

ThePost-Traumatic Gazette No. 16

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PTSD and Holidays

The text of what I wrote last year, slightly revised, plus new ideas

Most people do not realize that people with PTSD have anniversary reactions. Holidays may also be anniversaries of trauma and bring up a lot of pain. This is one of the most distressing forms of reexperiencing for survivors and their families.

If the survivor doesn't recognize that this is one of the symptoms of PTSD, he or she may feel like Scrooge instead of like a normal human being who went through hell at that time of the year.

If the family doesn't understand that this is a PTSD anniversary reaction, they may be very angry at the survivor. "What is wrong with you?" is a heart-rending, humiliating question when the survivor doesn't know why s/he reacts like this.

If your veteran spent a particularly horrible Christmas seeing villagers lose all they had, seeing friends die, seeing the fat cats in the rear partying while the troops were suffering, he may have a hard time with Christmas. If your abusive father tore up the Christmas tree every year, if your uncle molested you at the family get together when you were eight, if you got mugged while out Christmas shopping, or date raped after an office party, or if your violent family pretended nothing was wrong during the holidays, these upcoming holidays may be a hard time for you. This is a normal reaction.

Holidays are also a really stressful time for many trauma survivors because they seem to reinforce the outsidersness of being a survivor of trauma. Everyone else seems so happy while your guts are twisted into

knots as you think about past events. For veterans and other survivors, this pain can be compounded by grief for lost friends and their families who now face the holidays without those loved ones who didn't survive. Guilt may also rear its painful head. Why did I survive?

The financial difficulties many trauma survivors experience are highlighted by the commercialization of the holidays. There are a lot of pressures to conform.

One of my first healthy actions in my marriage was to decide that Bob didn't have to celebrate Christmas after he came back from Vietnam. I loved it so I should celebrate it and let him be him. I have no idea where that idea came from but it saved me a lot of fights. Today I look back on it as a miracle, accepting Bob as he was, and detaching in a healthy way.

I think this is an important point for all trauma survivors and their families: Let the people who love the holiday celebrate it, and the people for whom it brings pain don't have to. This may cause problems with the extended family or the kids, but treating someone with respect is one healing way to frame it: "We have to respect other people's feelings and limits," can be a healthy way to put it.

We can also create our own ways of celebrating the holidays. We don't have to conform to a rigid commercial stereotype of piles of expensive gifts and big gatherings. As a matter of fact one thing that trauma can bring you face to face with is the value of people as opposed to things. We're starting a tradition in our crowd this year (a number of whom are trauma survivors and veterans) of homemade, recycled, or under \$5 gifts. Ingenuity and fun!

Many survivors are not comfortable in crowds or at parties, but a quiet meaningful celebration, say singing carols in the living room with just the tree lights on, may be something they can participate in. They may not want to trim the tree, but going out to cut it down or pick it out may be okay. I am mentioning Christmas traditions here because that is what I grew up with, but I'm sure that Hanukkah and Kwanzaa celebrations can be as low keyed and spiritual as the survivor needs them to be.

Survivors may need to create new rituals to help in their healing. For instance a veteran who lost friends in combat on Christmas may want to feed the homeless (many of whom are combat veterans) instead of

participating in a big family dinner with people who may not appreciate his service or think he should be over it. He may need to go to a special place and tell his lost buddies how much he misses them and wishes they had lived. Someone else may want to help provide Christmas presents for children of poor families or for other survivors of trauma. The range of possibilities is limited only by the imagination.

If all you want to do is stay drunk or stoned through the holidays, it might be good to find help instead. No one wants to be providing traumatic memories for the next generation. What you do while drunk or stoned can be pretty unpleasant for others, and especially painful for family members of both the spouse variety and the small fry variety. 12 step meetings happen even on holidays like Christmas and New Year's. I'm going to be at my ACOA meeting Christmas Eve. Sobriety is better than big presents. Harder, too.

Crass commercialization and shop till you drop take the fun out of the holiday for me. So does having religion shoved down my throat, but I find that I can celebrate the birth of a child who represents all children to me and use it as an opportunity for me to do good in the world. Perhaps you and your family can do the same.

