

THE ARTERBURN WELLNESS SERIES

UNDERSTANDING AND LOVING A PERSON WITH

POSTTRAUMATIC
STRESS
DISORDER

*Biblical and Practical Wisdom
to Build Empathy, Preserve Boundaries,
and Show Compassion*

**STEPHEN ARTERBURN M.Ed.
AND BECKY JOHNSON**

UNDERSTANDING AND LOVING A PERSON WITH

POST-TRAUMATIC
STRESS
DISORDER

*Biblical and Practical Wisdom
to Build Empathy, Preserve Boundaries,
and Show Compassion*

**STEPHEN ARTERBURN, M.Ed.
AND BECKY JOHNSON**

DAVID C COOK™

transforming lives together

© 2018 Stephen Arterburn. Published by David C Cook. All rights reserved.

Contents

Introduction by Stephen Arterburn	vii
1. How Can I Help My Loved One with PTSD?	1
2. PTSD—Yes, It’s a Real Thing: Signs and Symptoms	12
3. Becoming a Compassionate Companion	33
4. Compassionate Self-Care	65
5. Withdrawing versus Connection: The Healing Balance	74
6. Trauma as Delayed Grief	84
7. The Healing Toolbox	97
8. Professional Therapies	109
9. Post-traumatic Growth	119
Suggested Resources	134
About New Life Ministries	141
About Stephen Arterburn	143
About Becky Johnson	145

CHAPTER ONE

How Can I Help My Loved One with PTSD?

Everyone has a right to have a future that is not dictated by the past.

Karen Saakvitne, *The Trauma-Informed Toolkit*

Ayden walked into the master bathroom where his wife of eight years was blow-drying her hair. But Bella didn't hear him come in, and when she turned and suddenly saw him standing near her, it startled her so badly that she jumped about six inches off the floor, dropped the blow-dryer, and began screaming.

"I'm so sorry!" Ayden said. "I tried to let you know I was coming into the room, but you couldn't see or hear me."

After the screaming subsided, Bella fell into Ayden's arms, trembling and weeping. It would take her most of the evening to calm herself and "come back into her right mind," as she called the process of reorienting herself to the reality of the present.

A few years earlier, Bella had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And Ayden was learning how to live with,

comfort, love, and encourage someone with a brain that had been deeply affected by past trauma.

“I try to be so careful about not accidentally startling my wife, who suffers from PTSD related to trauma from abuse in her past,” Ayden shared. “Bella’s PTSD was not from one major traumatic episode, as some PTSD survivors’ experience. Her brand of PTSD is complex, having resulted from decades of surviving a confusing, painful relationship. There were multilayered instances of abuse that happened without any consistent pattern she could nail down, so she could not figure out how to avoid it. She never knew when the abuser from her past would be kind or belittling, attentive or abandoning. It was intermittent and random. This left her with a nervous system set on high alert. Even after she was safe in a calm, loving marriage to me, the symptoms continued.”

In Bella’s case, the intermittent and uncontrollable nature of the abuse left her feeling particularly vulnerable and hypervigilant—her nervous system was stuck on high alert.

Why Doesn’t My Loved One Feel Safe?

Why Symptoms Now?

Some people find it hard to comprehend that PTSD symptoms are often at their worst when life is great again (or great for the first time). In fact, many people’s PTSD symptoms do not even materialize until they are safe, after all danger has passed. We have all heard of brave soldiers who muster adrenaline-stoked courage and stamina to survive the horrors of war in a foreign land but become hypervigilant and jumpy or emotionally paralyzed when home. Back stateside, a soldier is finally safe enough to experience

feelings that had to be ignored or tamped down in order to survive a battle in progress. Though the public often associates PTSD with shell-shocked war veterans, PTSD is much more widespread, and it is also often underdiagnosed. Anyone who has undergone any kind of trauma, whether sudden and severe (like a car accident or severe injury), long term and intermittent (like relational abuse or cancer that goes in and out of remission), or some combination thereof, can experience PTSD.

People who have been triggered into reliving a negative memory or sensation from that memory often report feeling completely out of control. “PTSD is not something that my wife can control intellectually. Her brain and body are simply reacting—on autopilot—to a trigger, an incident that brings old trauma memories to the surface,” Ayden explains.

I can attest to the truth of Bella’s story because I also suffer from PTSD. And yes, it is a real thing—not an excuse, not a “fad diagnosis,” not a figment of the imagination. Trauma changes us, and trauma that had to be “put on hold” in order to survive a situation—without a safe place to process and let it go at the time—changes the brain in ways that neuroscientists can see in before-and-after brain scans. Your loved one can improve, but it may take a long time (depending on the type and severity and length of the trauma endured), and his or her brain may always be set on a higher alert status than before the trauma experience.

