

# Home From War

by  
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My husband, Bob, spent the second year of our marriage flying a Huey slick in the First Cavalry Division in Vietnam 1965-66. His book, *Chickenhawk*, tells the story of that year. When he got back, I saw how skinny he was, but I was so glad to have him back, I didn't notice the thousand yard stare. I had no idea what he had been through. I was just so glad he was alive. Neither of us had any idea that the war was, quite *naturally and normally*, going to affect both of us for the rest of our lives. We didn't know any of what you will read in this pamphlet. They told Bob he would be fine in a few weeks. When he wasn't, he thought he was nuts. I thought I was a bad wife, or he would not be having problems. He often agreed. Our life was not very happy for the next fifteen years, until we found out about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. We still deal with it, but today our dealings are informed, which makes things easier.

## **Stages you may go through when you get home:**

**Stage 1: I'm fine:** Most soldiers come back believing it's all over. Young, strong, proud, even if you are having some odd moments, you are not about to tell the doctors because you will be kept from going home. The changes that helped you survive war don't seem that big a deal, and who is going to tell some guy in a white coat that you are seeing dead people? You may not know how much you have changed till you're home. Life here is flat. People have petty problems. You can't sleep, have bad dreams, get furious at everything, and keep looking for roadside bombs. When a car backfires, you hit the dirt. Still, you probably think the people around you have problems. Not you. Any comments about how you've changed may really piss you off. You're fine! You survived a war! What kind of help could you possibly need after that? If you don't know that it is normal to be affected, what else can you do but deny that you are? That's what everyone else does. Denial can make your family feel nuts. You may be telling them they are nuts. This usually does not improve relationships. Furthermore, in today's military, you probably will have to go back, so denial may seem necessary..

**Stage 2: I'm not fine, but I'm not telling you:** You notice some problems. You get angry too fast, you are yelling at people instead of talking to them, you keep seeing your friends die. When civilian things go wrong, you don't care. (Is anyone shooting?) You may be shocked to feel nothing when a beloved relative gets sick or dies, or you may think you don't love your spouse anymore because you can't feel it. You hate civilians or Arabs. You are not fine, but you are not going to tell anyone, especially not anyone who

wasn't there and has been telling you that you have problems. You start to think that you can't talk to anyone who wasn't there. You begin isolating so no one will see how nuts you feel. You are pissed off about being affected. You also fear going for help because it may dull your edge, which you will need when you go back. It might also affect your career, and you don't want people to think you are nuts. You exclude your spouse. He or she gets angry at you a lot.

**Stage 3: I can't talk to people who weren't there:** Since you can talk to other vets, you feel that no one understands unless they were there. This unfortunately is true. Most people make this clear by saying insensitive things like, "So what's your problem? Get over it!" "Did you kill anyone?" "You're a hero." and the inevitable, "But why aren't you over it?" So you increase your isolation from family and friends. This however tends to make spouses angry, because we are *supposed* to be *understanding*. Your sense of humor has become very black, and you laugh at things that would have horrified you once. You may even wonder if your spouse would still love you if they knew what happened over there. You might feel that everyone around you is spoiled and insensitive and it pisses you off. You have to stay so numb that your spouse feels you don't love him or her anymore.

**Stage 4: What's wrong with me?** The term "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" is a good description of the effects of war on normal people. The skills of war create a lot of *disorder* in your life. Shrinkers and family members tend to see the symptoms of PTSD as the *problem*. Not me. I see *war* as the problem and the symptoms of PTSD as *solutions* to the problem of war, something *right* with you, not something wrong with you. Each symptom begins as part of your body's hard-wired survival responses to danger, which your training has been designed to intensify and strengthen. They worked. You are *alive*. That is the bottom line. You have been through something that killed others. Having PTSD is proof of survival. I also believe that the people who get PTSD are the ones who care the most. You may feel like you don't care, but if you didn't care, you would not have to develop the symptom of emotional numbing to survive. Although PTSD symptoms originate in hard-wired survival skills built into all of us, unhealed, they can become your biggest problems over time.

**Stage 5: I'm screwed up and no one can help.** Deciding that no one can help is pretty human, but it is not true. I don't think you are screwed up, either. You are in survival mode. What helped you survive one deployment will probably help you during the next one, unless your symptoms become debilitating. What you will need, when you are finally home for good, and decide you want to change, is information and tools, someone to talk to, and hope. So will your family. You can get treatment without diagnosis at the Vet Centers and for two years after you get back at the VA. This can be a problem since it might be two years before you realize you have problems.