**Let the people
who love the holiday celebrate it,
and the people for whom it brings pain don't have to.**

Holiday Helps: Asking for input and creating family traditions:

As I mentioned before, when Jack was a kid, he and I had our own Christmas without making Bob participate. This is called politeness although my principal reason was selfishness, wanting my kind of Christmas. Selfishness created a healthy boundary in that case.

Something I didn't think of at the time was asking for input, which is also polite. *Rituals For Our Times*, by Evan Imber-Black and Janine Roberts has a wonderful chapter on holidays and a whole section called "Making

Meaningful Rituals.” Among other things, they suggest that planning, discussing and getting input from family members can prevent disappointments. Planning small changes in existing family traditions instead of trying to change everything at once is also easier.

Sometimes family traditions are out of balance and only please one side of the family or one spouse or whatever. To fix this, ask what the other person would like to do for the holidays. Say something like: “Maybe we could figure out some new things we could do that we would all like and could do together. Then the kids and I could do the stuff we like without pushing you to be involved.”

Your spouse may never have thought about what he or she would like to do. I suggest not expecting an answer right away—maybe not even till next year. Just let him or her know you are interested in discussing it and open to change. People resist doing things they haven’t been involved in. Planning or contributing to an event can give them a sense of being valued and having some control.

One final point, without them being aware of it, some traditional activities may clash with issues of safety for survivors. For instance, if Vince Veteran never puts up the Christmas lights despite endless nagging, perhaps it is because in Vietnam the night belonged to Charlie. By lighting up the house at night, he is attracting attention to his nearest and dearest, the kind of attention that could get you killed in Vietnam. Bringing this to consciousness—the need to keep the family safe—may help him get such a natural need met in a more appropriate way like buying new tires for the car or better locks for the doors. Examining your traditions with that in mind can be rewarding.

Let go of outdated traditions or modify them to suit today. With our without the help of your survivor, you can sit down with whoever else in the family wants to celebrate. Have each person list what is fun for him or her. Do the things everyone likes doing. Let go of what has become a burden or what you think others *should* do or you *should* do. (Don’t *should* on yourself.) You can always go back to doing something if you miss it! Example: I like filling stockings for everyone and I thought they should fill mine. Now I get my own stocking stuffers. It is a lot of fun getting a stocking full of stuff I really like instead of an empty one full of hard feelings.

I've also dropped creamed onions, cornbread dressing and mince pie!

Discussing what the family might like to do can be empowering for your children because it gives them a chance to move on to more age appropriate activities as they grow up. This may be hard for the parents, but I suggest that you can hang your own stockings or have your own quiet holiday dinner.

Flexible people don't get bent out of shape
—quoted in an Al-Anon story

Some new family traditions you might try:

Looking up at the stars can be a beautiful experience of the glory of nature. According to December's Discover magazine, this December the sky is going to be swarming with planets at twilight. "Every bright 'star' to the left of the sunset is a planet...This is a show that airs before prime time, so observe early. After 9 PM only Saturn remains... This year the natural holiday lights are on display for even the youngest of Earth's appreciative sky watchers." (1997).

Get out of the house: Making snow angels is one of my favorite pastimes. There is nothing that helps me recreate the feeling of being a happy kid again like falling over backwards into the snow and waving my arms and legs. Too bad it never snows in Florida! Snowmen, snowball fights (no ice balls, please), snow forts, snowy walks, cross country skiing, sledding, ice skating all can be family fun activities. In the south, walks in the woods, canoeing, kayaking, fishing, bicycle rides are still options.

Decorating with natural materials is another thing I like to do. Grapevine wreaths with gold or silver spray painted pinecones, magnolia cones, acorns, berries and any weird seed pods I can find give me a sense of satisfaction no store bought wreath ever brought. Look around and be inventive. I also have a wreath made of rusty barbwire which my friend Marci gave me. As a trauma survivor, she feels a little Scroogey at Christmas. I like it!

Recycled and home made decorations (and gifts) bring family members together, minimize the wastage of natural resources, and increase our own resourcefulness and independence in a healthy creative way. For some of us it is important not to contribute to corporate profits. Paper

chains and pomanders (oranges covered with cloves) are great home made decorations. Buying cloves in bulk at an oriental grocery store or a health food store makes pomanders affordable. They smell great!

Doing stuff for others. One veteran I know has been feeding the homeless for the last nine years on holidays.

