Family Support for Military Sexual Trauma

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For more information about the SAGA program to help veterans with PTSD see http://www.sift.net/research/health-and-telemedicine/saga

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SAGA

FAMILY SUPPORT for MST

I GOT THE GROCERY LIST, HONEY, READY?

PAUL, I DON’T WANT TO GO.

IT’S JUST A GROCERY STORE, JESSICA, NOTHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU!

I SAID I DON’T WANT TO GO!

IT WAS 2 YEARS AGO, WHEN IS THIS GOING TO STOP?

LEAVE ME ALONE!
MY WIFE WAS RAPED WHEN SHE WAS ON DEPLOYMENT.

WHAT BRINGS YOU IN TODAY?

IT'S BEEN 2 YEARS BUT...

SHE'S STILL HAVING NIGHTMARES, SHE'S ALWAYS ANGRY, AND NO MATTER WHAT I DO, IT'S NOT HELPING.

JUST AS NO TWO TRAUMAS ARE EXACTLY ALIKE, NO RECOVERY PATTERN IS THE SAME.

PATIENTS

THERE IS NO TIMELINE TO RECOVERY AND IT IS NORMAL TO FEEL ANGRY, SAD, FRUSTRATED, ALL OF THESE EMOTIONS.

DOES THAT MEAN SHE'S GOING TO FEEL LIKE THIS FOREVER?

MOST LIKELY NOT: MOST PEOPLE RECOVER OVER TIME BUT SOME SYMPTOMS MAY REAPPEAR WHEN TRIGGERED.
Sometimes she’s triggered by crowds or certain words or sounds. At those times, what can I do to help her?

Sweetheart, I know that this is hard for you.

What you’re feeling is completely understandable.

I’m here with you in any way you need.

The greatest gift we can give to someone who is struggling is to normalize their experience.

Kindness can help people more than anything else.

It can be helpful to create a caring atmosphere for the assault survivor by offering support and using a soft tone of voice and (with permission) a gentle touch.

You are in a tricky spot—you want to help Jessica, but sometimes might also feel the pressure to “fix” the situation.

Yeah, I feel that.

Take as much time as you need, honey.

Just staying with her can help more than you can imagine and reduces the pressure from you both.
It's also common for the family members to feel angry or feel ashamed or guilty for not being able to prevent the trauma or take it away.

I feel like a failure.
I try... but no matter what I do, I can't make her feel better.

These judgments and feelings are completely normal and mean that you care this much about this individual to want to help them.

During these distressing moments, you can practice taking loving kindness breaths, either by yourself or with Jessica.

This seems ridiculous.

Negative emotions can spiral out of control if the situation doesn't change.

We can work on our emotions by changing our physiology through slow breathing and hand on heart technique.

Placing a hand on one's heart and taking slow compassionate breaths can help reduce stress. To practice a loving kindness breath, focus on breathing in and out. On each inhalation, focus on taking in the strength, love, and support that you need for yourself, and on each exhalation, send strength, love, and support to your partner.
SLOW, DEEP BREATHS ACTIVATE THE PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM, SLOWING YOUR HEART RATE AND SHUTTING DOWN YOUR BODY’S FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSE.

TO GET THE MOST OUT OF BREATHING EXERCISES, LET YOUR ABDOMEN AND RIBCAGE EXPAND OUTWARD EACH TIME YOU INHALE, SO YOUR LUNGS CAN FILL UP COMPLETELY. SHALLOW BREATHING AND STRESS GO HAND IN HAND.

TRY INHALING AND EXHALING TO A COUNT OF THREE OR FOUR, MAKING THE BREATHS EQUAL IN LENGTH.

BECAUSE TAKING CARE OF SOMEONE REQUIRES A LOT OF PATIENCE AND EFFORT, IT IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY FOR YOU TO ALSO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

SELF-CARE CAN INCLUDE PROPER SLEEP, EXERCISE, ENGAGING IN HOBBIES, LIKE VIDEO GAMES, MOVIES, OR PAINTING, AND OTHER REJUVENATING ACTIVITIES.

IT FEELS SELFISH TO DO SOMETHING FOR MYSELF WHEN I KNOW SHE IS STRUGGLING.

THINK OF IT THIS WAY: THE TIME AND EFFORT YOU PUT INTO YOUR OWN PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CAN GIVE YOU THE STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE TO BETTER HELP JESSICA.
Recovery takes time and even if Jessica is not visibly improving, it doesn't mean that you are not helping.

Sweetheart, what do you need right now?

I could use a hug.

If you have questions about how to best help someone who experienced sexual assault, you can talk to a mental health professional to give you the tools that you may need.

For more information about sexual assault recovery, please call the national sexual assault hotline: 800.656.HOPE or visit https://RAINN.org