Admitting you have a problem and asking for help is hard, but you survived the war, and you can survive getting help and healing. If you don't get help, you can be stuck in any one of these stages for the rest of your life, losing friends and family in the process, like so many veterans of previous wars. War affects people who live through it. There is evidence of PTSD throughout written history. People not affected by war are usually actors in war movies. *It's worse when it's real*. You may have noticed this.

This pamphlet is meant to explain the normal effects of war. Today, you don't have to feel crazy, weak or defective, or blame each other, like Bob and I did. You can find ways

to heal.

### **What causes PTSD?**

Four types of traumatic events, common in war, cause PTSD:

1. When people are trying to kill or injure you.
2. When people are trying to kill or injure those you are close to (and many soldiers are closer to their buddies than to anyone in their lives.)
3. When you suddenly lose your home or community, which happens to soldiers who are wounded and medevacked or when they lose a lot of buddies to an IED or firefight.
4. Seeing *anyone* who has recently been seriously injured or killed (stranger, enemy, civilian).

Most soldiers have *hundreds* if not thousands of traumatic events during a deployment.

Traumatic events are cumulative, starting in childhood.

Traumatic events are made worse by human cruelty, neglect, and betrayal. Suicide bombing and the constant killing of civilian men, women, and children by factions in Iraq and Afghanistan make this war very cruel. What an incident means to you may also make it more traumatic. If your friends were “wasted”, it is worse than if they were killed doing something that was noble and important. It’s worse if the deaths were because they had no armor (betrayal). If you shot a car that was full of women and kids, it is a lot worse than if you shot guys with guns. Such incidents can destroy your sense of who you are.

Three other things also cause PTSD: Your brain is designed to keep you alive, so built in systems are activated by war. You care about other people or you would not have to get and stay numb. And finally, *you lived*. Dead people do not get PTSD.

**Who gets PTSD?** Given enough trauma, *everyone* gets PTSD. *Most people have all the symptoms right after*, but some of them seem to heal better than others. The people who develop PTSD have the most exposure to war, the greatest losses (not only friends, mental health and body parts, but trust, faith in the government or God or the military), the greatest number of previous traumas, the fewest resources [not just family and friends, but also the capacity to know what you feel or sit with a bad feeling and let it peak and fade (emotional intelligence), to let other people think differently, etc.] , the greatest vulnerabilities, and the least social support. PTSD seems to be a disorder of healing. That’s why it is important to be informed about post-traumatic reactions and about different kinds of help. There is no one-size-fits-all treatment for PTSD and no drug that makes it all go away, although research continues. Individuals need different things to heal. However healing seems to be dependant on being able to talk about the war, feel the pain, learn to moderate your reactions, and stay present in the present instead of being stuck back in the war.

**What is PTSD?** Many people think of PTSD as “the problem.” To me war is the problem, and PTSD is actually a solution to the problem of surviving war. All the symptoms start out as skills that help you survive

**What are the symptoms of PTSD?** Watch for these three categories. They grow out of the fight-flight-or-freeze survival mechanisms hard-wired into us all.

**Set 1: Hyperarousal:** Your brain is designed to pay attention to anything new, especially to threats, so you can survive. Hyper-alertness is a capacity that keeps you alive. Under the hammer of war constant watchfulness and expectation of danger (hyper-

vigilance) become ingrained. *Extremely effective* startle responses [the shrinks call it exaggerated] keep you alive and moving (fight or flight). Irritability and outbursts of anger, keep you alive and fighting instead of giving up. The inability to fall or stay asleep keeps you from being killed in your sleep. Shrinks also mention the inability to concentrate, but that is not exactly what is going on. It is the inability to concentrate on regular everyday stuff like picking up diapers at the store on your way home. Believe me you are concentrating on safety and on survival information. These hyperarousal symptoms are appropriate and effective in a war zone, where you have to do whatever it takes to survive, including things you may regret later. You have developed rapid responses, faster than thought, which can move your body before you know what you are doing. Keeping this edge is very important if you face redeployment. At the same time, at home these can become some of your biggest problems.