However, I am here to offer you some real, tangible help, hope, and encouragement. Though I am occasionally triggered and have a PTSD episode, I have discovered several methods that calm my overanxious brain. I now startle less easily and don’t jump as high

or yell as loudly when someone surprises me. As an aside, I have lost count of how many store clerks I have accidentally scared when they came up to me and asked, “May I help you?” Startled, I would jump and scream, and then they would jump and scream. Fun times in the grocery store aisles!

I have learned to access the logical part of my brain (prefrontal cortex) and am less controlled by the hypervigilant, fearful parts (the hippocampus, basal ganglia, and amygdala) when something triggers a painful memory or feeling. I don’t react as badly, and I recover much more quickly. If I am practicing good self-care, I find it much easier to roll with the occasional PTSD punches. And I owe much of my progress to the persistent, patient, loving heart of my current husband. In addition, my work as a researcher and writer for therapists and doctors has given me an inside perspective into practical ways to help myself (ones that really work!) and others.

The Blessing of a Reparative Partner

I am so thankful for my good husband, who has stayed right by my side, determined to give me new memories of safety, faithfulness, love, and responsiveness to take the place of those memories involving danger, betrayal, contempt, and abandonment from a past dysfunctional marriage. He has given me the gift of what are sometimes called “reparative moments”—healing responses—that pour over old emotional wounds like a soothing balm.

In this book, I want to share how you too can be part of your loved one’s healing journey and how you can support his or her efforts to recover his or her life after trauma. This is a subject

near and dear to my heart, and I am thankful for the opportunity to share what I have learned about what PTSD is, how it happens, how it changes the brain, and how to heal from its effects. I'll also share what family members and friends can do to support a loved one's journey toward emotional healing.

In years past, before I experienced some of the symptoms of PTSD for myself, I am not sure I would have believed someone else describing the whole odd phenomenon to me. But now I know, not only from my personal experience but also from studying what happens to human bodies after trauma, that PTSD is a very real thing.

Some counselors believe that PTSD is, in its most simplified form, grief that got stopped, stalled, or shelved in order to handle a present crisis. Counselors, family, and friends can help by understanding that their loved one with PTSD has suffered a great loss, or perhaps multiple losses, and never got to talk through what happened sufficiently (in the presence of a compassionate listener) or cry the tears that got stopped up and stored away. You can't do her healing for her, but you can support her efforts. And I will show you how to do so in coming chapters.

I will also help you take care of yourself so that you don't get washed away in the tide of your loved one's PTSD triggers. Researchers have shown that those who live with a person with severe PTSD also show signs of increased anxiety. The same is true for people who live with someone who is in a major depression (which can go along with PTSD); they may find themselves spiraling into depressive feelings as well. Most spouses of those with PTSD end up walking on eggshells to some degree, never knowing

when their mates will be triggered and blow up or shut down. The good news is, you'll discover that almost everything I suggest to help calm your beloved PTSD survivor will also help you to remain calm. This book is a twofer: use the ideas within for yourself even as you share them with your mate.

What You Can and Can't Do to Help

The purpose of this book is not for you or your loved one to go back in time and wallow around in painful memories. In fact, it can be risky for anyone who is not a professional to delve deeply into trauma memories with someone who has PTSD. You can inadvertently trigger emotions too strong for the average layperson to deal with—an experience that can feel a bit like opening Pandora's box. A surgeon never begins open-heart surgery without a clear plan to monitor the process, stitch the patient back up, and offer pain-reducing therapies during the recovery phase. Someone who has specialized training in PTSD knows how to listen to trauma memories compassionately while also monitoring and treating his or her client for undue stress during verbal recall exercises. If the trauma was severe and is very hard for your loved one to talk about, it is best to let a professional be the one to hear the details of the memories so your loved one can process them at a safe and soothing pace.

However, your loved one may want to share some past trauma memory with you at some point. If so, I will give you specific ways to listen to that memory, monitor his or her reactions, and respond in wise and healing ways.

There's much you can do to support your loved one, whether he is in therapy for his issues right now or he isn't ready for or doesn't want to get professional help. I can help you understand some of the changes that may have occurred in your loved one's brain during past trauma and how to respond in ways that are helpful instead of hurtful, healing instead of potentially demeaning or even damaging. We are all more compassionate and patient when we understand the story behind others' behavior. When someone you love experiences a PTSD trigger, her reaction can be puzzling, concerning, and in extreme instances, even frightening. But when you (1) understand what is happening inside her mind and body when triggered and (2) have a variety of concrete practical ideas to try, along with soothing phrases to say and activities to do with your loved one, you won't feel quite as helpless or hopeless.

Practical emotional tools empower us all.

