

PARENTING WITH A POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS INJURY

A GUIDE FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN IN VETERAN FAMILIES



This resource was prepared by the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families. The Atlas Institute would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions to this resource. Please note the names listed include only those who have explicitly consented to being acknowledged as a contributor.

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Check out our contributorship model for more information: atlasveterans.ca/contributorship.

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This resource is a practical guide for Veteran Families looking for information about how children are impacted by PTSIs and tips for having conversations about PTSIs with children.

This resource is for many kinds of parenting dynamics and Family configurations. We know that Veteran Families don't all look the same, even when they have experiences in common. You may need to adapt some of the strategies to fit your specific situation while still benefiting from the practical advice we're sharing.

In addition to being informed by research, this resource was co-developed with an advisory committee comprised of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Veterans and Veteran Family members. We thank these advisory members for sharing their time and expertise to co-create these resources.



INTRODUCTION

Veterans can be impacted by posttraumatic stress in several ways that may affect their life experiences as individuals, as parents and in their Family relationships. Veteran parents may worry that their injury prevents them from being the kind of parent they want to be and can have concerns about how their children are impacted. Veteran Families may have questions about navigating parenting while seeking help for a posttraumatic stress injury (PTSI). The experience can feel isolating, but there is hope and help available.

The Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families has co-designed two resources about parenting with a PTSI. These resources include information and practical advice from other Veteran parents and Families who have experienced parenting with a PTSI. Download ***Parenting with a posttraumatic stress injury: Practical tips for parents in Veteran Families***: atlasveterans.ca/parenting-with-ptsj-parent-tips

"We've all got something in common – none of us are alone in this. People that are going through this, there's just so many other people out there that can also understand and maybe even help make it a little easier for someone else."

— A Veteran and parent

"You don't want to affect your kids, but they're already affected. They know that there is a change and that something is going on. I think that by not including them we're doing them a disservice."

— A Veteran Family member and parent

"Children are sponges – they hear everything, the good and the bad. Any open communication will help the child understand. We don't give them enough credit at times for their awareness of the situation."

— A Veteran and parent



DEFINITIONS

Operational stress injury (OSI) is a term that refers to a prolonged mental health condition resulting from operational stressors¹ (e.g. traumatic events, combat or peacekeeping duties, loss, grief, high-stress situations or operational fatigue²) experienced while serving in the military or RCMP. It is not a diagnosis.

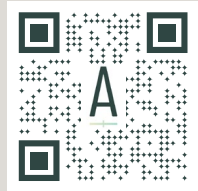
Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a specific type of mental health condition that can happen after someone experiences, sees or hears about a traumatic event. PTSD is diagnosed by a licensed medical professional based on specific signs, symptoms and behaviours.

Posttraumatic stress injury (PTSI) is a broad term that refers to any kind of mental health challenge or condition that happens after someone experiences, sees or hears about a traumatic event. You don't need a diagnosis to have a PTSI.

It's important to note that though these terms are often used interchangeably, they do cover separate injuries. Not all OSIs are PTSD, and not all PTSD diagnoses are related to OSIs. For the remainder of this resource, we will use the term PTSI.

For more information about topics that impact Veterans and Veteran Families, visit the Atlas Institute website: atlasveterans.ca/topics.

Looking for more information about PTSIs to share with your Family? [MindKit.ca](https://mindkit.ca) is a mental health education hub for young Family members of Veterans living with a PTSI.



"I'm grateful that I can take all of my experiences and turn them into something amazing. Our children are going to grow up to be incredible humans because we're doing the best we can and fighting to do the best we can."

— A Veteran and parent



HOW ARE CHILDREN IMPACTED BY PTSIs IN THE FAMILY?

Children and youth can be impacted in various ways when someone in their Family has a PTSD.³ There may be changes in their day-to-day life. They can also experience a variety of thoughts, feelings and behaviours in response to the experience.



Changes in routine: Children may notice changes in Family routines and activities, such as having a movie night at home instead of going to the movie theatre. They may notice that some Family members have to take on new tasks or that they're asked to pick up some additional chores. Children may also observe changes in Family functioning, such as more conflict in the home or certain activities like driving to school becoming more stressful.