### **Set 2: Numbing and avoidance:**

**Numbing:** The brain has a natural capacity to rapidly adapt to circumstances, especially danger. This is so we can be in control. It enables warriors to numb their feelings automatically so they can do whatever it takes to survive and to help others survive. It's called professionalism, part of your training. Among the numbing symptoms are feeling like you have no feelings anymore, feeling like there is no future (so why worry when you could be killed tomorrow?), and feeling like no one can understand you unless they were there. Trauma happens so fast that you also may not remember all or part of some incidents. Our brains are also capable of dissociating. When this happens it is like being an observer of what is happening, as if you weren't there.

**Avoidance:** We use avoidance to keep from feeling the painful emotions we have numbed. You maintain professionalism through numbness. You must not lose control. Avoiding emotions, thoughts, situations and activities that remind you of the war is easier if you are using substances, like alcohol, or behaviors, like workaholicism, TV watching, the internet, or creating chaos (affairs, gambling, fighting). If you think you should be over it and your family and some of your outfit think only weaklings get post-traumatic reactions, avoidance seems like the perfect answer.

**Set 3: Re-experiencing:** Re-experiencing symptoms make you feel nuts. They include intrusive thoughts of the war, which you can't stop having, dreams, nightmares, acting/feeling as if you were back in the war, blasts of adrenaline when thing that remind you of the war, and anniversary reactions (see *PTSD & Holidays* at [patiencepress.com](http://patiencepress.com)). Your brain is a better-safe-than-sorry system designed to keep you alert and alive. Trauma happens so fast and is so overwhelming that the more primitive parts of the brain don't know it is over. They do not speak English, nor can they tell time. They want you to spend the rest of your life looking for roadside bombs and ambushes, so you won't die. You know you are home, but your brain doesn't seem to. Although this part of your brain is trying to keep you alive, the effect of re-experiencing can be the opposite. Acting as if today were the past can get you killed or get other people killed. You have to be reacting to today to stay alive and not harm those around you.

Many people have horrible flashes of non-verbal memory burnt into them by the war. They may be triggered by *situations* like confrontation, *sounds* like a backfire, *emotions* like guilt or shame or fear (many people turn these big three into anger so fast that they don't know they are feeling them), *thoughts* like "I should/shouldn't have...", *sights* like a car at the side of the road, or *smells* like cooking meat on a grill. Triggers can remind you

of incidents of which you have no coherent memory. Further complicating your life, some sights, smells, emotions, sounds, etc., that are going on around you if you are triggered back home can become *second* or *third generation* triggers. This will make you feel even crazier when something with no connection to the war starts to trigger you.

Oddly enough, moving a non-verbal memory up into your frontal lobes, which do speak English and can tell time, either by writing and re-writing or telling and re-telling the story, often stops the re-experiencing. There are several forms of short term exposure therapy that can help with intrusive re-experiencing so you can keep your edge for the next deployment.

**Why don't they just get over it?** Avoidance is very understandable, but it is also *the main factor in perpetuating PTSD symptoms*. By avoiding thinking about the traumatic events, you can't make sense of it. Part of you is still back in the war zone trying to figure out what happened, going over and over it, hoping for a better ending.

Avoiding triggers leads to isolation, which means you don't get the help you need to heal.

Avoiding bad feelings means you suppress them all, which can lead to depression and family problems. People can tell you are not feeling what you once felt, and rather than ascribe it correctly to PTSD, they think you don't love them any more. You may think that, too.

The symptoms of PTSD can reinforce each other, too. Perhaps you are so numb, the only time you feel alive is when you are filled with adrenaline. You may unconsciously create arguments at home or do dangerous things that anger your spouse so you can feel alive. Then you start remembering and feeling, so you have to clamp back down to numbness, and they feel unloved as well as angry.

What you tell yourself can also perpetuate the problem. "I shouldn't feel like this," "I should be over it," "What's wrong with me?" "I must be crazy!" all can serve to keep you stuck. You are having normal reactions to war, reactions which John Wayne and Rambo never had because they were never in a war.

Although you may need your hypervigilance and emotional numbing in your next deployment, if you have significant re-experiencing it may endanger you and your buddies.

Once you are home for good, PTSD symptoms can become your biggest problems if you simply ignore them and expect them to go away. Although some people seem to heal, a large percentage of veterans exposed to high war-zone stress develop chronic cases. This is partly because of the lack of treatment available before the '80's, but it is also due to the stigma people attach to "being affected". I hope to reverse some of that, since *normal people are affected by what they live through*. Since PTSD can also be triggered by subsequent events throughout the rest of your life, it is wise to learn how to heal. Many older veterans have lost their friends and families because of the struggle to hide symptoms and seem fine. The current war has also re-triggered PTSD symptoms in many older veterans because they remember. They know what you're facing. If this has happened to you, don't think treatment didn't work. It worked before and it will work again. Go back for more.

