

Marriage and PTSD: What is happening to us?

■ by Debi Mitchell, MS, LMFT



*He heals the brokenhearted
and bandages their wounds.*

Psalm 147:3 NLT

Many different marital problems enter a counseling office. Some are common, like communication problems. Some have hidden causes which may evolve into complicated problems. PTSD is tough on marriage, and the spouses tend to be feeling desperate for some help.

What is PTSD?

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the result of extreme trauma, and the symptoms may be masquerading. There are four specific “cluster” areas that are affected by PTSD.

The DSM-5 criteria:

1. **Intrusion:** This can be when awake or in dreams, in thoughts, feelings, or physical reactions to anything that reminds you in any way of the trauma. A smell? A sound? The location?
2. **Avoidance:** Efforts are made, whether successful or not, to avoid any reminders, whether memories or actual people/things.
3. **Negative alterations in cognitions (thoughts/perceptions) and mood:** These symptoms vary, but it usually involves thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about oneself, the world, and/or God changing negatively and drastically. One of the changes important to marriage is feeling detached or “estranged” from others.
4. **Alterations in arousal and reactivity:** This can include irritability, recklessness, concentration, sleep problems, extreme watchfulness, and overreacting when startled. The “fight or flight” response comes too easily. One client described it as living in an unending panic attack.

PTSD and Marriage

A “normal” marriage has conflict without PTSD involved. Add in PTSD, and marital cycles are likely to devolve quickly. Consider these examples:

- *Bob has kept the childhood molestation a secret. Over the past few months, Bob has been going to bed later and later at night. Once in bed, he no longer cuddles with Amanda but instead lies on the edge of bed. If he falls asleep, he tosses and turns, but he usually only sleeps on the couch. There are no more hugs or kisses hello or goodbye, and Amanda is dumbfounded when Bob yells that she doesn't love him anymore. Bob always seems lost in thought and jumps at the slightest touch. He is getting more and more irritable, staying at work later, and spending more and more time alone when he finally comes home. Amanda is pretty sure that he is having an affair.*
- *Milly was in a bad car accident and has had difficulty riding in a car since that time. Milly vacillates between blaming the driver of the car that hit them, the driver of their vehicle, who just happens to be Milly's spouse, Tony, and then blames herself for not being awake to watch the oncoming traffic. When she did ride in the car, Milly became the worst backseat driver Tony had ever known. He*

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understood her anxiety for a while, but it's been almost six months and it is getting worse. Milly is now refusing to even drive the car herself, jumping at the sound of brakes on their own street when safe inside their home. By now, Tony is just getting angry because Milly "refuses" to try to get over it.

PTSD can go unrecognized and undiagnosed for a long period of time. Once diagnosed, one can have an extremely difficult time understanding how a previously loving spouse can become "a completely different person."

Building a Game Plan

It bears repeating: PTSD is tough on marriage, and the spouses tend to be feeling desperate for some help. Here's some advice.

For the one who experienced the trauma:

Therapy: *Question:* How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb? *Answer:* Only 1, but the light bulb has to want to change. Because of the extreme need for avoidance, therapy can be difficult to even consider but is highly recommended. Some types of therapy available are: exposure therapy, EMDR, cognitive behavioral therapy, group therapy, and more. Be sure to research.

Medications: Some are available to help with the symptoms, although there is no cure presently available. There are psychiatrists who specialize in or are highly experienced with PTSD.

For both:

Support: The Bible uses the analogy of a body to describe the church, saying that He has different gifts and purposes for every one of us (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). Everyone needs support from the other parts of the body; it is even more important when you are hurting.

Couple's therapy: "A house is built by wisdom and becomes strong through good sense.... So don't go to war without wise guidance; victory depends on having many advisors." (Proverbs 24:3,6)

Forgiveness: Necessary for any marriage - and expected by God! (Matthew 6:14). Hurts will happen; more hurts will happen because of the nature of the PTSD symptoms.

Deep-breathing exercises and more: This can help with stress management and lessen the impact of the "fight or flight" response for both. Many useful techniques can be found online or in books on managing emotions.

Physical safety: Consider this, if necessary, in deciding how to move forward.

Faith: Read scripture. Pray. Possibly attend a prayer ministry meeting. Don't forget to go to God: "the rock where no enemy can reach me" (Psalm 62:7).

"A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken." Ecclesiastes 4:12 NLT



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