

Helping Families Become Part of the Solution: Resources to Recommend

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A healing perspective for all trauma survivors, family members, friends and therapists,

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How poor they are that have not patience!

What wound did ever heal but by degrees?

—Shakespeare

Family members may feel helpless, hopeless and defensive if they have dealt with PTSD on their own for a long time.

Family members may be in a state of denial that the newly traumatized or triggered person can't "just get over it."

Family members may simply be looking for ideas.

Some of these may help them:

Living with PTSD is difficult, especially if neither party knows what it is. They need information:

Most people are willing to receive information that is couched in non-blaming and non-shaming terms. It took me six months to write the lead articles explaining PTSD and how to recover in **The Post-Traumatic Gazette #1** because I wanted every word to be healing. Most explanations of PTSD leave the trauma survivor and family members feeling weird, weak and defective. Some sort of explanation of PTSD is essential. I found the DAV pamphlet *Readjustment Problems among Vietnam Veterans* by Jim Goodwin, Psy.D. very reassuring because what we had been living had a name and other people had it too. My book, *Recovering From the War*, is extremely helpful to veterans and family members, and the books for children I've written, *Why is Daddy Like He Is?* and *Why Is Mommy Like She Is?* are helpful to kids and adults. *Amongst Ourselves* by Tracy Alderman, Ph.D. and Karen Marshall, L.C.S.W., New Harbinger, 1998, is a wonderful resource for DID clients and family members. *I Can't Get Over It*, by Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D., New Harbinger, 1996, clearly explains PTSD and provides exercises for survivors of all types of traumas. Family members find it useful too. (If you are not on New Harbinger's mailing list, call 1800-748-6273. They seem to have a new wonderful book every month). *Children Changed by Trauma* by Debra Alexander, Ph.D., New Harbinger, 1999, is written for parents. Not only is it wonderful, but I think adults can use it to help them understand why someone isn't over something that happened in childhood. *Unspeakable Truths and Happy Endings: Human*

Cruelty and the New Trauma Therapy by Rebecca Coffey, Sidran, 1998, is another excellent book. I also recommend Al-Anon Family Groups, Inc., (757-563-1600, fax 757-563-1655) *From Survival to Recovery: Growing up in an Alcoholic Home*, 1994, which gives examples of repressed memories, incest, other traumas and recovery from them using the steps.

The most important information you can convey to the family of a trauma survivor is that it is normal to be affected by trauma.

If they learn nothing else from you, family members need to know it is normal to be affected by trauma. Homer and Shakespeare wrote about traumatic reactions (*see Achilles in Vietnam* by Jonathan Shay, M.D. and Lady Percy's speech on Hotspur in *Henry IV, Part I*). If you have eyes to see, PTSD is visible in people as diverse as Elizabeth I and George Washington (an example of psychosocial acceleration, as John Wilson called it in *The Forgotten Warrior Project*, after Braddock's defeat). Pepys had dreams of fire, British soldiers went on a rampage of bloodlust on the way back from Lexington and Concord (Tim O'Brien, "Ambush," Boston Magazine, April 1993), and Dr. Livingston describes instant emotional numbing as he was "shaken like a rat" by a lion. According to one FBI study, 69% of surviving spouses of police officers killed in the line of duty have PTSD. In the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, 66% of people who had experienced high war zone stress had diagnosable PTSD at some time in their life, and 33% still do today. Studies of WWII combat vets and POW's in the VA hospital for other things showed that 50+% of them had had PTSD at some time in the past and 25+ % of them still did, completely undiagnosed despite inpatient medical treatment at the VA.

Normal people are affected by what they have been through.

One book that puts this very succinctly for family members of Rape survivors is *Free of the Shadows* by Caren Adams and Jennifer Fay, New Harbinger, 1989. Another is *Recovering From Rape* by Linda Ledray, R.N., Ph.D.

Back from the Brink by Don Catherall is also helpful.

Books by other survivors of the type of trauma can normalize it for the family. My husband's book, *Chickenhawk*, has this effect on people. *The Magic Daughter* by Jayne Phillips, *The Liar's Club* by Mary Karr, and other memoirs can serve this function.

PTSD symptoms can be seen as survivor skills that are activated at the time of the trauma to keep us alive. Later on these same skills can become the survivor's biggest problems.

There is a long discussion of this in **the First Issue of the Post-Traumatic Gazette**, which is free. Download it at www.patiencepress.com. You are free to copy and distribute it to anyone it will help. Among others, John Briere, Ph.D. discusses PTSD symptoms as survivor skills in his books that are for professionals. *Scarred Soul* by Tracey Alderman, Ph.D., New Harbinger, 1997 discusses the how and who of one of the most frightening of these, self-injury, as does *Understanding Self-Injury* by Kristy Trautmann and Robin Connors available from Pittsburgh Action Against Rape, 81 South 19th St, Pittsburgh, PA 15203. Other books that helped me with this concept include the discussion of brain

activation in *The Body Speaks* by James and Melissa Griffith (Basic Books, 1994) on p. 184. It is a terrific book for therapists and applies to PTSD work. *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman also has a part on emotional hijacking of the brain, which I found helpful. Another helpful article is free on my website, a report I did on a talk by David Grossman who wrote *On Killing*. His discussion and diagram of the effects on the senses of hormonally induced heart rate increase really opened my eyes. Most books mentioned above have something along this line in them.