**Getting Better:** Each symptom of PTSD develops from a bodily-based, God-or-evolution-given built-in *survival* mechanism, designed to keep you alive. We all have these survival mechanisms, and *if we had been through what you have been through, we*

*would also be affected.* You learned these survival mechanisms under the hammer of war. When you are ready to get better, you have to learn what they are, when and how they are useful, and new skills for when they are not. Each met a need, usually for survival, and finding other ways to meet your natural needs for safety and security is the job of recovery.

We also have *built-in healing mechanisms*. Attention (eye contact, being listened to, receiving empathy and respect), telling your story, safe touch, acceptance (bad things happen; they are painful), crying, making a contribution (working for the common good [altruism] and to support your family), justice, and spirituality are some of our built-in healing mechanisms. Our culture finds some of them awkward.

While avoidance strengthens and perpetuates PTSD symptoms, it is much less painful than the work of healing, especially if you have lost buddies, your sense of yourself as good or competent, and/or have shame or guilt or despair associated with the trauma *as most people seem to*. Somehow feeling like it is your fault, and *if only you had done something, it wouldn't have happened*, makes you feel less powerless. The essential ingredient of trauma, however, is that it is overwhelming and you are powerless. No one can stop bombs or bullets with if-onyms. Many people spend their lives after trauma waiting and wishing for a better *past*, instead of working through the pain and anxiety for a better *future*.

Exposure is the basic task for healing PTSD. It teaches the parts of your brain that don't speak English and can't tell time that it is over. Exposure to what you are avoiding in small safe doses with a trained trauma therapist makes a huge difference. Often this is telling parts of your story again and again so that details come back and you can comprehend the whole experience. If you want to avoid these details because you think whatever happened was your fault, talking can help with that, too.

Most vets feel that if they ever let themselves feel, it would destroy them, but numbing bad feelings means the good ones are gone, too. Healing means you learn how to sit with a feeling and let it peak and fade, so you can process your memories. You went through hell. The feelings will hurt, but they will also pass eventually. Your therapist can teach you how to identify your feelings, that you are not your feelings, and that other people can have different feelings without either of you being wrong.

You can even learn to go in and out of numbing, since it can be handy, as can many of these survival skills. If you have developed an addiction to help you maintain numbness, you probably need to get clean, sober or abstinent from the substance or behavior.

The best way to deal with non-verbal memories is to move them from the non-verbal parts of the brain up to the frontal lobes and turn them into narrative memories, in other words: remember. Writing and rewriting something that happened to you is one way of doing it. Talk therapy is another. You get to tell your story. This is painful but you made it through the event, and you can make it through the memory.

For hyper-arousal, I always suggest basic un-training. Every soldier I've ever met thinks the military taught him to take care of himself. "Oh, really?" I often say, "So you used to say to your drill instructor, 'Sorry Sergeant, I can't do that. I need a nap.'" This usually gets a big laugh, but that is the kind of self-care you need to learn. After you have been to war, there are some things you simply can't do. Sometimes it's parties (don't

bunch up), cookouts (burning flesh), family fights. Sometimes it's "Don't ever come up behind me and grab me." Whatever it is, learning to speak up is important.

You have to learn self-soothing methods, so you're not always yelling and angry. You have to expose yourself to triggers in small safe doses, too, so they lose the power to trigger you. Learning that what triggers you is not necessarily dangerous here is also important, so your family doesn't have to avoid your triggers.

Learning to meditate helps with these tasks and keeps you present in the present. The book *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn helped Bob a lot. He also reads Thich Nhat Hanh. You may also find ways to heal your body's constant state of tension through somatic therapies or yoga.

You may have to heal your beliefs. During extremely traumatic events, such as having a buddy die in your arms, or get killed when you weren't there, people often decide "I will never love anyone again" or "I should never have left" or "It's my fault." Other beliefs that can interfere with healing and with everyday life include ideas like "Don't talk about it," "Only weaklings and whiners ask for help," "You can't trust anyone who wasn't there," and it's converse, "You can (and must) trust anyone who was there."

PTSD can make you feel totally out of control. By choosing to take new actions which have worked for others, you can regain that sense that you are in charge of your life.

