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PTSD and Your Family

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Topic Overview

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be a challenge for you and your family. Your family may find it hard to accept some of the changes PTSD can bring to your life. By talking and supporting one another, you and your family will be better prepared for these changes.

Family support

Your family is an important part of your recovery. They can be there to listen and to help you through rough times.

It's also important that you help your family understand PTSD. They may not always know how to respond when they see you hurting. They may feel scared, sad, guilty, or even angry about your condition.

Talking about PTSD can help you and your family cope. Talk about your symptoms and what triggers them. Discuss different treatments and how they can help you recover. When you open up, your family can better understand what you're going through.

Family therapy can help. This is a type of counseling that involves your whole family. A therapist can teach you how to work through problems and communicate better.

Talking with your kids about PTSD

Teaching your kids about PTSD is important. They may not understand why you're feeling bad or why you get angry sometimes. This can be scary for kids at any age. They also may blame themselves for things that aren't their fault. Make sure your kids understand that they aren't to blame for your PTSD.

When talking with your kids about PTSD:

- Be honest and listen to what they have to say.
- Tell them it's okay to ask questions. Ask them how they're feeling, and let them know that their concerns are important.
- Make sure they feel safe, secure, and loved. They may be afraid that something bad is going to happen.

- Provide information about PTSD. Let them know what it is, how you got it, and how you can recover.
- Encourage a good support system of friends outside your family. Get them involved in school activities or youth programs in the community.
- Don't promise that your PTSD is going to go away soon. Instead, talk about how treatment can help you feel better. It's okay if you don't have all the answers.
- Be as positive as you can. Your kids will notice how you react in difficult situations, which can influence their reactions.

Triggers

Things that suddenly remind you of your traumatic event are called triggers. Triggers can bring up stressful feelings or cause you to have flashbacks, which means you feel like you're reliving the event all over again.

Trying to avoid triggers is a common reaction. It's normal to stay away from things that cause you stress. Because of this, you may feel like you can't do the things you used to enjoy. This may be hard on you and your family.

Talk with your family about your triggers. They need to know what causes you stress. By being aware of your triggers, your family can help you find ways to cope with them.

Some common triggers include:

- Places, social events, or even smells and sounds. For example, smoke may trigger memories in someone who was hurt in a fire. Or a car that backfires may remind a veteran of gunfire.
- Being around others who were involved in your traumatic event. This may happen when veterans have a reunion.
- The anniversary of your traumatic event. Try to plan enjoyable activities on and around the anniversary date. It may help to be with friends or family.

Coping with holidays

Big holidays like Christmas and New Year's can be stressful. The holidays can be a painful reminder of past times when life seemed better. Big groups of family and friends are often part of the holidays. This may be stressful because:

- Groups tire you out or make you feel overwhelmed.
- You feel pressure to join family activities when you're not up for it.
- You feel like you have to act happy when you're not.

Your loved ones also might ask you questions about your life or about PTSD. You may not feel comfortable answering these questions. Keep in mind that your family may feel some of the same pressures.

You can cope with holiday stress by:

- Setting limits. Don't join activities for longer than you can handle. You can choose when you want to be a part of the group.
- Taking breaks. Go for walks, or set aside a place where you can be alone for a while. This can keep you from feeling overwhelmed.
- Getting plenty of rest. Take naps if you feel like you're not getting enough sleep at night.
- Talking with your family about how you feel. Your family can help you. Be honest with them about your stress.
- Not drinking too much. Alcohol may make your symptoms worse or cause you to have problems with your family.

For family members

If you are the spouse or family member of someone with PTSD, here are some tips for helping your loved one during the holidays:

- Accept the mixed feelings your loved one may have about the holiday.
- Respect and support your loved one's choices about being involved in the celebration.
- Plan ahead of time how you will cope with stress. This may mean talking about how your loved one will answer questions about PTSD, or deciding how long you will stay at a party.
- Remember to take care of yourself. Do things for yourself to relieve stress.
- Keep your expectations realistic.

For more information, see the topic Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Credits

Current as of: June 16, 2021

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