Thoughts: Children may wonder if their Family will ever be like it was before. They may worry that their Family doesn't love them anymore and may feel that it's their responsibility to fix the situation. They may blame themselves for their parents' symptoms and changes in the Family.



Feelings: Children may experience a range of feelings in response to a loved one's PTSD. This can include hopelessness, anger, confusion, frustration, betrayal, sadness, loss or grief. Children may also feel embarrassment, tension or fear (like they're walking on eggshells).



Behaviours: Children's behaviour in Families with a PTSD may be different from how they used to be. They may become alert to their parent's symptoms or avoid Family and friends altogether. They may find it hard to bond with their parent and Family and may find it difficult to keep other relationships or friends. Some children may try to take on a caregiver role for their parent or take on adult responsibilities around the home.⁴ Children may also copy their parent's behaviour in an effort to connect with them. Children may try to please others or might under- or overachieve at school or other areas of life. They may not want to participate in their usual activities or hobbies and may act older or younger than their age. You may also notice your children acting out, doing risky things, being aggressive or violent, or harming themselves. Children can also experience thoughts of suicide or symptoms of trauma such as feeling on-edge.

If you or your Family are in need of support, there are people who can help.

For immediate support you can call or text the **Suicide Crisis Helpline (9-8-8)** or dial **9-1-1** if it is an emergency (in Nunavut, contact your local RCMP detachment or **1-867-979-1111**). Children and youth can reach out to **Kids Help Phone** by calling **1-800-668-6868** or texting **686868**. You and your Family may be eligible to receive support through the **Family Information Line (1-800-866-4546)**.

For long-term support, you can reach out to a mental health professional about what you're noticing in your child. The Atlas Institute directory of services includes a list of various resources that may help: atlasveterans.ca/directory-of-services

Before and after a PTSI

Many Veteran Families have experiences “before a PTSI” and “after a PTSI,” though this isn’t always the case. Some children may only know their Veteran parent while they have an injury or may not remember a time before the injury. It may be harder to see how your child is impacted by a PTSI because changes might not be noticeable without a timeline of “before” and “after” the injury. However, they can still be impacted by their parent’s PTSI in the ways listed in this section. Additionally, rather than looking at their Family dynamic before and after the injury, children and youth may compare their Family experiences to their peers and notice that something is different.





HOW CAN PARENTS HELP THEIR CHILDREN?

Reducing feelings of guilt and shame

Children in Families with PTSIs may come to their own conclusions about why their parent is acting a certain way. Children may believe that their parent is angry or withdrawn because of something they did and may internalize such messages, even though that's not the case.

You can help your children navigate feelings of guilt and shame by:



Listening to their questions and educating them about PTSIs. It can be helpful to have age-appropriate conversations with your children about the injury and its impacts on you and your Family. *See the following sections for details on how to have these conversations.*



Giving kids a safe space to express themselves. You can help children express themselves and feel safe to do so by responding positively to their questions, emotions, interests and requests for shared activities. It can also help children to have multiple safe people and places to express themselves. For example, having another trusted Family member that shares their interest in a particular activity or hobby, or encouraging children to express themselves creatively at school and at home. As parents, you can be a positive role model to your children by expressing your own feelings with them.



Explaining that their parents' reactions and behaviours are not because the child is bad. Children may not understand why their parents are having certain reactions or where their feelings or behaviours come from. If a parent behaves in a particular way because they are feeling triggered (such as yelling), children may not understand that they didn't cause the behaviour. Without clear explanations that such reactions and behaviours are not their fault, children may internalize messages that they have done something bad without knowing what it is.

Promote positive childhood experiences

When children grow up in environments that promote positive childhood experiences, they are less likely to experience the negative impacts of trauma.



Quality time together

Spending time with your children and giving them your undivided attention can strengthen your relationship. It can show your children that you are present for them and you enjoy their company, and it can help form meaningful memories of the time you spend together. The activity or time together does not have to be a planned event — it can be as simple as watching a favourite show together or having a picnic in the backyard.



Positive relationships

Developing and maintaining positive relationships with friends and family or a support network can contribute to a child's sense of being cared for by a community.



Family traditions

Family traditions (such as game night, Sunday dinners, or taco Tuesday) can be meaningful activities that children look forward to.



