



## Understanding PTSD & How to Make a Difference

There are very few of us who don't remember the images of September 11, 2001 – the first plane crashing into the tower, followed so unbelievably by the second; people jumping desperately to their deaths to avoid the lapping, searing flames; the agonizing sound as the buildings collapsed on top of the souls still trapped inside; crowds covered in ash, with torn, bloody clothes and tear streaked faces, walking aimlessly to escape the carnage of that horrific morning; the faces and broken voices of loved ones who searched in vain for those who left innocently for work that morning and never returned. As I write this, almost ten years later, I still feel tears welling in my eyes, a lump forming in my throat, and anger rising from my gut as I recall those details.

Now, imagine having a brain filled with images, sounds, smells, and emotions from three hundred and sixty-five days like 9-11-01. Can't imagine it? Well, the average combat veteran is faced with exactly that. But, beginning to get a partial grasp on how PTSD happens and what PTSD might feel like is just half the battle. The next step we must all take is figuring out how to step up and help our returning heroes.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

As the wife of a Veteran with severe, chronic PTSD, and an advocate for Veterans and families, I'm often asked what people can do to help. It's a great question, because there is so much we can each do to help our heroes (and their loved ones) return to happy, healthy, albeit different lives.

By being on this website, you're taking the important first step. You're learning more about PTSD and how it affects our Veterans. By understanding it and how it changes the core of a soldier, you will be better able to reach out and *really* help. Here are some great tips to help you get started:

#### #1 – Don't invade personal space.

You see a guy wearing a shirt or cap that says he's a veteran or maybe a soldier in uniform, your heart swells with pride, and you rush over to hug him or pat him on the back and tell him how thankful you are for his service. This makes him feel good, right? WRONG. Most individuals with combat experience have personal space issues, but for someone with PTSD, having someone they don't know (or even someone in their family) come too close can set off a deafening chorus of alarm bells.

I've been married to my husband for eleven years and been with him almost fifteen, yet there are still times when he simply cannot handle me touching or hugging him. You can only imagine how he feels when a stranger, no matter how well intentioned, tries to do so.

A much better idea is to stand back at a normal, conversational distance. Then, tell the Veteran how much you value his contribution and sacrifice. Only by respecting the boundaries of the soldier or Veteran will you ever be able to help him. If you don't take this first step, you won't be able to get any farther.

## **#2 – Offer respect, not sympathy. Don't ask “that question.”**

I can't count the number of Veterans I've talked to who have the exact same “pet peeves”...

First, is someone feeling sorry for them because they have PTSD. It's easy for many of us (I even catch myself doing it sometimes with my husband) to begin to feel sorry for Veterans who are struggling with something like PTSD. But, they're not interested in sympathy. “Oh, you poor thing,” is not a thought or feeling they need for anyone to have about them. They may be injured, but they are still proud.

Another pet peeve that rates just as high is the, “Did you kill anyone?,” question. For some reason even well intentioned people feel the need to ask this question. I have known family members who think it's okay for them to ask just because they're related to a returning hero. It's **not** okay to ask... ever. If a soldier or veteran wants to talk to you about this, they will. But, if they don't, respect that choice. It's the same thing as someone asking you to openly share your deepest, most closely held, most private, personal life event. You can destroy any groundwork you've laid with a veteran - possibly forever - by simply being too nosy.

## **#3 – Offer concrete options for support.**

I can't even begin to explain the pure mental and emotional chaos that comes with PTSD, especially in the first months and years as an individual and his family learn how to adjust to living with it. Basic, daily tasks feel akin to climbing Everest. Life takes every ounce of energy and brain power you can muster. And, really, this is no exaggeration.

So, when someone offers to help by saying, “Let me know what I can do, “ or, “When you think of something, let me know what I can do to help,” the chances of that Veteran or his family members ever taking them up on that offer are pretty much zero. They just don't have the extra brain capacity to figure out what to tell someone else they can do to help when they can't really even figure out how to manage their own day-to-day lives.

