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Helping a Family Member Who Has PTSD

PTSD can be hard on families. Changes in one person greatly impact other family members. Learn ways to help a family member who has PTSD and tips for taking care of yourself.

When someone has PTSD, it can change family life. The person with PTSD may act differently and get angry easily. He or she may not want to do things you used to enjoy together.

You may feel scared and frustrated about the changes you see in your loved one. You also may feel angry about what's happening to your family, or wonder if things will ever go back to the way they were. These feelings and worries are common in people who have a family member with PTSD.

It is important to learn about PTSD so you can understand why it happened, how it is treated, and what you can do to help. But you also need to take care of yourself. Changes in family life are stressful, and taking care of yourself will make it easier to cope.

How Can I Help?

You may feel helpless, but there are many things you can do. Nobody expects you to have all the answers.

Here are ways you can help:

- Learn as much as you can about PTSD. Knowing how PTSD affects people may help you understand what your family member is going through. The more you know, the better you and your family can handle PTSD.
- Offer to go to doctor visits with your family member. You can help keep track of medicine and therapy, and you can be there for support.

- Tell your loved one you want to listen and that you also understand if he or she doesn't feel like talking.
- Plan family activities together, like having dinner or going to a movie.
- Take a walk, go for a bike ride, or do some other physical activity together. Exercise is important for health and helps clear your mind.
- Encourage contact with family and close friends. A support system will help your family member get through difficult changes and stressful times.

Your family member may not want your help. If this happens, keep in mind that withdrawal — or pulling away — can be a symptom of PTSD. A person who withdraws may not feel like talking, taking part in group activities, or being around other people. Give your loved one space, but also say that you will be ready to help at another time.

How Can I Deal With Anger or Violent Behavior?

Your family member may feel angry about many things. Anger is a normal reaction to trauma, but it can hurt relationships and make it hard to think clearly. Anger also can be frightening.

If anger leads to violent behavior or abuse, it's dangerous. Go to a safe place and call for help right away. Make sure children are in a safe place as well.

Set a Time-out System

It's hard to talk to someone who is angry. One thing you can do is set up a time-out system. This helps you find a way to talk even while angry. Here are some tips on how to do this:

- Agree that either of you can call a time-out at any time.
- Agree that when someone calls a time-out, the discussion must stop right then.
- Decide on a signal you will use to call a time-out. The signal can be a word that you say or a hand signal.
- Agree to tell each other where you will be and what you will be doing during the time-out. Tell each other what time you will come back.

While you are taking a time-out, don't focus on how angry you feel. Instead, think calmly about how you will talk things over and solve the problem.

After a Time-out

- Take turns talking about solutions to the problem. Listen without interrupting.
- Use statements starting with "I," such as "I think" or "I feel." Using "you" statements can sound accusing.
- Be open to each other's ideas. Don't criticize each other.
- Focus on things you both think will work. It's likely you will both have good ideas.
- Together, agree which solutions you will use.

How Can I Communicate Better?

You and your family may have trouble talking about feelings, worries, and everyday problems. Here are some ways to communicate better:

- Be clear and to the point.
- Be positive. Blame and negative talk won't help the situation.
- Be a good listener. Don't argue or interrupt. Repeat what you hear to make sure you understand, and ask questions if you need to know more.
- Put your feelings into words. Your loved one may not know you are sad or frustrated unless you are clear about your feelings.
- Help your family member put feelings into words. Ask, "Are you feeling angry? Sad? Worried?"
- Ask how you can help.
- Don't give advice unless you are asked.

If your family is having a lot of trouble talking things over, consider trying family therapy. Family therapy is a type of counseling that includes your whole family. A therapist helps you and your family communicate, maintain good relationships, and cope with tough emotions.

During therapy, each person can talk about how a problem is affecting the family. Family therapy can help family members understand and cope with PTSD.

Your health professional or a religious or social services organization can help you find a family therapist who specializes in PTSD.

How Can I Take Care of Myself?

Helping a person with PTSD can be hard on you. You may have your own feelings of fear and anger about the trauma. You may feel guilty because you wish your family member would just forget his or her problems and get on with life. You may feel confused or frustrated because your loved one has changed, and you may worry that your family life will never get back to normal.

All of this can drain you. It can affect your health and make it hard for you to help your loved one. If you're not careful, you may get sick yourself, become depressed, or burn out and stop helping your loved one.

To help yourself, you need to take care of yourself and have other people help you.

Tips to Care for Yourself

- Don't feel guilty or feel that you should know it all. Remind yourself that nobody has all the answers. It's normal to feel helpless at times.
- Don't feel bad if things change slowly. You cannot change anyone. People must change themselves.
- Take care of your physical and mental health. If you feel yourself getting sick or often feel sad and hopeless, see your doctor.
- Don't give up your outside life. Make time for activities and hobbies you enjoy. Continue to see your friends.
- Take time to be by yourself. Find a quiet place to gather your thoughts and "recharge."
- Get regular exercise, even just a few minutes a day. Exercise is a healthy way to deal with stress.
- Eat healthy foods. When you are busy, it may seem easier to eat fast food than to prepare healthy meals. But healthy foods will give you more energy to carry you through the day.
- Remember the good things. It's easy to get weighed down by worry and stress. But don't forget to see and celebrate the good things that happen to you and your family.

Get Help

During difficult times, it is important to have people in your life who you can depend on. These people are your support network. They can help you with everyday jobs, like taking a child to school, or by giving you love and understanding.

You may get support from:

- Family members
- Friends, coworkers, and neighbors
- Members of your religious or spiritual group
- Support groups
- Doctors and other health professionals

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