Extracurricular/community activities

Doing activities together (such as sports, arts and crafts, or going to museums) or helping out in your community can be a positive experience for children. Engaging in hobbies and activities outside of school can help children develop their interests and form a positive sense of self.



Opportunities to engage with their peers

It can be helpful for children to be around their peers to build social skills and connections. These connections can develop at school or daycare and can also be encouraged in extracurricular activities such as camp, sports, art classes or theatre groups, among others.



Maintaining routines and structure

Many people benefit from having routines. For children, routines and structure can be an important building block for their well-being.

Recognize strengths

Although you may have encountered challenges while parenting in a Family with a PTSD, you can also discover and develop strengths as a result of the experience. Acknowledging these strengths can help you have a balanced understanding of how your Family has been impacted, including the positives. Here are some strengths that children may see from their experiences as part of a Family with a PTSD:



Increased empathy and compassion, communication skills, patience and resilience

Talking about PTSDs in the Family can help children be more empathetic towards others. Having these conversations can also give them the tools to approach challenging experiences with compassion and patience, especially when these traits are modelled by their parents.



Comfort asking questions outside the home

Children are often full of questions — which can be a good thing! They may feel more comfortable being curious and speaking up about mental health if the Family is open about PTSD. Your approach to answering may also help your children feel more comfortable asking questions at school, for example.



Innate strengths and character are more apparent

Challenging experiences can be an opportunity to learn more about ourselves and uncover our innate strengths. If your Family has been impacted by a PTSD, your children may learn more about their strengths during difficult times.



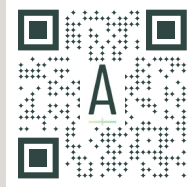
Benefits from early lessons about mental health, self-regulation and self-care

Having conversations about mental health and the importance of self-care can help your children learn important skills for maintaining their well-being so that the skills are available to them when needed.

Teach coping skills

Coping skills are the methods and strategies that people use to navigate stressful or challenging situations. It is important to teach your children these skills so that they have the tools to get through the difficult parts of life. It can also be a key part of helping them cope with PTSD in the Family.

Looking for more information and resources about children's mental health and PTSDs in Veteran Families? Check out [MindKit.ca](https://www.mindkit.ca), a place for youth to explore things related to mental health and the brain, what it's like to live with PTSD in your Family, and different ways to handle challenges.



Remember: Your own recovery has taught you skills — you can teach them to your children.



Normalize a range of emotions. Remember that it is okay to have emotions. Emotions in themselves are not right or wrong and can provide helpful information to understand our human experience. Teaching your children that it is okay to experience any and all emotions and that each serves a purpose is one of the first steps to helping them navigate their feelings in a healthy way.



Consider how to express big feelings. Emotions guide our actions and play a role in helping us understand our experiences, but sometimes they can feel overwhelming or difficult to manage. Consider anger, which can be an important sign that our boundaries are being crossed. However, expressing that anger as yelling or throwing things may hurt other people. It can be helpful to teach your children to pause after they notice a feeling, so they can choose healthy ways to express an emotion or a big feeling.



Make space for emotional regulation. Emotional regulation is a skill that can be developed. Once a feeling has been identified, there are different tools that can be used to help bring your child back to a state of being calm, comfortable and safe. It may be helpful to make space for feelings to be processed by doing an activity that helps to reduce stress, brings joy or is soothing (such as going for walks, exercise or journalling). In-the-moment strategies can include deep breathing or stepping away from the situation. It's important to know that emotional regulation can be different for different people and the activities that help one person may not work for others.



Acknowledge that everyone has needs. Every person has needs that must be fulfilled to feel their best. By acknowledging that it's okay to have needs, you are taking the first step in recognizing what your needs are.



Notice needs that have to be taken care of. If something feels “off” or you know that your needs are not being met, take a moment to pause and ask yourself, *“What do I need in this moment?”*



Encourage asking for help. When you ask for help, others are more likely to want to help you. Asking for help can also allow others to feel connected to you and can build trust in a relationship. It takes strength and courage to ask for help, which are qualities that many people admire — remind your children that it is *not* weak to ask for help.



