTSD experts, and communicating in writing with some of them. I'll sum up what I've learned.

With good treatment and your own active involvement, your symptoms could largely disappear. Some people recover fully from their symptoms; many others improve and feel much better. Bear in mind that in the future, you might experience a major life event that could trigger a return of some symptoms. But by then you'll have lots of resources for coping with them and recovering, just as you did previously.

It's true that after a trauma, you'll never be the same person you were before. It's also true that you'll never be the same person after *any* life event that impacts you emotionally. We are never the same once we've gone through a life-threatening illness or once we have children or after we've been exposed to a radically different way of seeing the world. Life leaves its imprint on us, and we are all changed by our experiences. As we've seen, combat trauma has had an impact on your nervous system. This only means that life changes you.

The human brain and nervous system are amazingly plastic. And if your brain and nervous system can be changed by your experiences—such as the trauma of war—they can be changed again by later experiences, especially experiences that are aimed at changing your nervous system and brain in a more positive, healthy way. I believe that you can again find

the essential core of yourself as a whole and healthy person, shaped by life but also capable of a new sense of well-being and healthy functioning.

Here's what my husband David says about this whole subject: "What I really want is a healthy, happy life. We don't even need to debate whether PTSD can be 'cured' or not. The bottom line is that yes, with good treatment, you can overcome it and lead a healthy, happy life."

Getting on the Same Page

If you think you or your partner is suffering from symptoms of PTSD, the first step toward healing is to start a conversation about it. If you've been feeling strain and conflict in your relationship lately, here's your chance to shift away from pushing against each other and start pulling together toward the same goal: recovery from PTSD.

*When I finally understood enough to speak intelligently and calmly about David's symptoms, I made a plan to talk with him. I chose a time when he was fairly relaxed so he'd be less likely to get defensive. I mentioned that I could tell he was unhappy lately and I'd been reading that people sometimes feel that way even years after they return home from a combat tour. I told David I had found a checklist of symptoms that we could go through together to see if he was having some of the common symptoms of PTSD. When we went through the "Characteristics of PTSD Questionnaire," found in Chapter 3 of *Tears of a Warrior*, David was surprised to see how many of those symptoms he was experiencing.*

I told him very confidently that he didn't have to keep feeling this way, and that there were good treatments for PTSD. At this point he agreed that he'd like to get some help.

Once we had passed this major milestone, we discussed how to find the treatment he needed, and he shared with me some of his reservations about talking to a therapist. After our discussion, the VA seemed like a good choice, so we started making phone calls. But David met with weeks of frustration trying to get through to the VA clinic in our area. He seemed ready to give up. Finally, a friend gave us the name and phone number of his former counselor at our local Vet Center. "This is the guy to go to for help," he said emphatically. As soon as I called, I got right through to him. This wonderful man set up an appointment to see us together the very next morning! Now David and I were finally on the same page, ready to write a happier ending to our story.

Deciding to Get Treatment

Most veterans have learned the habit of ignoring or suppressing unpleasant feelings. We've talked about some of the reasons, such as the demands of combat and the military culture. It's also very human. Admitting to emotional or psychological distress makes many people feel vulnerable.

So how do you move past this thinking and get the treatment you need? As my psychologist friend Sid tells all his clients, "It takes courage and self-respect to ask for help." As a veteran you've already demonstrated your courage in serving your country. You can show the same courage in serving yourself

and your family by making the decision to get treatment for your PTSD. Remember, you are not alone in what you've been through and what you're now experiencing. And you don't have to keep walking that path alone.

If you think that you, or your partner, are suffering from PTSD, the best gift you can give yourself and your loved one is the gift of counseling. If your partner is unwilling, go yourself. It may turn out to be one of the best decisions you've ever made.

Online Resources

There's a wonderful website at www.maketheconnection.net, launched by the VA's National Center for PTSD, to help veterans and their families find support. It's full of brief video clips of veterans speaking about their experiences with PTSD. Here's their invitation to you: "Hear honest and candid descriptions from Veterans of what life was like for them with PTSD. A variety of Veterans—men and women, younger and older—share their emotions, actions and symptoms, how they learned they had PTSD, and what they did to get on a path to recovery."

Another great resource for information is the main website for the National Center for PTSD at www.ptsd.va.gov. It provides a wealth of reliable and reassuring information as well as a dozen mobile apps for your phone. You can subscribe to their email newsletter as well. To view videos by veterans who have experienced PTSD, go to www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/AboutFace/questions--how-i-knew-i-had-ptsd.html. And for a series of informative animated videos about PTSD, go to this website: www.ptsd.va.gov/public/materials/videos/whiteboards.asp.

For a more complete list of valuable resources, see the “Additional Resources” section in this book.

In addition to the supportive online resources discussed above, there are many veterans crisis hotlines you can call for immediate support. Just do an online search for “veterans crisis hotlines.” You’ll easily find a number of them. If you can’t get through quickly to one crisis line, try another. I offer the same advice about any attempt to reach out for support, whether you’re contacting the VA, a private counselor, or another source of help. Be persistent until you get the help you need.

WRAP-UP

In this chapter I’ve offered some basic information about PTSD, what causes it, how it develops and how to recognize the symptoms. I’ve also encouraged those who are experiencing some of these symptoms, and those of you who love them, to open a discussion about what you’re noticing. If you are in a close relationship, your partner can become a wonderful ally in your recovery. In the next chapter we’ll turn our attention to how these symptoms affect the life of a person experiencing them and the impact on those around them.