I buy books to contribute to the local newspaper's Christmas book giving program for disadvantaged kids. This is a living amends to a poor little girl to whom Jack wanted to give one of his books when he was 5. I wouldn't let him.

Battered women's shelters always need stuff as do homeless shelters, nursing homes, hospitals and churches.

You can adopt a family if you are well off, or contribute a few cans of food or a toy if you are not. Whatever you give will benefit you as well as those you help. Altruistic people actually are healthier than those who are not!

You can do any of these as a memorial to someone who was lost or abused.

Doing stuff for yourself: Provide yourself with something you didn't get that you needed. Maybe this is a grown woman buying her inner child a Barbie doll, maybe it is a veteran presenting himself with a certificate of thanks for his service. Look inside. People who love you would like to do this for you, too. Let them know if they can help somehow.

Ask people what you could get them within your price range. Tell people what you want. Talking about presents is hard for some of us. I thought I should be able to find the perfect present with no input. Now I ask. I used to expect Bob to know what I liked and wanted. Now I give him guidelines.

Our crowd is having a homemade, recycled or under \$5.00 Christmas again. We gave each other some really funny presents last year. If someone has given you something expensive you hated, this year you can recycle it to someone who might like it. I get wonderful containers at garage sales and fill them with cookies or rum balls or spiced pecans: homemade and recycled!

Talk to each other: Go for the quiet evening at home together. Many of us never sit down and talk because we are so swept away in the demands of daily living. Make a date and simply talk. What about? About what the holidays and the family mean to you.

Accept the fact that kids are naturally self-centered and needy but can develop great kindness. A parents job is not to suppress these natural characteristics, but to encourage awareness of others and empathy. People used to think small children were little demons, but they are actually very kind and willing to give of themselves and help others. One great family tradition is to tell them that some little kids need toys and help them weed out ones they want to give away.

Give each child something that will give him or her a feeling of specialness. It needn't be expensive. Magic markers and a pad of paper gave Jack many wonderful hours of fun. I still treasure his creations. 🍷

There are other holidays besides the midwinter ones. Trauma survivors may not love Thanksgiving, Easter, Veterans Day, Memorial Day, or the Fourth of July, for reasons similar to those for Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Years. Their dead friends and their families are in their thoughts if they are veterans or first responders. Some horrible firefight, ambush, fire or crime fills their minds to the exclusion of enjoyment. All the suggestions in the first part of the article apply. Ask how to celebrate, and if the trauma survivor can't, and the rest of the family wants to, have your own celebrations without him or her. Further thoughts on this are in issue #22, Can't you just be normal for one day?

APOLOGY

The last issue was really late for a number of reasons. I gave several talks in Fairmont MN in conjunction with the moving Wall being there, attended a spiritual retreat for combat veterans and their spouses put on by the National Conference of Viet Nam Veteran Ministers, spoke at the reunion of graduates of the Transcend Program at the Brecksville OH VA, and spoke at a meeting of the Vietnam Veterans in Canada in Vancouver. (I am willing to speak anywhere, anytime for \$500/day plus expenses.)

During this time, Bob got sick with a mysterious weakness which turned out to be post-polio syndrome. He is now up and around, recovering, but he spent the last two months in bed writing on his laptop. It was fun to get to fuss over him. In past years this would have been an opportunity to try to control him and play the

martyr, but this year it was an opportunity to show him how much he means to me and how glad I am to have him around. However, I really had trouble sitting down, writing, editing, and mailing out the newsletter. I apologize to all of you. This is still a one-woman business, and the one woman was overwhelmed.

It wasn't till the doctor was examining Bob's legs, and I saw how weak they were, that I was able to feel how scared I was. I can see how much I have grown and changed. This would have been a catastrophe to me at one time. Today it helped me see how precious Bob is, how precious life is, and how important it is for me to live one day at a time.

P.S. Bob says breakfast in bed is the best thing for his PTSD —Patience
By the way, Bob got stronger so it was not post-polio, but Epstein Barr and I got it too.

More When Someone You Love Is Starting to Feel

Whenever one person starts to change, even long awaited positive changes, the balance in the relationship changes. “Will s/he still love me if s/he changes?” may not be a conscious fear during this disturbing time, but fears of abandonment are a possibility. All change is frightening on some level even though it can also be exhilarating, joyous, freeing, and even addictive.