**Home life problems:** The final topic I want to cover are some of the things I noticed in my family. Bob did things that really made me mad and I told him so a lot. Family members, friends, and even therapists can believe if you just did what they told you, you would be over it. Since the essence of trauma is your powerlessness to prevent it, most veterans need to regain a sense of control in their lives. This makes telling them what to do, even if you are right, counter-productive and ineffective, especially if you are constantly doing it. How do I know? I did it for years. Suggestions, on the other hand, can be quite useful, especially if explained as, "This has helped others. It might be awkward at first, but you might try it?"

For veterans of war, home life also creates triggers which cause major problems in the family without anyone realizing why.

Being asked to do things can get you killed in war, yet not doing common everyday things that your spouse asks you to do can cause a lot of resentment. Ask yourself, "Will taking out the garbage get me killed?" If not, maybe you can help out. Bob also says that common everyday things seem so unimportant when you come home from war, why bother? (Is the garbage shooting? No. Then don't worry about it.)

Taking orders can also get you killed, so if your spouse gets demanding or bossy, resistance may become even stronger. Spouses resent this, too, because they usually get bossy when they are desperate for help.

Not following orders can also get you killed. Since you have the experience of war, you may find yourself ordering your family around and expecting instant obedience as if you were in the field. This can cause problems and resentments. No one likes to be ordered around.

Lateness can get you killed, so you may react strongly to it.

Mistakes can get you killed, but the way children (and grownups) learn is through mistakes, so they are not all fatal. You can remind yourself of this.

Emotions can get you killed. You have probably become quite numb to survive, but if you react to the normal emotions of your nearest and dearest as if they are trying to get you killed it usually causes problems.

People in your family may also seem like sissies with a lot of whiney problems, and after what you've been through you simply want them to shut up and focus on survival. Most people find that demeaning and unkind.

You want to keep them safe by making them strong so you may yell at them and try to toughen them up physically and emotionally. Most people hate that.

You may even envy these spoiled brats who have everything compared to you or to the people you were trying to help in other countries. It rarely helps to point that out.

So in dealing with family issues, you can ask yourself some questions:

1. Is it going to get me killed? Usually taking out the trash or washing the dishes won't.

2. It is not life or death like stuff in Iraq/Afghanistan, so it may not be important to me, but is it important to my family member or friend? Can I be of help? It is rarely helpful to point out to them that in your scale of things, this is petty bullshit.

3. Do I want my kids to live like the kids I saw in Iraq or Afghanistan? Or do I want them to have an appreciation for what they have and to reach out to help those kids who have less? It is more effective to teach by example than by yelling.

Another problem that develops with PTSD as it becomes chronic is depleted cortisol. When people are flooded with adrenaline during combat (or arguments), a hormone called cortisol calms you down afterwards. Studies on Vietnam veterans with chronic PTSD show that instead of having chronically high levels of cortisol, they have depleted cortisol, not enough cortisol to calm down after they get hyperaroused. For me this explains a lot of the anger problems in veterans. They get angry easily because a killing rage can keep you alive and fighting in combat, but turning off the anger once it is on is really difficult. Not only is cortisol depleted, but in the middle of an argument, if your heartbeat is over 175 beats per minute, no one is home in your frontal lobes where you listen to reason! The forebrain has been hijacked, so you can't understand your spouse's arguments. When this happens, it is best to remove yourself from the source of your anger.

The purpose of this article is to give you information that will help you decide to heal whatever post-war reactions you may be having. It is not easy, but if you want to feel less alienated, it is possible. Recovering from war is not for the faint of heart. Bob and I wish you well.

Patience Mason is the wife of Vietnam helicopter pilot, Robert Mason, whose memoir of that war, *Chickenhawk*, was a bestseller. Her book, *Recovering from the War*, has been helpful to family members and veterans of all wars. Her website is [www.patiencepress.com](http://www.patiencepress.com). Bob's is [www.robertcmason.com](http://www.robertcmason.com). (He has pictures.)

You may download a number of free articles at [www.patiencepress.com](http://www.patiencepress.com) as well as ordering the book, *Recovering from the War*. I also sell two books for kids, *Why Is Daddy Like He Is?* and *Why Is Mommy Like She Is?*, several pamphlets, *After the War: For the Wives of All Veterans*, *The War at Home*, and *An Explanation of PTSD for 12 Steppers: When I get sober, I feel crazy*, and the collected *Post-Traumatic Gazette*.