Living with PTSD affects you even if you are not aware of the effects.

Living with someone with PTSD affects people. It can drive you nuts. *Vietnam Wives* by Aphrodite Matsakis, Sidran 1998, my book, *Recovering From The War*, and *Allies in Healing* by Laura Davis (for family members of sexual abuse survivors) discuss some of the difficulties. The **Second Issue of the Post-Traumatic Gazette** is a through discussion of the affects and of how to get better at self-care. It is available free at www.patiencepress.com and may be downloaded, copied and given away.

Most of Al-Anon's Conference Approved Literature will help. You can read the pamphlet on Detachment at www.al-anon-alateen.org or get it at Al-anon meetings. Detachment and working on yourself are concepts that are invaluable for someone struggling with someone else's PTSD. In *How Al-Anon Works for Families and Friends of Alcoholics*, 1995, and *Paths to Recovery*, 1997. Al-Anon concepts are explained and how to use the steps and traditions to improve your life. I tell people to substitute the word PTSD for alcohol if they need to although a lot of people with PTSD develop alcohol problems, so either way works.

I have read a lot of adult children of alcoholics books and books on codependency because I found living with PTSD created similar difficulties. Janet Woititz' *Adult Children of Alcoholics* is wonderful as are all her books. I also recommend *Facing Codependence* by Pia Mellody, HarperCollins, 1989. I also got a lot of help from Earnie Larsen's set of pamphlets *I Should Be Happy... Why Do I Hurt?* which led me to his helpful book, *Stage II, Relationships* and Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse's *Choicemaking*.

There is help but changing takes time. Persistence and willingness are vital.

Family members need a realistic sense of how long it takes for a survivor to get better. They will both go through a process of mourning, the survivor for what was lost in the trauma, and the family for loss of the old life. Every one would like instant cures, but changing patterns of behavior takes time. A discussion of **effective vs. ineffective** behaviors can feel less threatening. Even though I wanted to help Bob, my quest to fix him was ineffective because as a person with PTSD, he needed to regain a sense of control in his life. He had to fly where he was told when he was told and how he was told. When I was telling him what to do, his healthiest response was not to do it. So even if I were right, it was ineffective. Trauma survivors also need to feel very painful feelings and family members need to let them. Cheering them up may seem nice, but it slows recovery.

Changing requires tools and support.

Some Tools:

A. Acceptance: In the “Big Book,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, on page 448 is probably the most famous reading on the topic of Acceptance. Most people want to be accepted as they are. Balancing acceptance and the desire for change is a delicate task. I learned to accept my painful emotions because of this reading, to sit with them and let them pass. I also learned to accept my husband and to let him find his own path to healing, which I had been blocking with advice. I also learned to accept that changing took time for both of us.

B. Boundaries. Free handout on Boundaries is available at www.patiencepress.com. *Learning To Say No, Establishing Healthy Boundaries*, Carla Willis-Brandon, MA, was helpful to me when I first started. The Serenity Prayer is a good guideline.

C. Compassion: The best stuff on self compassion which generalizes to others and prevents a person from allowing abuse was developed by Steven Stosny, CompassionPOWER, 16220 Frederick Rd., Suite 404, Gaithersburg, MD 20877, 301-921-2010, fax: 301-921-6663, Help@compassionpower.com, www.compassion-power.com. Using his HEALS technique is very effective.

D. Detachment: read the Al-anon pamphlet at www.al-anon-alateen.org or pick it up at any Al-anon Meeting. There are 22 readings on Detachment in *One Day At A Time In Al-Anon*, also available at meetings. *The Courage to Change* is a newer Al-anon daily reading book that also addresses detachment.

E. Examination: I found it particularly effective to examine cognitive distortions using the book, *Feeling Good* by David Burns, MD. I found *The Twelve Steps: A Way Out*—the old editions with the gray or lavender covers—helpful in examining the patterns I grew up with as were the other ACOA books. The new revised and updated purple version is not as helpful.

F. Focus on yourself.

G. Getting help is important. In addition to whatever therapy is available for family members, joining Al-anon, Co-dependents Anonymous or any other 12-Step meeting and working the steps is helpful. The **Third Issue** of **The Post-Traumatic Gazette** discusses the 12-step process as a self-initiated, self-regulating process of internalizing compassion and self care. I have written formats of 12 step groups for Veterans, Family and Friends and for Trauma Survivors, Family and Friends. Addresses and information about many 12 Step groups are at www.recovery.alanon.org. Groups such as Vietnam Veterans of America or VOICES (Victims of Incest Can Emerge Survivors) can also provide support and information for family members. People need to be supported in recovery by other people who have faced the same problems.

Trauma has consequences. There are some things trauma survivors can't do because of the trauma. There's strength in recognizing this.

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