Post-active duty — Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

Dear Alice,

How can I help my boyfriend cope with PTSD? He just got back from Iraq.

Answer

Dear Reader,

While serving your country is undoubtedly honorable, it’s also an experience that may have intense emotional and psychological consequences, given service members’ potential for exposure to traumatic events. This exposure leads some to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental health condition that may emerge after a person experiences or witnesses a traumatic event. Your desire to help your boyfriend cope with PTSD is admirable, as observing a loved one experience its symptoms is no simple or easy task. The most helpful ways to assist are to learn about PTSD, understand how it affects your boyfriend and yourself, be a supportive and non-judgmental listener, and to encourage your boyfriend to seek help if necessary. Read on for more about PTSD and how you can help your boyfriend cope.

PTSD is a mental health condition that can develop in response to a person’s experience or witnessing of a traumatic event involving actual or threatened injury to themselves or others. Everyone responds differently to traumatic events, but those with PTSD experience a variety of symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, nightmares and flashbacks of past traumatic events, negative mood and thoughts, avoidance of reminders of trauma, hypervigilance, and sleep disturbance, all of which may negatively impact social functioning, work, and relationships.

Fortunately, there are many effective treatments for PTSD, including a variety of medications and psychotherapies. However, many veterans don’t seek the help of a mental health professional because of stigma often attached to the diagnosis. Medications — such as antidepressants, antipsychotics, and anti-anxiety medications — may be used to treat PTSD, and quite well, at that! Certain medications have been found to reduce PTSD symptoms, including nightmares and sleep disturbance, in as many as 50 percent of patients. As for psychotherapy, several types may be used to treat PTSD. Cognitive behavioral therapy helps people recognize ways of thinking that are keeping them stuck. This treatment is often used alongside exposure therapy, which helps people face situations and memories they find frightening so that they can learn to cope with
them effectively. Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing is another psychotherapy that combines exposure therapy with a series of guided eye movements that help the person process traumatic memories and change how they react to them. On top of these psychotherapies, some find group, family, or couple’s therapies to be helpful in coping with PTSD. Many need to combine or experiment with various treatments to achieve a satisfactory therapeutic response, and unfortunately there’s no way to know what combination will work for any one person. Not sure where to start? Veterans can refer to the Department of Veteran Affairs[2] for a list of providers.

While medications and psychotherapies may help your boyfriend cope with PTSD, your support certainly will as well. Something that may help you support him best is learning as much as you can about PTSD, which is exactly what you’re doing by asking this question. One place you could learn more is through the National Institute of Mental Health’s page on PTSD[3]. The more you know, the more you can help your boyfriend feel safe, comfortable, and trusting by being a patient, non-judgmental, and supportive listener, and creating (but not forcing) opportunities for him to talk about his experiences. Alongside this, it can be helpful to express understanding if your boyfriend doesn’t want to talk, or if he seems distant or closed-off from communicating with you. It may be challenging for him to readjust to the interactions with which you're familiar — try not to take this personally, as it may not have much to do with you. Other things you may try are encouraging contact with family and close friends, doing physical activity together, setting up a time-out system, and observing your limits. The last two go hand-in-hand. A time-out system can allow you or your boyfriend to call a time-out if either of you needs a break or a breather. Not only could this be useful for your boyfriend, but this may also help you cope with the stress and pain of supporting a loved one with PTSD, for example in moments of frustration or sadness. If it seems like it may be helpful, you may also consider reaching out to a mental health professional who can support you as you support your boyfriend.

Keep in mind that all traumas, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, take time to heal, and the length of time varies for everyone. There’s no right way to heal from an experience such as serving in Iraq, but having a supportive and educated partner such as yourself can only help your boyfriend in the process of recovery.

In hopes of healing,

Alice!

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