



Hurt, Alienation, and Discouragement

Combat trauma survivors don't realize the impact their post-traumatic stress (PTS) or PTSD has on the family. There's a range of symptoms exhibited by returning warriors suffering from PTS. Hyper-vigilance, sleeplessness, anger or irritability, avoidance and grief are common symptoms. Most symptoms diminish over time; but when symptoms persist, there's a significant impact felt by the family.

In this article, we'll consider how post-trauma symptoms experienced by the returning warrior contribute to hurt, alienation, and discouragement in the family.

Ryan returned from a yearlong deployment to Afghanistan suffering from PTS. It was his first deployment to Afghanistan and he had enjoyed the full support of his family before and during the deployment. He often communicated with his family through phone calls, emails, and letters. Ryan was fortunate. He had a loving wife and family. They were behind him a hundred percent.

But the deployment was tough for Ryan. His STRYKER unit was repeatedly attacked and he had personally been subjected to small-arms fire and mortar attacks at the Forward Operating Base where he was stationed. Two of his close friends were killed when an IED detonated on their STRYKER vehicle. Three others Soldiers in his unit were severely wounded and were evacuated back to the U.S.

Ryan, like most warriors, never talked to his family about those things. By the time he redeployed and reunited with his family, he was a different guy. He struggled emotionally and felt strangely distanced from his family; but admitted that he felt more connected to the men in his unit. After all, they had been through a lot together. Also, he



couldn't sleep and didn't want to sleep. He became irritable and unpredictable. Just about anything could set him off.

It's pretty hard to live with someone like that—someone who changed so much from a loving and thoughtful person to a volatile and moody individual. His wife, Shelley, and their two kids, Amber and Ryan Jr., “walked on eggshells” when they were around him. Ryan would stay up nights and worry about members of his unit or sit silently at the dinner table, staring at the wall. It didn't take long before things boiled over.

Understandably, his family felt betrayed. They didn't have the same husband and father they'd sent off to war. They felt deeply hurt. He'd “blow up” over a misplaced toy or a meal that wasn't ready when he thought it should have been ready. Most nights, he'd sleep on the big leather sofa in the den, if he slept at all. His wife felt unloved and unappreciated. She had done so much for him while he was away and after he returned. But her affectionate overtures were mostly ignored. She just couldn't understand what had happened to Ryan. She wondered, “What did the Army do with my husband?”

Ryan refused to go out in public. He couldn't take the crowds at the local mall. His son played soccer and desperately wanted his dad to watch him play like he used to do. But Ryan couldn't go to his games anymore.

Gradually, the hurt led to alienation. Shelley would pack up the kids and take them to the park without Ryan. Just getting out of the house was a relief. She couldn't take it anymore—his melancholy moods, his erratic behavior, and his emotional distance. It was driving her crazy. She often cried herself to sleep at night alone in her bed.



They'd argue about everything. Ryan was on one track. He was stuck on the war and his feelings about what happened back in Afghanistan. He didn't know how to tell his family. He didn't know where to begin and thought they'd somehow think less of him for what he'd done and seen.

Shelley and Ryan would often argue about seeking help. Ryan wasn't interested. Eventually, Shelley, hurt and alienated by the one she loved, became deeply discouraged and decided to take the kids and go back and live with her mother and father.

The story you have just read is a common one. The names and places may be different but the issues are the same.

What can be done for families that experience hurt, alienation, and discouragement after being reunited with their returning warriors? Let me suggest a couple of things. The most important things are understanding and communication. Families must understand how war affects them. Warriors need to understand the challenges families face back home when they're deployed. It's not about them or just about the family. It's about everyone; and it's hard for everyone. In a sense, when warriors deploy to combat, everyone goes to war. Everyone is affected. Everyone is changed. No one comes back together the same.

So families need to educate themselves about the effects of war upon the family unit. They need to be prepared; they need to talk about it before the warrior deploys.

Not every warrior returns with PTS or PTSD. But there are always adjustment issues. Talk about those issues before, during, and after the deployment. If post-trauma symptoms are present, seek help from qualified counselors. Recognize that reintegration with the family takes time. Be patient. Be considerate.



Many families have made real progress when they were prepared. You can prepare yourself and your family by addressing the potential challenges a warrior faces when “downrange” as well as the very real challenges at the home front. Also, families do well if they’ll lower their expectations for reunion, lay out a realistic and agreed to reintegration plan for the following twelve months; and, then agree to scheduled family meetings to check on progress. Again, as mentioned earlier, seek to understand and strive for meaningful communication each step along the way. In severe cases, get some help from those who understand how PTS or PTSD affects warriors and their families. Seeking help is always wise and a proven strength for all.

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SOF Missions is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization. Our focus is to help veterans and their families overcome the visible and invisible scars of war. We create awareness of the PTSD and suicide epidemic through film. We develop support groups and offer educational materials. We provide intensive care for vets that are in dire need. Our goal is to do all we can to help our countries veterans find a life full of hope and purpose.

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