If you're truly interested in helping, then offer to help with concrete examples and time lines. For example: “Why don't I pick the kids up on Saturday and keep them for the day so you can have a break?”, “I'm mowing my grass this weekend and thought while I was at it, I'd do yours, too.”, or “I'd be glad to drive you to your next doctor's appointment. When is it?”. This way, your offer for help really *helps* the veteran instead of actually becoming a source of added stress.

## **#4 – Be aware of the needs of family members / caretakers.**

The spouse and children caring for a Veteran with PTSD (or in some cases parents or siblings) are under tremendous pressure. They are essentially in a situation where they feel responsible for preventing as many sources of stress as possible for the Veteran, 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. Every moment is about watching, guarding and anticipating. It is a never-ending strain that eventually begins to crush most caretakers.

One of the main problems is that when caretakers begin to become unable to stand up under the strain, they also become unable to care effectively for the Veteran, which in most cases leads to the Veteran's PTSD

symptoms getting worse (because individuals with PTSD don't deal well with change or added stress). Then, the whole situation becomes a self-perpetuating cycle that gets more and more out of control – a circumstance that can literally destroy a family.

But, this whole cycle can be short circuited by a few kind hearted individuals! If you're interested in helping a Veteran with PTSD, help his or her caretaker. Arrange for them to have time off to spend alone. Make sure they feel recognized and appreciated. Listen (without judgment) to their worries, sadness, frustrations, and anger. Give them a standing invitation to call for help at a moment's notice if they're feeling overwhelmed. I cannot begin to tell you how much this sort of lifeline means to the mental health of a caretaker and consequently to a veteran with PTSD.

#### **#5 – Give the Veteran ways to be involved.**

This can be a tricky tip, but can make a big difference in the life quality a PTSD Veteran experiences. For many suffering Veterans, especially those who are unable to work because of PTSD, their sense of self-worth and purpose is very low. For someone who is used to contributing to the "greater good" as part of a military unit to suddenly be alone without a sense of direction, life can seem very bleak.

As you get to know a Veteran, find out what his or her interests are. Is he interested in motorcycles? Does she enjoy photography? Does he have a passion for military history? Look for the thing (or top few things) that seem to get him talking the most. Then, look for ways those interests and talents can be used to contribute to their local community or remotely via the internet. For someone who enjoys motorcycles, there may be a local, veteran-related motorcycle group that he can join. For someone who enjoys photography, there may be an internet-based photography course or a volunteer organization that needs photographs for a special project. Someone who has a passion for military history might be able to start a website educating people about military weapons or battles or leaders.

The point is to help them find a way to get involved that includes few people (at least to start with) but also gives them a way to contribute to a larger purpose. And, to also enable the Veteran to begin excelling at something despite PTSD . You may have to help them get everything set up and going, and even help them work the project to begin with, but eventually they will take it and run. But, just the knowledge that it's still possible to do *something* even with PTSD can be a huge boost for many who are struggling with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, especially in severe cases.

#### **CONCLUSION: IT'S GOING TO TAKE ALL OF US**

At this point, most of us have heard the statistics indicating that some 300,000 Veterans will return from Iraq or Afghanistan with PTSD (to put that into perspective, only 400,000 veterans from all the wars combined have received benefits for PTSD through the VA). If each one of those Veterans has an average of two family members who are also affected by his illness, that's 900,000 people who are going to need help. The VA (Veteran's Administration) and military are trying to expand services to meet the growing need, but are far behind demand. So, either our country is going to be left with a generation of broken heroes and families OR we are each going to have to step up and do our part.

If we truly do care about the men and women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, as so many of us say we do, we are now going to have to take personal responsibility for helping care for them. We cannot rely on government programs and funds. We must instead look to ourselves and take concrete steps to reach out and

make a difference in the lives of the heroes who have given so much in defense of our lives and livelihoods. Don't waste time. Let's get started!

*This article was written by Brannan Vines, the founder of FamilyofaVet.com and proud wife of an OIF veteran. If you would like to contact Brannan, send her an e-mail at Brannan -at- familyofavet.com.*

*FamilyOfaVet.com is an organization dedicated to helping Veterans and their loved ones by providing real-world, plain language education and resources about PTSD, TBI, and life after combat. Our website is completely free and requires no registration. You can also find out more about Family Of a Vet on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/familyofavet](http://www.facebook.com/familyofavet).*