

WELBY O'BRIEN



LOVE OUR VETS

RESTORING HOPE FOR FAMILIES OF VETERANS

with **PTSD**

Deep River
B O O K S



NOTE: Do not use the information in this book to diagnose or treat any condition without consulting a qualified health or mental health care provider.

Love Our Vets
Restoring Hope for Families of Veterans with PTSD
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DEDICATION

To Frank, the love of my life and hero of my heart.
I thank God for the privilege of journeying together
through this life with you.



FOREWORD

This is not a book about theory or academic ideas from experts. It is grassroots, practical advice from wives and loved ones who are struggling to make sense out of their veteran's PTSD. Most of us don't take hard situations as teaching moments in our life. Instead we run and we want to escape. We can easily become addicted to anything that will ease our pain and discomfort.

Here is a book for PTSD spouses, families, and all loved ones, that is far more than just a survival guide. It is a challenge to grow and thrive by embracing the difficult questions that come from living with PTSD. It is humble, offering no magical or pat answers. Just practical and authentic wisdom learned through trial and error.

Full of real questions and real answers, this book comes out of the lives and experiences of veterans' wives, partners, and all loved ones who are learning a day at a time to live and thrive in spite of PTSD.

ERIC E. MUELLER, PH.D., CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

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a warrior whose war will never cease.**

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“Thank you to all who contributed to this wonderful book. The question-answer format and inclusion of real stories and experiences makes *Love Our Vets* a unique and valuable resource that I’m certain will provide both practical and emotional support to countless loved ones of veterans.”

SUZANNE BEST, PHD, CO-AUTHOR OF *COURAGE AFTER FIRE*

“Couldn’t put this book down! Powerful. Loved the humor too. What a read! We finally have a book that deals with the reality, courage, faith, and real hope for loved ones of PTSD survivors.”

LINDA WHITE, WIFE OF A VIETNAM VETERAN

“*Love Our Vets* offers insight not found in previous publications that I have read. Being a Vietnam vet diagnosed with the disorder, I can appreciate Welby’s call for support from those closest to the problem. Those that love us!”

JERRY W. KEEN, COMMAND MASTER CHIEF, USN (RET);
CHAIRMAN, CLARK COUNTY VETERANS ASSISTANCE CENTER

“For those of us under the stress of being caregiver to a loved one who suffers from PTSD, Welby provides a priceless resource of strength. This insightful book offers a place to start rebuilding a spiritual foundation for our own strength and healing, and a better relationship with our PTSD loved one.”

CHERYL, MOTHER OF AN AFGHANISTAN VETERAN

“I loved it! I found myself laughing one minute and crying the next! I am amazed and relieved that others are going through the same trials as we are. I do not feel as alone as I did before. I loved reading some of the stories to him, and I could see a bit of relief in him, knowing that he is not the only one acting the way he does and that he is not alone as well. We found ourselves talking about things that have happened. I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone with a loved one who

is a post-war vet! It is a freeing feeling, knowing that we are not alone, and I plan on reading the book again and again when I feel down and discouraged. *Love Our Vets* has given me so many insights on his actions and tools to help ease and get through the hard times.”

DANIELLE K, WIFE OF IRAQ VETERAN

“This is the best book on PTSD and vets I’ve ever read. Anyone who works with vets, or is related to a vet, needs this book. You won’t regret it. As a professor, this book is definitely at the top of my reading list on PTSD. Welby O’Brien is honest, insightful, and incredibly compassionate. Gutsy and sensitive. Absolutely fantastic!”

DR. STEVE STEPHENS, PH.D., AUTHOR;
PSYCHOLOGIST SPECIALIZING IN TRAUMA ISSUES; POST-GRAD PROFESSOR

“I’ve picked up countless books about PTSD, thumbed through them, and thrown them down. I’m so glad to know there are *real people*, going through the same *reality* out there, and I’m not alone. And there is real help and real advice. Thank you!”

RENEE, LOVED ONE OF A PTSD VETERAN

“*Love Our Vets* is by far the best book I have ever read about PTSD!”

VIETNAM VETERAN AND CHAIRMAN OF VET CENTER

“I barely made it through the first few pages, crying. Someone understands!”

PTSD SURVIVOR

“I have read *Love Our Vets* from cover-to-cover and wholeheartedly endorse this book as an excellent resource for both family members of veterans and for veterans/active military members themselves.”

DREW DEATON, PRESIDENT & CEO
HONOR THE SACRIFICE, WWW.HONOR-THE-SACRIFICE.ORG



“It was a life saver, and I am grateful beyond words for what it has meant to me!”

WIFE OF COMBAT VETERAN

“Thank you for the amazing book *Love Our Vets*. It is an inspiration!”

ELA, SPOUSE OF ACTIVE-DUTY SERVICE MEMBER

“Thank you, Welby, for writing a wonderful, inspiring, helpful book. I'm loving every word!”

MARINE MOMMA @ SUPPORT OUR MILITARY HEROES

“Sensitive and profoundly useful.”

VA CHAPLAIN

“To anyone who is needing encouragement and support, this book is a lifesaver! Reading *Love Our Vets* is paying off in dividends, not only in my caregiver role with veterans, but also in healing my own wounds and learning new ways to manage my own fears and challenges.”

Laura, VETERAN AND PTSD SURVIVOR

“Amazing resource for caregivers... 5 stars!”

HAHNA LEAH

“For anyone who is working with someone who is in a relationship to a veteran with PTSD, this will be a most helpful book that they can put into the hands of the counselee.”