Teaching self-care. In order to be able to do the things we want to in life and to have the capacity to help others, we must first take good care of ourselves. Self-care may mean engaging in your hobbies or relaxing activities, or taking time for yourself away from your usual routine. It might also look like working on tasks that we know will benefit us, like cleaning the house, booking an appointment or following through on homework from therapy. What's most important is finding the self-care activities that work for you and your needs.

GUIDE FOR AGE-APPROPRIATE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT PTSIs

Things to keep in mind

1

It's a process. You don't have to think about it as a one-time conversation. Aim to start by first having an open-door policy as a Family to talk about what's happening with each other. This can help to create an atmosphere that welcomes honest discussions when someone is worried or upset about something that's going on in the Family.

2

The journey of recovery with PTSl is not linear. It can take a while for the injured person to get into treatment or recovery. It's important to have ongoing communication throughout the whole journey and not just wait until recovery. Through the opportunity to create meaning around the injury, the Family can develop resilience.

3

You don't have to talk about the traumatic experience. You can talk about your injury by sharing information about the impact it has had on you without going into detail about the experience.

4

It can help to look for a safe occasion to have difficult conversations. Maybe that's after dinner, maybe that's out on a Family drive or out for a walk in the country. Aim to not talk about challenging things during a reactionary time such as in the middle of a heated argument.

5

Have a support person with you. They can help you regulate your own emotions while talking.

6

Aim to have age-appropriate conversations with children. If there is a big age difference between your children, you may want to talk to each of them separately, since each may need something different. For example, younger children may only be able to take in short pieces of information or might not want or need details. On the other hand, older youth may have more questions or ask for more details about your injury.

7

Acknowledge the impact on them. Remember that the focus of the discussion is not about how they can help you in your recovery — it's about recognizing how the injury impacts them. It's relational! Remind them that the injury can be difficult to experience since even though it can be invisible, it can sometimes lead to behaviours that impact your relationship with them. It's important not to place more responsibility on children as you're teaching them about what is happening to you. Notice the difference between saying, *"I get angry and well, that's the injury so you'll have to deal with it,"* versus *"I do get angry because at times certain things trigger me, like loud noises. I know that can be confusing to you and it may feel like I'm mad at you. I want you to know I love you very much and I'm working on trying to tell you more about what makes me angry and also what can help me cool down."*

Steps to take before the conversation

1. **Plan the conversation with your partner, a trusted person or a therapist.** Think about what you want to get out of the discussion and what you need to be in the best space to have the conversation. Remember that you don't need to share all the details about how or why you have a PTSD and can focus instead on how the injury affects you now.
2. **Ask yourself what your children might need.** How much and what you say may depend on the age of the child or youth. Regardless, it's important to remember to check in to see what they understood and how they are feeling. Remember, you don't have to fix their feelings. They may feel upset, angry or confused. You can acknowledge that by saying, *"Yes, I get these things that are happening with me and our Family can make you feel that way."*
3. **Assemble your tools and resources.** It may be helpful to have tools on hand to guide the conversation, such as this resource or others that you find helpful.



A FRAMEWORK AND EXAMPLES FOR TALKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH ABOUT PTSI

1

Explain that you experienced a stressful event while in service.

Start with what your child already knows about your experience in the military or RCMP.



"When I was in the military, I got to do some really cool things (like drive tanks and fly in helicopters), but I also had to do and see things that made me feel sad or scared. The things I saw and did caused me to get a mental health injury."



"During my policing career, I had to help a lot of people in some very difficult situations. Seeing and being part of these situations has left me with some memories that make me feel sad or angry sometimes. The things I saw and did caused me to get a mental health injury."

2

Name the injury.

Emphasize that everyone has physical and mental health. Just like we get physical injuries that are visible (such as a broken leg), we can also have injuries to our mental health. These mental health injuries may be harder to understand because we can't see them like we can see a broken leg.

Even though the injury is invisible, your child may have picked up on some of your symptoms or changes in behaviour. It may be helpful to acknowledge these and explain that they are linked to your injury (although it is not necessary to share details about how you got injured).



"Because of these stressful experiences, I have a mental health problem / I have been diagnosed with (name of diagnosis, e.g. PTSD) / I have (condition, e.g. anxiety). Invisible injuries are difficult to understand because we can't see them. That's why it's important to talk about it."



