ATLAS INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND FAMILIES

PARENTING WITH A POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS INJURY

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR PARENTS 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 parents looking for information about PTSIs and their impact on parenting and Families, tips for navigating parenting and helping yourself as a parent with a PTSI. It also includes information and tips for parents who don't themselves have a PTSI but are impacted by a Family member's injury.

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 might 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: A guide for conversations with children in Veteran Families***: atlasveterans.ca/parenting-with-ptsi-conversation-guide

"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

"Honest conversations strengthen the parent and child relationship. It helps to rebuild trust if it's been lost."

— A Veteran and parent

"Having these conversations with our children help them flourish. My child can regulate himself and use the tools I learned in therapy - he probably does it better than me at this point because I've had these conversations with him."

— A Veteran and parent

DEFINITIONS

Operational stress injury (OSI) is a term that refers to a prolonged mental health condition resulting from operational stressors[1] (e.g. traumatic events, combat or peacekeeping duties, loss, grief, high-stress situations or operational fatigue[2]) 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.

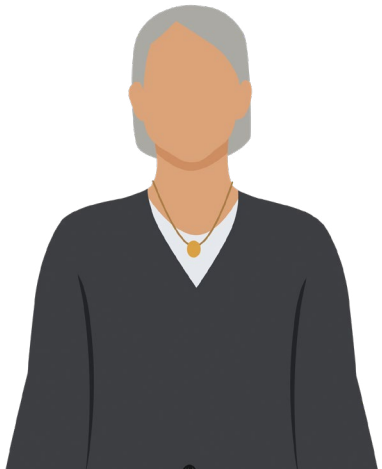
Posttraumatic stress injury (PTSI) is a broad term that refers to any kind of mental health challenge or condition that happens after someone experiences, sees or hears about a traumatic event. You don't need a diagnosis to have a PTSI.

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** is a mental health education hub for young Family members of Veterans living with a PTSI.

"A lot of the struggles that you're going through are result of the love that you have for the world and for the Family. Working on yourself is ultimately an act of love for yourself and those you love the most."
— A Veteran and parent



PTSI AND THE FAMILY

Every Family is unique — the personal experiences of each Family member, the experience of the Family as a whole and the Family structure can influence how PTSIs impact the Family. This means not all Families will experience the same impact.

A PTSI is not the only or most important part of the Family experience. It's one dynamic of the Family, not the defining factor.

How PTSIs might impact Families

Not knowing when or how to talk about it

Parents and Families might find it difficult to have conversations about PTSIs or to know what information is best to share or what is age-appropriate.

Concerns about long-term impacts on children

Parents may have fears that changes in the Family dynamic will have lasting, harmful effects.

Walking on eggshells

Family members may feel they have to "walk on eggshells" and may be fearful of unknown or unpredictable emotions in their Veteran loved one. They may be hesitant to discuss the injury because they aren't sure how their loved one will respond.

Family dynamics may change

The Veteran with the PTSI may interact differently with the Family while trying to manage their symptoms and their partner may take on more of the home and parenting duties while also acting as a caregiver. Family life may begin to revolve around managing or avoiding triggering the injury.[3] Children may sense that something is different and might wonder if it's their fault.

Complex emotions

Members of the Family might experience complex feelings in response to the injury or changes within the home and Family dynamics. This can include confusion, guilt, shame, anger or sadness.

Difficulty accepting changes

It may be challenging for the Veteran with the PTSI or the Family to accept that life has changed or might change after the injury.

Concern for the person with the PTSI

Family members may feel and express concern for the person with the PTSI and may want to help them. Some Family members may adopt a caregiver role or change their behaviour because they are trying to help the Veteran.

Social isolation or avoidance[4]

Some Veteran parents and Families impacted by PTSI may experience social isolation or avoidance. They may no longer keep up with Family, social traditions or events because those environments are difficult for them. They may also avoid those environments due to the stigma they may encounter.

How PTSIs might impact a Veteran parent with a PTSI

Resistance to conversations about PTSIs

If a Veteran with a PTSI has not yet accepted their injury or the impact of trauma in their life, they may not be ready to have conversations about PTSIs with their Family. Instead, they may be trying to process and understand the PTSI for themselves and what the injury means for them and their Family.

Guilt and shame

Some parents with a PTSI may feel guilt for the ways they have or have not cared for and supported their Family, and some may feel that they have not done well as parents. Parents with a PTSI may experience shame as a result of their beliefs about themselves and the effects of their symptoms on others. They may also experience guilt for feeling that they have "brought the PTSI home" to their Family.

Feeling they aren't being the parent they want to be

Veteran parents with a PTSI might feel that they have not lived up to their own expectations and hopes about parenting.

