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Many of the common reactions to experience in a war zone are also symptoms of more serious problems such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In PTSD, however, they're much more intense and troubling, and they don't go away. If these symptoms don't decrease over a few months, or if they continue to cause significant problems in your spouse’s daily life, it's time to seek treatment from a professional.

**PTSD SYMPTOMS**

**Re-experiencing:** Bad memories of a traumatic event can come back at any time. People may feel the same fear and horror they did when the event took place. Sometimes there’s a trigger: a sound, sight, or smell that causes them to have a stress reaction, or to relive the event. For instance, many veterans react to burning scents or loud noises with anxiety or anger.
**Avoidance and Numbing:** People with PTSD will try hard to avoid things that might remind them of the traumatic event they endured. These include crowded places, situations (like shopping malls) where there are too many choices, or certain types of terrain (hot, dry places). They also may shut down to prevent feeling pain and fear. Others use numbness so they can cover distress over their reactions.

**Hypervigilance or Increased Arousal:** Those suffering from PTSD may operate on "high-alert" at all times, often have very short fuses, and startle easily. Sleep problems, anger, and difficulty concentrating are additional arousal symptoms.

**PTSD TREATMENT**

PTSD is a treatable condition that is diagnosed by a healthcare provider. Treatment involves several steps. First, a professional will evaluate the symptoms with a full interview. Next, the person often receives education about PTSD and other conditions, including symptoms and how they can affect people. Finally, a treatment approach is selected that best fits the person's needs, which could include therapy, medication, or a combination of both.

**PTSD AFFECTS ON THE FAMILY**

PTSD can make somebody hard to be with. Family members of a person with PTSD may experience the following:

**Sympathy:** You may feel sorry for your loved one's suffering. This may help your spouse know that you sympathize with them. However, be careful that you are not treating them like a permanently disabled person. With help, they can feel better.

**Negative feelings:** If you believe your spouse no longer has the traits you loved, it may be hard to feel good about them. The best way to avoid negative feelings is to educate yourself about PTSD. Even if your spouse refuses treatment, you will probably benefit from some support.
Avoidance: You may be avoiding the same things as your spouse in order to reduce their reactions. Or, you may be afraid of his or her reaction when you do things without them. One possible solution is to slowly start to take part in a few different activities. At first, you can let your spouse stay home if he or she wishes, but in the long run you should negotiate a plan so that you can do things together. Seek professional help if your spouse continues to avoid many activities, or if he/she frequently prevents you from going out.

Depression: This is common among family members when the person with PTSD causes feelings of pain or loss. When PTSD lasts for a long time, you may begin to lose hope that your family will ever "get back to normal." If your usual coping strategies and supports don't bring relief over time, seeking treatment is recommended. Many of the same treatment strategies that help with PTSD are also effective for depression.

Anger and guilt: If you feel responsible for your spouse's happiness, you might feel guilty when you can't make a difference. You could also be angry if they can't keep a job or drink too much, or because they are angry or irritable. You and your spouse can get past this anger and guilt by understanding that the feelings are no one's fault.

Health problems: Consistently feeling anger, worry, and/or depression over a long period of time can have a negative impact on health. Additionally, unhealthy habits such as drinking, smoking, and not exercising can get worse when trying to cope with PTSD symptoms in a family member.

SUPPORT RESOURCES

Department of Veteran Affairs National Center for PTSD
www.ptsd.va.gov

Veteran Affairs (VA) Vet Center
http://www.vetcenter.va.gov

Chaplain

Military OneSource Non-Medical Counseling
http://www.militaryonesource.mil/non-medical-counseling

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