Someone we love having and expressing feelings can be an extremely uncomfortable experience for most of us. You may have picked this person because he or she was numb which you saw as strong. You may have misidentified numbness as the ability to handle feelings. You may also have a hard time being around pain in other people and may want to fix it quickly. You may even have a hard time watching people be “too” happy and want to damp it down. That's the way I was.

I used to say, “Oh, you shouldn't feel that way!” followed by some cheerleading or criticizing whenever Bob expressed a bad feeling. Such words were not “nice” but a selfish attempt on my part to control what he was feeling so I could feel comfortable and look good. (“Oh, she's so

sweet!”) I never noticed this and would have hotly denied it if anyone had pointed it out. When I read about discounting feelings, which is what this is called, I felt terrible.

Not only did I correct and discount Bob’s feelings, but then I complained that he wasn’t good at sharing his feelings. How could he be since I met every feeling with a correction? Eventually I saw that I really didn’t want Bob to feel fear or sadness or discouragement. When I wanted him to be more in touch with his feelings, I wanted him to get in touch with love (for me), admiration (for me), desire (for me), generosity (to me), happiness (with me), needing me, being grateful to me. When I look back on it I have to laugh. Bad feelings, except for missing me, were simply not part of my plan for him (or for me).

When he got in touch with fear or sadness or discouragement, I got mad. I didn’t realize that it was anger covering up my fear that he couldn’t take care of me if he was afraid or sad or discouraged. I felt it as impatience: I would think ‘let me help him feel better.’ “Look at it this way,” I would say. My intentions were always to make him feel better, but it wasn’t effective.

It took some years after I got into recovery for him to begin to feel it was safe to say what he felt.

You may have expectations of how people should feel, how long it should take to recover, and how that recovery process should go. Identifying these expectations will help you evaluate their realism. No one can know how someone should feel or how long it will take someone to heal.

You may be afraid that if this person is sad or angry it will last forever. “This too shall pass,” is a good slogan. If you feel angry at the expression of some feeling, that is evidence of your own fear and of the way such feelings were handled in your childhood home. It doesn’t mean that the other person is wrong to feel that way. It means you have work to do on yourself.

Awareness of your fears is important. Unconscious fear can lead to sabotage. There is nothing sadder than a struggling trauma survivor whose partner says “Why aren’t you any fun anymore?” or “When are you going to get over this?” or “That therapy is making you worse. You shouldn’t go.” Most trauma survivors have to feel painful feelings which they have stuffed

for years in order to recover. To let them heal we have to let them be in pain. Unsurprisingly, many partners of trauma survivors are numb. Survivors often have to deal with the un-numbing process in a partner, too. We have to feel our pain.

It takes patience, practice and effort to sit and let someone else be in pain. Sitting and listening to someone else's painful feelings is even harder. Here are some suggestions.

This is the other person's feeling. It is a good time to practice having a boundary. You can always visualize a wall or a glass globe if nothing else works.

"This too shall pass," is a good slogan if you feel distressed by the other person's feeling. It is not permanent. Talking about it or feeling it will not engrave it in stone.

Detachment with love means that you listen with compassion and interest but you don't try to fix it or give advice. There are 22 readings on detachment in the Al-Anon One Day At A Time. I used to read them all every day. Substitute PTSD for the word alcohol and it will usually work. Reading 22 was pretty silly but I wanted to speed up my recovery. Pretty funny!

Intensity is to be expected. When a feeling like sadness or anger first comes back, it often erupts because it has been buried for a long time. Over the course of time it will become less intense. Eventually good and bad feelings will flow naturally instead of erupting. Don't take the eruptions personally. That's a hard suggestion to follow! Say, *"This is not personal."* However, we are all human and if something is too much for you, it is important to be able to say "this is too much."

Bodily comforts: If your loved one seems to be drowning in pain, hold his or her hand for a while. Scratch his back. Rub her feet. Sit in the sun with him, or draw her a warm bubble bath.

You need support. I am not a group person, but I found I could not let Bob be where he was or feel what he felt without being in a 12 step group and working the steps on my issues. Before I did that, the words, "Don't be sad," would march out of my mouth against my will.

