

## Lesson 6

### Coping Strategies, Treatments, and Cures... Part 1

Because I'm assuming you want happy endings for your characters, I've devoted two lessons to exploring a variety of ways for your characters to cope with, find treatment for, or possibly even be cured of, PTSD symptoms.

This is also a good time to address the controversial terms you'll encounter if you follow many of links I'll provide in Lesson 8 and in the final wrap-up.

Currently (and I say currently as who knows what it will be next) the proper label as listed in the DSM-V, is ***Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)***.

Within many branches of military, the preferred label is ***Post-traumatic Stress Injury (PTSI)***. The reality of what's happened to the soldiers, is more comfortably referred to as an injury as opposed to a mental disorder. That is, *a perfectly normal mind/brain/psyche has been damaged/injured by incidents/occurrences/experiences.*

Other programs have taken the distinction away entirely, and use the term, ***Post-traumatic Stress (PTS)***. It is worth noting here that programs run by other than licensed mental health professionals cannot legally make a psychiatric diagnosis and therefore dropping the DSM descriptor is a very appropriate/correct choice based on morals, ethics and legalities.

Personally, I think using the term **Post-traumatic Stress** is a brilliant choice on the part of *Save the Warrior*, no matter what their reasoning was. It suits their program, and incoming warriors are not discriminated against on the basis of a diagnosis, or lack thereof.

## Coping Strategies

The vast majority of strategies recommended for dealing with PTSD symptoms (and the triggers that set off the symptoms) lean in the direction of taking control back—which makes perfect sense since a feeling of helplessness appears to be at the root of the problem.

These are tactics for life change and resilience, for getting through all the days and nights, one day at a time.

### Educating family/friends/coworkers

- Loved ones are frequently frustrated, feel shut out, or confused when they don't know what the other person is going through. Whereas those who *know and understand* can be helpful or at least not a hindrance when someone is fighting their symptoms.

### Breathing Exercises

An example of one technique called, square breathing:

- Inhale to a count of five, hold to a count of five, exhale to a count of five, then, wait for a count of five.
- Inhale to the count of six, hold /count of six, exhale /count of six, then wait /count of six.
- Inhale to the count of seven, hold /count of seven, exhale /count of seven, then hold again /count of seven.
- ...and so on....
- By extending the count each time there will eventually be an easy pattern of long slow deep breathing.

### Relaxation techniques such as:

- Self-hypnosis
- One-by-one muscle relaxation
- Bio-feedback, etc.

### Expressive Writing/Journaling

- Writing down everything about experiences such as flashbacks and nightmares as soon after the fact as possible may help to purge, as opposed to keeping the incident alive on that endless loop in the mind (repetitive thinking).
- Daily journaling can bring a feeling of control
- Daily journaling can help a person recognize triggers or patterns
- Putting anger and or frustration on paper can help to get it out of the mind

### Social support

- People to talk to without censure
- People to call when having a bad go
- People who understand
- Those who have walked the walk and *get* where a sufferer is coming from

### Canine support

- There are dogs specially trained to help with PTSD symptom management
- Any pet can be an invaluable source of distraction and unconditional love
- Being responsible for a pet's exercise just might get someone outdoors when nothing else will

## Meditation

- This can range from simple techniques to quiet the mind and achieve inner peace, to hard core practices with the intention of reaching a life-changing spiritual awakening.

## Mindfulness

- Definition: *a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique. (Oxford dictionary)*

## Yoga

### Promotes

- Balance
- Relaxation
- Control of the body
- Control of the mind

## Safety Plans

When a person understands their symptoms and the triggers that set them off, they're able to arm themselves up with situation-specific safety plans, or general go-to plans.

### Examples:

- Lila was a medic in Iraq. She's been back in Colorado for two years now and life is pretty good. She's in the grocery store and finds herself trapped in a crowd near the meat counter. She can't get away and she knows the smell of meat, of blood, is likely to trigger her PTSD symptoms.

She goes right into one of her coping strategies. Grabs a piece of peppermint gum from her purse, stuffs it in her mouth and chews, hard. The peppermint will mask the odor of the blood and the simple motions of getting the gum out and unwrapping it have served as a distraction.

Then she stuffs her earphones in and hits a button on her phone and the voice of a comedian fills her ears.

Will she have a flashback of blood and limbs strewn across a roadway? Maybe. But by being prepared, having a safety plan, she might not.

- Richard wanted to go to Disneyland with his kids but couldn't imagine surviving the crowds, the sights, sounds and smells.

But he made a plan, practiced his coping skills and the signals he would use with his family. He has key words, everyday words. If he suddenly says, "banana," his family members know he needs to get away from wherever he is so he can take a minute and get a handle on his involuntary responses.

Likewise, if he says, "Penguin," he's in trouble because the symptoms are well-started. At that point someone in the family will make sure his earphones are in, help him get out of his jacket and find him somewhere to sit with his back against a wall. Then they'll back off and let him breathe.

His family know to expect his spell to last about ten minutes, and then he will need to walk off the residual anxiousness.

- Lisa was molested at the age of four, and doesn't have PTSD symptoms on a regular basis. The only things that set her off are being in tight quarters, or being held too tightly—especially when she's not expecting it.

She's coped for years by being the person no one was likely to hug, and using prescribed medication if she has to be in what she calls, "tight quarters." But when caught by surprise, she uses purposeful deep breathing exercises to try to prevent herself from fainting, which is her PTSD symptom response.

- Nathan was trapped upside down in a car wreck for over an hour before help arrived, and suffers from PTSD. The most troublesome trigger for him is seeing road kill/blood on pavement (though he has no memory of his own accident).

If he sees a dead animal on a road, he's learned to pull over as quickly as possible, and hit number 4 on his stereo. It's programmed with a playlist of songs he knows well. The distraction of singing along with them gets him past the point of reacting and he's able to get back into traffic within minutes... Once he established his coping mechanisms, he was able to go out alone in his car again.

- Callie relies on her dog. She finds him a distraction when out in a crowd, and a source of comfort when symptoms do sneak up on her.
- Melanie does yoga every morning before she goes to work because she does better throughout her day if she begins with the physical energization she gets from yoga. This also helps her shake off any residual effects of nightmares.

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**Lesson 7** will explore treatment options, both the traditional and various non-traditional therapies.

**Lesson 8** will be devoted to **answering** any and all of your **questions**, plus I'll be sharing articles, blogs etc which will take you further into the world of PTSD.