

Lesson 5

Part 2 of, How to make your character believable.

Relationships.... Yes, they are complicated!

A gazillion questions to be answered here for sure, so I'll toss out a few of them just to get our brains in the right mode. Then, instead of talking about how things might be complicated because of PTSD, I've got some examples you can read through, plus a dynamite link.

In order to understand a character's current difficulties, you must know what his relationships were like before PTSD.

Was he:

1. A loner?
2. A party guy?
3. Everyone's best buddy?
4. The kind of guy his siblings relied on?
5. Did he spend time helping his parents?
6. Helping his community?
7. The guy everyone could talk to?
8. A great listener?
9. A total jerk?

Questions to consider while establishing your character's issues and how they affect his/her relationships.

1. How does PTSD affect your character's relationships?
 - a. How does he function in various relationships?
 - b. Has he disconnected?
 - c. Has he lost his sense of reason?

2. What are his coping skills when it comes to dealing with other people?
 - a. Is he patient?
 - b. Does he shut down?
 - c. Will he become violent if pushed?
 - d. Do the people around him tiptoe?
 - i. Pretend everything is fine?
 - ii. Or push his buttons?

3. Does he have the word **hero** dogging him?
 - a. Does he feel guilty to be a survivor?
 - b. Does it make him want to scream out that he's not a hero?

4. Is he loath to disappoint his family?
 - a. Or his friends?

5. Has he changed from a party boy to a loner?

6. Is he using numbing as a way to cope with broken relationships?

Consider Isolation and how it happens

When someone becomes overwhelmed by their inner world, they often push away from loved ones. This can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The longer a person is unapproachable, the less likely any attempts will be made to approach, which creates even more isolation.

Other or New relationships left behind can be haunting

Soldiers working together through life and death situations, form soul-deep bonds. Together, they've witnessed the same atrocities. Felt the same feelings, and survived the same close calls. They've stood up for one another, either alone or as a brotherhood, through life and death events making what happens at home, away from the battle field, pale in comparison.

Soldiers can long for the camaraderie and sense of belonging they've left behind. They might mourn the loss of someone they'd only known for a matter of weeks in a way their family just doesn't understand. When people have stood back to back with someone while their life is threatened over and over again, a bond like no other can be formed.

This kind of relationship could be a problem due to jealousy, or just a lack of understanding on the part of a husband or wife who believe they should be the one and only.

Examples of relationships affected by PTSD

John never got along with his dad.

They butted heads over everything from his attitude, to the way he parked his car in the driveway.

Now it's even worse. John refuses to be in the same room with him. Why? Because if the old man didn't think he was good enough before, he sure as hell wouldn't think he was worth talking to now.

Rose and her husband had a good, loving relationship.

Sex was good, quiet times together with sweet music were great, and they loved nothing better than to pack up the tent, throw some food in the cooler, and head for the hills with their dog and a couple of back packs. They'd sit in the dark and listen to the crickets sing, watch the lights of planes and satellites slip between the stars, and just enjoy being together.

When Rose got back from her last tour, life was good. She was glad to be home, ready to pick up her life, get on with getting their new house set up. But after a few months, she didn't feel like making decisions anymore. Didn't care what color carpet went in the spare bedroom.

Little by little she became more disconnected. Now she's avoiding her husband half the time. Can't talk about nonsense stuff like they used to. Refuses to go camping. They have sex, but that's all it is. She doesn't feel passion anymore because she just doesn't feel.

Constant music freaks her out because she can't hear over it, and silence makes her skin crawl. She's always looking over her shoulder, always expecting something to go wrong.

Delia and Robert **didn't have a fairy tale relationship, but it was a solid one.**

They were never deployed at the same time, so there was always an adjustment time when one of them got home, but they shared an understanding of the process, gave space when it was needed, stayed close enough but not too close. They put work into their relationship, especially after a tour.

So Delia didn't understand what was wrong with him now. They'd both been state-side for two years. Sure there'd been bumps along the way, they were human, and no marriage was perfect. But in the last six months or so, she'd seen changes. Changes she didn't like.

He'd started spending more time away from the house. When they were both off the roster, he'd take off alone instead of hanging out with her. She let it go for a while, thinking it was just a stage they were going through. But then he started drinking more. Instead of a beer or two, he was getting drunk. And angry when she called him on it. She'd tried talking to him—always early in the day when he was stone cold sober. But he wouldn't talk. When she pleaded with him, he just marched out and slammed the door.

An hour later he was home, apologizing to her, making love to her, but she knew he wasn't all there. His mind wasn't engaged.

For weeks it went on that way, and then he stopped trying. Shut her out completely.

Michael's parents didn't talk about love, never said the words.

But from his earliest memories, he remembered them saying they were proud of him. That, was the one thing he could rely on. And he grew up working for their praise. Blue ribbons for races at school. Gold stickers and prizes in the classroom. Player of the year in baseball, all the badges and awards invented in Scouts. He knew his parents must love him because they always told him they were proud of him. He grew up believing that love and pride were the same thing.

But now it was different. They called him a war hero. After his discharge they let him move back into his old room where the trophies and ribbons still decorated walls and shelves. Told him he could stay there while he was getting his degree. Bragged to their friends that their war hero son was going to be the best doctor in the world.

What they didn't know, was that he'd started skipping classes. When he didn't arrive at the lecture theater early enough to get a seat at the back, he couldn't stay. Voices behind him, especially whispered voices, made his heart pound so hard he thought it would explode. By the time he bolted from the room, he'd be sweating and shaking, barely able to focus on his escape path.