If you have been giving and giving you may be asking when do I get to get? I found it did me a lot of good to go to other people to get some of the love and attention I wanted from Bob. No one person, especially one with PTSD, can meet all your needs despite the dysfunctional fairy tales we all grew up with about Prince Charming and living happily ever after. 12

step groups and my friends were readily available sources of love and attention.

Find some kind of support for yourself. Go to therapy or Al-Anon or some fitting 12 step program. I publish a Format for a 12 Step Group for Veterans, Families, and Friends which is used by several groups of wives also one for a 12 Step Group for Trauma Survivors, Families and Friends.

Things not to say.

Get over it.

No excuses.

You'll be all right.

Don't be sad/mad/guilty/ashamed/nervous/unhappy or whatever.

Cheer up.

Things to say.

That must have really hurt.

That is a painful emotion.

I am sorry you had to go through such horrible experiences.

You didn't deserve to be hurt.

I am glad you are alive.

Thanks and welcome home (to veterans).

You can probably add to both of these lists.

Listening:

Should you listen? Acceptance, respect and support are very important to trauma survivors and their partners. Listening involves all three.

Don't waste your time listening when someone is drunk and or on drugs. The kind of moaning and sobbing that can happen when someone is high is not healing or helpful because alcohol and drugs numb feelings. The person may not even remember the next day. A recovering rescuer listening to a survivor or vice versa is working hard. His or her time should not be wasted on drugged or drunken discussions.

Can you listen.? You are not a shrink. No shrink does therapy with family members. If you have been traumatized yourself, listening to traumatic incidents may not be wise. You need to respect your own safety needs enough to be able to say this is too much for me right now. You do have

the right to say no, just as your partner has the same right. Safety first! No triggers!

Talk about talking about whatever you both want to talk about. Make a plan with your partner of what you will do if one of you gets overwhelmed. This may happen even if you have never been traumatized or you are as tough as nails. Discuss it before hand and look on each attempt as practice to be talked over afterwards to see how it worked for each of you. Discuss beforehand the fact that feelings pass, so that if you get upset, it will pass. Have a word or signal you can use to stop the discussion with no hard feelings. If one of you has to use it, and there are hard feelings, take a break and then talk about them using the word I.

Ask what kind of responses would help. Do you want feedback? Is it okay to say “That must have hurt?” or “I hate your parents/this country/the Marines?” Would you want cheering up at some point? If I don’t understand can I ask questions? If you stop, do you want questions to draw you out or would that seem like an interrogation?

What can you listen to? You may want to discuss limits on subject, tone and volume of voice, length of listening, etc. Taking care of yourself by setting limits is good practice and a good example for each other. You don’t have to listen to gory details or angry diatribes. On the other hand, there is no reason not to if you can and it isn’t overwhelming. Have an agreed upon signal so you can both call a halt without hard feelings.

What can you listen for? Tone of voice; emotions you can see or hear that the other person (trained in numbness) may not be aware of; implications of what is said (like I did it so I am no good); inconsistencies in the story which may reveal more—or a different perspective—about what happened; presuppositions in what is said (like something is wrong with me for being affected); ideas that are so much a part of the partner’s thinking that they are not identified or clearly stated. You may notice thoughts obscuring feelings. Denial.

If you notice any of these, it would be wise to have previously talked about whether or not you are going to mention them. Your insights may feel like criticism or attacks to the other person. If the two of you decide such insights will be shared, think carefully about how you might phrase any insights you get.

Even if you have decided not to share such insights, they can still be very valuable to you. This hurts him. He was afraid. He loved his friend. Her mother hurt her as much as her father. She has good reason not to trust. Realizations like that bring up powerful feelings of compassion.

How to listen? Active Listening is a technique discussed in *Parent Effectiveness Training* by Thomas Gordon and in *Messages* by Matthew McKay, Martha Davis and Patrick Fanning. When you actively listen, paraphrasing back what the person says, he or she can correct you if you hear something different than what was meant. It makes for clearer communication. Open ended questions, ones that can't be answered with yes or no, also promote communication.

If you or your trauma survivor wants to sit in a corner and be sad, that's okay. Kindness means letting people be where they are. Acceptance heals. When someone you love is starting to feel, it is not an easy time, but the results will be worth it. Get help, find support, and work on yourself. We all need space to grow.