In short, I am here to coach and companion you, as you companion your loved one through the journey of healing from PTSD. I believe I can help you because I know how my husband and other counselors have helped me. Once again, you can't "fix" another person; it is his job to prioritize healing his own life. But you can let her know that you are with her for the long haul as she works on her own emotional health. And you can be a part of a reparative moment when something you say or do touches a person's heart and pours the balm of love and acceptance over a painful memory or deep wound.

Here is one example of just such a moment. In a former marriage, when I would recognize a certain demeaning tone in my

ex-husband's voice, it would signal, "A bad experience is about to happen! Danger! Danger!" I learned to react to this tone of voice in one of three ways, which I refer to now as the three *F*s: (1) flight (pack my bags to leave), (2) fight (brace to defend myself or verbally attack him), or (3) freeze (go into a detached state of numbness, retreating to a faraway place of self-protection). In my current marriage to a mature, emotionally healthy man—especially in the first few months and years—I would get triggered by any slightly negative tone (or even something as small as a sigh of disappointment), and rather than pausing to talk things out with Greg, I would go into autopilot and respond with one of the three *F*s.

Then one day, Greg said to me, very thoughtfully and tenderly, "Becky, when you feel hurt or angry or afraid, you don't have to leave; I am not going anywhere. You never need to raise your voice; I am always going to listen. And you don't have to freeze or tense up or withdraw; I'll give you any space you need, and I am here to hold you when you are ready for a warm embrace."

I still melt every time I remember those words in that poignant moment in our first year of marriage.

For years now, I have shared Greg's compassionate, healing words with many young couples over kitchen-table conversations when they have come to us for help in their marriages. It never fails to bring a tear to the woman's eyes and to show young husbands how to, as Greg calls it, "shepherd a wounded woman's heart."

Somehow Greg knew exactly the right thing to say to me, and that night I eventually put down my suitcase, then curled up in his loving arms and wept pent-up tears from long-ago years, tears I'd never felt safe to shed before. These tears came and went,

unbidden, for a couple of days. Even when I was not consciously thinking about trauma memories—even when I was just washing dishes or folding laundry—my entire body was at work releasing pain from a former life. Bessel van der Kolk wrote a classic book on PTSD, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Treatment of Trauma*, in which he presents what researchers have learned about PTSD—namely, that it is much more than an affliction of the mind. Every cell in our bodies remembers trauma, even trauma that we may not consciously recall. So in addition to talk therapy, therapies that engage the whole body—such as a healing massage, or even a long soak in a hot tub—can be very helpful. Healing involves brain work, soul work, and body work.

Over time, Greg's love, wise understanding, and healing embrace broke a decades-old dam of pain and allowed the hurt behind the barrier to flow. My marriage has offered many reparative experiences, overlaying profoundly meaningful and healing moments on top of painful ones. In time, the old hurtful scenes have begun to fade, like washed-out watercolors, as Greg continues to paint new and more vivid scenes wherein I am both loved and cherished. My ability to trust that he will show up and love me—and has eyes for me only, forever—grows moment by moment, day by day, month by month, year by year. I went from a nervous, insecure newlywed afraid he would change his mind about loving me or desire another woman and leave me to a wife who is confident and secure in her husband's steadfast love and rock-solid faithfulness. I have learned to trust a man again. It was no easy task. But my man has earned every drop of trust I have in him and our happy and healthy marriage.

What Greg did for me, you can do for someone you love who battles PTSD. You can't do it alone; he has to participate in the healing and seek out professional help. And you can't fix every single bad memory, as much as you would love to do just that. This is God's task—way beyond the scope of your job description. But you can be a compassionate companion to your loved one as she pilgrims from trauma to healing, however long that journey might take. At the core of someone who suffers from PTSD is a person who longs to know that he is not alone—that someone sees his pain, cares for his heart, and will stay the course until he finds his way out of the dark.

Author Note: First, because reading lots of details about specific traumas that others have suffered can trigger a PTSD episode in the reader, I will be pretty generic about types of traumas, focusing mostly on the feelings left in the wake of abuse or a traumatic incident and then on ways to comfort, soothe, and heal from the kinds of memories that interfere with the joy of the present.

Second, because every individual experiences PTSD in a unique way, some ideas in this book will work beautifully for you and your loved one, while others ... not so much. Most people find that healing comes from a variety of sources as they put together their own plate of helpful resources. Use this book like a menu and try what sounds most appealing. Keep what is helpful and toss what isn't. Go back and try one or two other ideas when you get stuck.

Finally, this book may contain ideas that will help a parent who has a child suffering from some form of trauma or PTSD, but the category of children with trauma is beyond the scope of my focus and is a specialized area of its own. I will, however, list some resources for parents of traumatized children at the end of the book.