He'd never be a doctor. Would never get a degree. He wasn't who they thought he was. He had nowhere to go. His parents wouldn't be proud of the coward he'd become.

Louise was named ambulance call-taker extraordinaire, eight months in a row.

They'd finally put a permanent plaque on the wall and deemed her a legend, ineligible for future votes. It had been funny at the time. She didn't need the accolades. It was better for morale if the others could be recognized now and again.

Her team looked to her for leadership. Respected her. She bent over backwards to help the people she thought of as her family, and the students she mentored were always very successful.

But that had been five years ago. Now when she passes the plaque in the hallway the pressure in her head begins to build. She doesn't want to go into the communications room. Her team is growing tired of her constant requests to work radio, not phones. New dispatchers needed radio time, but she won't give up her seat. Can't.

Knowing that next call might be the choking baby, or the stopped heart of a loved one, makes her hand shake as she reaches for the button when it lights up.

She can't deal with the people, their cries, the begging. She has to say on radio. She has seniority. Fuck the students. She earned her right to work dispatch and not have to take fucking calls. She was the best at juggling resources. She'd get the help there faster than anyone in the room. She didn't have to listen to the screaming.

Steve was always first on scene.

First on scene, and last to clock out. It's what he did. Who he was. He rescued the smart, the stupid, old, young, the deserving, and the bottom feeders. If somebody was in need, he was there.

But no one knew he had to polish off a fifth of vodka in order to sleep at night. It kept him from driving his fists through the walls in frustration. Bought him a couple hours of unconscious. Time when the screaming in his head stopped.

Now he sat in the rig, heart in his throat, staring through the windscreen as the other paramedics dealt with the people in the wreck. He'd tried to go, but just like last time, he couldn't seem to get a grip on the door handle. He was letting his buddies down. He was worthless.

Julie used to love hanging out with her girls.

They'd been together since grade 1 and stayed together through college, weddings, and babies. But now, she just couldn't stand them. Didn't care about soccer practice and skating awards. And her friends stopped talking now when she came into the room.

Julie's friends are worried about her. They see the disconnect, but don't know what's wrong. They don't know she's started having flashbacks to those days when her stepfather... She can't tell them because then they would know she's been lying for years. She can't tell them she never had the guts to speak up, to defend herself...

Ralph's family are very proud of him because he received an award for bravery.

He helped get six of his teammates out alive, against all odds. But Ralph knows the truth. He knows he was scared shitless and running for his life. He knows there were three guys left behind. He knows they were taking their last breaths, not viable, but that doesn't seem to matter. He left them behind. They died without him.

Three months later, Ralph's friends wonder why he hasn't been to the pool hall—their regular hangout—since he got back. They go to his house and pound on the door. Try to get him to come down for a game or two, but he won't. Says he's got stuff to do. Hell, what could be so important? Sure he got those awards and all, but hey, they'd been buds forever.

Ralph knows he's safe in the house. He's rigged the locks and the windows so he'll know if anyone tries to get in. And he only sleeps when it's light out. He knows the dark is when the enemy can slip in, slit throats, and take away lives. For two weeks after he'd been discharged he'd tried sleeping at night, but even with the pills they'd given him, the dreams would come. Even when he swam to the surface, woke up, he could hear the breathing, see the flash of a blade and reach for his own. In the dark. Ralph couldn't sleep at night anymore.

At least in the daytime, he could see when the nightmares drove him out of sleep. And in one glance he could see the door and window locks, know if they'd been breached.

Melissa can't relate to her friends anymore.

They get giggly and plan a night at the bar where the single ones hope they might find mister right, or mister good for now. They want to dance with strangers, get drunk, and show off.

They don't know she was raped. By her supervisor. A man twice her age. The man she'd have to go to if she wanted to report a rape. They'd all been in a bar and she'd only done one shot. But it had been drugged and when she started to stagger, he told the others to stay and he'd take her home.

She wants to scream at her friends when they talk about getting lucky. About doing shots, about all the things that seem so stupid and trivial to her now.

Her husband knows what happened. She wonders if he thinks about it when they make love. She does. She's pretty okay now, though. Except if he grabs her by the hips. Something about that just makes her go ice cold, inside and out. Why does he forget sometimes? Shouldn't that be important for him to remember?

She loves him. Doesn't know if she could live without him. But sometimes she just wants to be alone. Left alone. Except when she wakes up screaming. He holds her. And sometimes he cries too, which makes her angry because it rips her heart out.

I recommend you write a few paragraphs like the above examples at the end of your character studies, (whether as a plotter, or after the writing if you're a pantsier). You might even find you can write several options, with different directions for your character to grow.

By knowing your character to such depth, you'll be able to illustrate what he or she is going through in their relationships. The credibility of your story will be maintained by a sense of meaning and reality.

Homework:

1. Watch these videos about a film called "The War Comes Home." It was shown once, in theaters around the country, and I still can't find anywhere to currently view it. The good news is that the trailer is a great intro to give you a "feel" of things to include in your stories, and the second video is a fantastic interview with the journalist behind the film.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcT3PnN1Ct8&feature=youtu.be>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-sJapYq6a4>

2. Here's the Save a Warrior website filled with great information.

<http://www.saveawarrior.org/#what-is-saw>

3. Here is food for thought in another direction.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9DNWK6WfQw>