Experiencing symptoms during conversations or activities with their Family

Some parents with a PTSI may notice they have symptoms during or after discussions or activities that remind them of traumatic events or experiences.

What a Veteran with a PTSI might experience while parenting

Challenges with consistently sharing their emotions and affections with their Family

Some Veterans with a PTSI may have learned to suppress their emotions in order to “get the job done” or may want to avoid certain feelings because they can be triggering.

Emotion dysregulation (or mood swings) and displaying inappropriate anger

A Veteran with a PTSI might find it difficult to gauge or respond at an appropriate emotional level in the moment. This might be experienced as under-responding (withdrawing, shutting down) or over-responding (outbursts of anger). For some it can feel like the dial has turned up on their emotions.

Finding it harder to help their children through strong emotions

Some Veterans with a PTSI may have less capacity to support their children through difficult conversations or strong emotions. They may be using most of their energy and effort to navigate their own emotions.

Concerns about children growing up too quickly

Many parents in Families with PTSIs may worry that their children have to grow up faster than their peers do because they are exposed to sensitive or challenging topics, situations and emotions.

Greater understanding of or worrying about risky or dangerous activities

This may manifest as overprotectiveness or strict parenting as a way to prevent their children from experiencing harm.

HOW CAN PARENTS WITH A PTSI HELP THEMSELVES?

Practical advice from other Veteran parents with a PTSI

- **Be patient with yourself.** Understanding and change take time and you won't always get it right on the first try.
- **Acknowledge the injury.** Veterans with a PTSI may find some relief and hope for the future in acknowledging the reality of the PTSI and its impact on themselves and their Family.
- **Practise communicating with honesty and vulnerability.** Honesty can improve the quality of a connection. It's necessary to be open about who you are and what you are experiencing to truly connect with others.
- **Recognize that you need time.** You may find that you need time to prepare for a conversation, to regulate your body and emotions or to process what you heard in a discussion. Communicating to others that you need time can help them meet your need.

Recognize how your Family of origin has impacted you. The conditions in which we grew up can have a profound impact and influence on us throughout life, including the way we parent. Reflect on the Family that you grew up with so that you can notice when and where you may be repeating patterns from your childhood experience that do not benefit you or your Family. Through time and understanding, you can model new choices and behaviours for your children that align with the values you hold and the kind of parent you want to be.

Practise self-compassion. Self-compassion means treating yourself with the same kindness and care that you would show a loved one who is struggling.[5] Tune in to the emotions you are experiencing — after naming what you are feeling, speak to yourself with the same compassion that you would share with a loved one. For example: *"I am feeling frustrated and helpless in this situation. My feelings matter and I acknowledge that I am having a difficult time at this moment. What do I need right now to feel better?"*

Practise forgiveness. If it feels right, practising forgiveness for yourself and others can be liberating. It may benefit your relationships to hold space for others and yourself to make mistakes and grow from them.

Get support outside of the Family. You may need the help of others to support yourself and your Family. While this can mean asking for help from friends or Family, mental health professionals may also be able to help you on your journey. You may benefit from seeking the help of a mental health professional for yourself and for your children, or consider Family therapy. Couples counselling might be helpful for you and your partner. Peer supporters can also lend an empathetic ear and help you feel that someone understands your experiences.

Navigating and coping with feelings

Veterans may experience a range of emotions related to the ups and downs of living with a PTSI. This might include shame, guilt, grief or regret. Here are some tips for navigating these feelings:

Focus on what's possible.

Try to remind yourself that you are doing the best that you can with the tools that you have available to you. You *can* be a good parent with a PTSI and help your children grow up feeling loved, safe, understood and cared for.

Be kind towards yourself.

Remember that you are navigating a mental health injury while experiencing the challenges of being a parent. These can be difficult things to work through all at once and it's okay not to be okay.

Acknowledge how far you have come.

Take a moment to reflect on your journey and how much time and effort you have put into improving circumstances for your Family and yourself.

Know that every Family has difficult times.

Families without a PTSI can also experience times of struggle and may have challenging Family dynamics. There are often common experiences you can bond over with other Families, even those that aren't impacted by PTSI, such as the joys and challenges of raising a toddler or teenager. This can help you feel less alone in your circumstances.

Connect with others who have been there.

It may be helpful to talk with other parents and Families who have been through similar experiences (whether they have a PTSI or not). They may have helpful advice to share or it may be comforting just to hear that others have also had the same ups and downs.

Consider individual therapy.

Through therapy, you may uncover more about yourself and your needs while learning tools and skills to help you navigate and cope with feelings of shame, guilt, grief or regret. Parents, children and the Family as a whole may benefit from therapy.