"It's kind of like my brain got rewired during my stressful experiences, and now I am working with my doctors to help fix the wiring and understand how to live with my injury."

3 Describe the behaviours linked to managing the PTSI.

It's important to emphasize that you are taking steps to manage the symptoms and behaviours linked to your PTSI.



"Sometimes my brain gets very confused. And that leads me to have problems with anger, shutting down and doing things that might be unhealthy to make me feel better. It's like my brain is set to feel in danger and fear.

This is why I get support to learn healthy coping skills to help my brain and my body feel safe."

4 Acknowledge that your injury affects the Family.

This includes three elements:

- First, assure them that your behaviour changes are linked to the injury, not their actions.
- Second, explain that the tension or changes in the Family are not their fault.
- Third, tell them they don't have to worry about "fixing it" — that isn't their responsibility.



"I worry and feel tense a lot. It's hard for me to relax."



"I know sometimes I'm crabby and snap at you, even when you didn't do anything wrong. Sometimes my injury means I get angry quickly and easily. I have a short fuse, kind of like a firecracker."



"I've noticed that you haven't wanted to spend time with me as much lately. Sometimes my injury makes me feel really bad and I have a hard day. I want you know that you haven't done anything wrong and I'm not mad at you."



"I appreciate that you noticed I was having a hard day and tried to cheer me up — that was thoughtful. But you don't need to worry about 'fixing it' when I'm having a tough day. I have things I can do to help myself feel better and it's my responsibility to take care of myself in healthy ways."

5 Express what you've noticed about how the PTSI has been tough for your child.

Reflect on any changes you have observed in their behaviour and ask them about their thoughts and feelings.



"I see sometimes after I have had a rough day or have been cranky or sad that you stay away from me. Did you want to talk about how you feel when I am like this?"



"I see when I am having a hard day that you give me extra hugs. Thank you for that. Do you know why you give me extra hugs on those days?"

6 Emphasize how you want to be there to support your child/youth.

Acknowledge that you are still their parent, but the way you support them may be different. Express that you still want to do things together and spend quality time with your child.



"It is really important to me that you can come to either me or another Family member to talk if you are having a tough time figuring things out. It's important that we take care of you, even when I'm not at my best. And if we need to, we can get a special person for you to talk to about everything that is going on within our Family because of my mental health."

7 Express that you are working together as a Family and as a team.



"Everyone in this Family wants to do fun things together, have dinner together and be able to be there when we need each other. We are a team that supports each other. Just like if I had a physical injury like a broken leg, everyone would help out until my leg healed. That's what I hope we can do now: work together."



HOW TO ADJUST THE CONVERSATION FOR DIFFERENT AGES

For young children (age 1-5)

- Use simple language to describe feelings, like happy, sad or angry.
- Keep the information you share brief and use fewer details to make it easier for your child to understand.⁵
- Use visual tools like a storybook or facial expressions to help them understand what you mean.

For children in early childhood (age 5-11)

- Be open to their questions — they may ask for more specifics or want to understand why.
- Use more specific descriptors of feelings (e.g. nervous, confused, worried) because children at this stage are learning about and having more complex feelings of their own.

For adolescents (age 11-14)

- Remember that children of this age are going through a lot of changes, which can affect their moods. It may be best to wait for a different time if they're having a bad day.
- Be prepared to explain any myths or stigmatizing beliefs about mental health that come up during the conversation that they may have learned from their peers or media.
- Involve them in decisions (as appropriate) rather than telling them what to do.

For teenagers (age 14–18)

- Remember that while teenagers have the capacity to understand more complex ideas, they are still developing emotionally and learning how to express and regulate their own emotions.
- Be aware that teenagers may ask difficult questions. You can be truthful in your response while maintaining your boundaries.
- Create an open dialogue that allows your teenager to contribute to the conversation with their own questions and inputs.⁵
- Avoid framing the conversation like a lecture.
- Engage in an activity during the conversation so that it feels less intense — play a sport or a game, go for a walk or a drive, or create some art together.
- Stay open to the possibility that talking about your mental health may encourage your teenager to talk about theirs with you, but recognize that it's also normal for teenagers to seek independence and privacy at this stage of development.



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