Seek group or peer support.

Connecting with others who have "been where you are" can help you feel that there are people who understand what you're going through. It can be a relief to speak about your experiences and get support from people with similar experiences of navigating PTSIs and parenting.

Take time before, during and after conversations to regulate your body and emotions.

Practising self-regulation can help improve your experience of those conversations and can make it easier to show up as the person and parent you are. In-the-moment-strategies can include deep breathing, taking a break, receiving comfort from a service animal or pet, and moving your body. Long-term strategies can include discussing your triggers in therapy and caring for your emotional, mental, physical and spiritual needs.

"There's no such thing as a perfect parent. We have some additional struggles but parenting is hard. You're doing the best you can by finding resources and trying to do better. **You're doing the best you can.**"
— A Veteran Family member and parent

PARENTS WITHOUT A PTSI

Parents in Veteran Families who do not have a PTSI can still be impacted by the injury when their partner or Family member has a PTSI. Family members have their own needs, feelings and challenges.

What it can be like if you're a parent without a PTSI

Taking on additional roles

Parents without a PTSI might also take on additional roles in the Family or while caring for children to help shoulder responsibilities and support the person with PTSI during their recovery.

Being "the referee"

Parents without a PTSI may feel that they have to act as the referee in the household (or with their co-parent or ex-partner), moderating and managing conversations between their partner and children. They may also feel responsible for maintaining harmony.

Repairing relationships

They may also feel that doing "repair work" — such as comforting a child after a difficult conversation — falls on their shoulders, especially if their partner is not yet ready to have those conversations themselves.

Mitigating the impact of negative experiences

The parent without a PTSI may feel that they have to take on the role of soothing and comforting the Family. They may feel the need to guide their children in understanding and contextualizing situations and experiences, or to help their children to not internalize any blame or shame for the behaviour of the parent with the PTSI.

Tips for parents without a PTSI

Recognize and validate your own feelings. Acknowledge that parenting in a Family with a PTSI can be challenging, including for a parent without a PTSI. What you are experiencing, thinking and feeling matters too.

Acknowledge the impact. It is okay to admit that parenting in a Family with a PTSI can be hard on you emotionally or mentally or even because of the additional roles and tasks you may take on as a supportive person.

Remind yourself that many parents experience self-doubt. Remember that you are not alone in feeling doubt about your role as a parent. You're probably doing a better job than you think!

Check in regularly with yourself. This can help you notice when and how you are being impacted by a situation or Family dynamic. Actively checking in with yourself will help you respond to your own needs and can be beneficial so that emotions do not fester.

Take care of yourself too. Parents without a PTSI need self-care too! Your health and well-being are important and it is okay (and often times, necessary) to put yourself first and attend to your own needs before helping someone else.

Understand your boundaries. Take time to recognize and understand your own needs so that you can set boundaries that help you maintain your well-being.

COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR VETERAN FAMILIES LIVING WITH A PTSI

Even though it can be hard to talk about PTSIs, open communication can help you understand each other and move forward as a Family. We've put together a list of tips shared by Veteran parents and Families about what helps them communicate.

Practise active listening

Pay attention to what the other person is saying and repeat what you have heard back to them to ensure you have understood. If you are not sure if the person you're speaking with is looking for a supportive ear or for problem-solving, ask! Some people want and need to have their emotional needs tended to before they are in the right state to come up with solutions.

Work together as a team to find a solution

Remind yourself that your partner is not the problem and that you can have a more productive conversation by working together to identify the core issues, their impacts on the Family and positive ways forward.

Only bring up what is relevant in the moment

The purpose of the conversation should be on finding new ways forward together, not revisiting past hurts. While discussing the impact of different situations can be important, sometimes those details are best left for another conversation, especially if one person is experiencing symptoms or triggers in the moment.

Take breaks

Conversations about needs or conflict can be difficult for many people. They can bring up old wounds or memories from childhood. If you notice this happening for you or your partner, try to take a break from the conversation. Sometimes it's best to go for a walk or meditate for 20 minutes before resuming the conversation so that you can be in a better frame of mind to listen, understand, share and problem-solve together.

Set boundaries

A boundary is a way to define what you are comfortable with and where the safe zone is, as well as what behaviour you will accept from others. It's okay to have boundaries. In fact, setting and enforcing your boundaries can be an important part of maintaining your well-being. For example, *"I feel uncomfortable when you swear while we're on the phone. If you do that, I will hang up."*

Acknowledge and appreciate what's going well

It can be hard to only hear about what needs to change. Taking a moment to share a "thank you" or to acknowledge what's going well or improving can help the other person feel that their efforts are worthwhile. Don't take for granted that the other person knows how you're feeling and make time to celebrate the successes.

When things go wrong: Rupture and repair

Despite our best efforts to communicate well, sometimes things go wrong. Even though it wasn't our intention, we may say or do things that hurt others and negatively affect our relationships. This can lead to feeling misunderstood and disconnected from one another.

- **Ruptures in a relationship** can happen after a disagreement, an argument, yelling or cursing at one another, having different approaches to a parenting scenario, or not being heard, listened to or seen.[6] Ruptures exist on a spectrum and can be small or big. They can happen in all relationships.
- **Repair** is a deliberate, intentional practice to mend the relationship and connection after a rupture. The concept comes from psychotherapy[7] and often refers to the relationship between a therapist and their client, though it can be applied to other types of relationships.

Anyone can learn how to repair a relationship. Practising repairing a connection after a rupture can strengthen relationships, help us feel closer to one another and grow as individuals . It can also be helpful for parents to model repairing a relationship for their children, so that those children can develop repair skills to use in their own lives.

There is no single formula for how to repair a rupture in a connection — it's a flexible approach that can be adapted to each relationship or experience, whether it's between adults or a parent and child. The following is an example of a repair process.

1 Establish safety.

Before the conversation, engage in activities that help calm your body and regulate your nervous system. Ruptures in a relationship can feel like a danger or threat so it's important to take time to soothe ourselves and find ways to feel safe again. It's okay to feel vulnerable during honest conversations. However, feeling like you need to fight or run away or avoid a discussion are signs that you need more time to feel safe. Taking 30 minutes to a day to ground yourself can help you get in the right headspace.

Finding the right balance:

- Keep in mind that ruptures can feel bigger or hurt more if the repair isn't done in a timely manner. At the same time, however, rushing through or trying to talk before we feel safe can make it harder to repair a relationship.
- You may need to find the right balance between one person's need for space and the other person's need for connection. Let the other person know how much time you need before you're ready to talk, and stay open to what they need to feel safe too.

2 Communicate your intentions and goals.

When you're both ready, invite the other person to have a conversation with you about the rupture and talk about your intent to work together to repair your relationship. Use communication that is honest and helps you connect.

Remember: It is okay to pause or take breaks during the conversation to re-establish safety within yourself and with each other. You can let the other person know that you need a few moments to yourself or catch your breath before you carry on.

3 Acknowledge the rupture.

This is an opportunity to apologize, express regret or take responsibility for the rupture. Be accountable for your words, choices and actions. Being kind to yourself and the other person can be helpful in this step, especially if it feels risky to acknowledge the rupture because you're worried about losing the connection with a person you care about. In fact, taking accountability and being vulnerable can often strengthen our connections with others.

4 Explore the experience.

Listen and lead with curiosity and compassion in your efforts to understand each other, what led to the rupture and how it impacts each of you. This is a time to learn more about the person you care about. Repair can happen when each person is humble and open with the other instead of trying to defend or argue their viewpoint.

5 Co-create the repair.

Ask what is needed to heal, rebuild trust and reconnect. Remaining curious and open to what each person needs can help everyone feel heard and understood. Demonstrate empathy and accountability when following through on actions to repair the relationship.

6 Reconnect with each other.

Engage in activities that you enjoy together and that help you feel connected in your relationship. Keep in mind that repair and reconnection are often not one-time actions and it can take time and consistent effort to re-establish trust and connection.

Considerations for repairing ruptures with children and youth

- You can help to establish safety with children before repairing conversations through connection (e.g. spending time together or asking about their interests), nurturing (e.g. giving hugs or offering a snack), play (e.g. doing a fun activity together) and encouragement (e.g. telling them to keep trying or that you're proud of them).[6]

- Take note of your child's reactions and behaviour during ruptures and repairs to understand how they might be feeling. Are they shutting down or avoiding the conversation? They may need some time alone. Are they fighting back or yelling? They may feel frustrated and unheard. Use these behaviours as cues to adjust your approach. Focus on soothing and connecting with your child while reassuring them that it will be okay.

- Don't take for granted that your children know you love them, care about them and want the best for them — tell them. Hearing it can make a difference.

- You have the opportunity to model many positive behaviours and perspectives to your children through the repair process. This can include self-awareness and accountability, kindness to others and ourselves, not holding grudges, accepting that everyone makes mistakes, and apologizing. Children and youth learn from listening to and watching the adults around them — your approach to repairing relationships will teach your children what to do in their own relationships and what they should accept from others.

Check out our other resource, ***Parenting with a PTSI: A guide for conversations with children in Veteran Families*** for more conversation tips and examples: **atlasveterans.ca/parenting-with-ptsi-conversation-guide**

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