MILITARY CHAPLAIN ROY W. LUDLOW

“We received your book and are stuck on it! The first few pages had so much information and hope for families it has been hard to put it down. Thank you for your support, and we will surely be telling everyone to check out this book. It is beyond amazing!”

GOLD STAR FAMILY OF MARINE LCPL NATHANIEL 'NATE' SCHULTZ
4/30/91 KIA 8/21/10 “UNTIL EVERY TROOP COMES HOME”





“Wow, where have you been? A lot of the PTSD books and information do a good job of addressing the vet, but the spouse (a key figure in recovery), at least mine, feels a little left out—in the dark, so to speak. Thank you!”

DR. BOB LANTRIP, POINTMAN OUTPOST LEADER, SEMPER FI

“I found myself laughing, crying, and empathizing with the problems our returning vets deal with. These brave men and women need our thanks, our help, and perhaps most of all our gratitude for our ability to live in freedom when the price they pay and continue to pay is so dear.”

GAIL WELBORN, BOOK REVIEWER

“I think it’s the best book I have ever read. I am very impressed!”

REBECCA MCCOY, WWW.ASPOUSESSTORYPTSD.COM

“This is an amazing resource! Sometimes the caretakers and loved ones get pushed under the rug. This book is for us! Great stories to help you know that you are not alone, and resources we could all use.”

HAYLEY KOLB

“No one ever gave me anything for my wife or family. *Thank you!*”

A GRATEFUL VETERAN





PART ONE

REAFFIRM

Our Questions

What is your dream? We all want something. We long for it. Always have.

What do you want—really want? What makes your heart ache, and what drives you to keep going? I have always longed for an enduring and fulfilling marriage. I want what I see in the movies. I want the honeymoon to last forever.

Well, now that I am all grown up and have experienced a failed marriage, as well as several years of a happy one, my dream is now subject to the confines of reality. We all know that no matter how wonderful the marriage, the honeymoon does not last forever. That is just a fact of human nature. But we do know that really great, successful, and fulfilling marriages are possible. But is that true for those with PTSD? All of us who are married to, or in a relationship with, a vet with PTSD are asking, “Is it possible for us to have a happy and fulfilling relationship?”

What about those who are related in other ways to their veteran? Parents, siblings, children, friends, partners, and even coworkers. We all desire positive relationships with those we care about. Is there hope in all the craziness?

After many years of wrestling with that question and seeking the perfect key, I finally realize it does not exist. There is no easy way. No magic formula. But what I have found in my own life and the lives of those around me is a principle that seems to be consistent. For all relationships.

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The most successful marriages and healthiest individuals seem to have more of this than those who don't. Amazingly simple. But also a continuous goal. It is in the day-to-day living that we have the opportunities to experience the blessings of these two treasures: faith and love—shown by actions, and not dependent on feelings.

Faith is connection with God; love is connection with others. It is in connecting that healing and growth triumph. The comfort and closeness heals and nourishes. Ultimately, it is faith and love that provide the life-line we so desperately need. The pain and struggles do not go away. But where there is comfort there is hope. Truly we can find hope and practical help for ourselves personally and for our relationships.

For the remainder of this book, I've chosen to use male pronouns in the interest of consistency. Please know that when I refer to "he" or "him," these same strategies and words of encouragement apply if your brave loved one happens to be female. Men or women—this devastating disorder doesn't play favorites.

The following pages contain a gold mine of practical help and hope for all who care for a veteran with PTSD. Although my own experience is in the context of marriage to a Vietnam veteran, the wisdom shared applies to all from all conflicts. Your loved one may even still be serving in the military. My hope is that this book will support and encourage *all of you* who struggle to love the vet in your life who has PTSD. You are the wives, the husbands, the parents, the children, and the dear friends who have made a courageous commitment to love your vet as well as humanly possible. He or she is your hero, but you are a hero too.

1. What is PTSD?

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder can occur as a result of exposure to a severe trauma. According to the Mayo Clinic, it is a “mental health condition that’s triggered by a terrifying event.” Wikipedia defines it as a “severe anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to any event that results in psychological trauma. This event may involve the threat of death to oneself or to someone else, or to one’s own or someone else’s physical, sexual, or psychological integrity, overwhelming the individual’s ability to cope.” It may be an automobile accident, an assault, the tragic loss of a loved one, witnessing a horrific event, or anything that is horrible and shocking.

From the beginning of civilization, PTSD has haunted its victims and their loved ones. Throughout history it has had other names, such as “battle fatigue,” “soldier’s heart,” and “shell shock.” Currently, advocates are trying to drop the “D” and just call it “Posttraumatic Stress” in an effort to reduce the stigma that may be attached.

Up until the last few decades, PTSD went relatively undiagnosed and unacknowledged. Now we know better. It is a serious problem affecting many of our men and women, particularly those who have experienced combat. The atrocities our veterans experienced are often too horrendous to talk about—and in many cases, are locked away “safely” in the deepest parts of their memory.

There are many ways to describe PTSD and the effect it has. Here is one simple description: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder can affect anyone (not just military personnel). The whole person gets permanently locked into emergency mode after a horrific experience. For the rest of their lives, they live as if the original trauma or an impending crisis could strike at any moment. It overwhelms their ability to cope, so when something triggers them back into survival mode, they have no reserve with which to handle it.

Visualize a reserve tank of coping skills for stress. Most people have a ready supply on hand for emergencies. PTSD, however, uses about ninety-five percent of the tank’s reserves, due to the brain operating in impending crisis mode at all times. The remaining five percent is all they have to handle real stress. Therefore, when something triggers them, they have no

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reserve with which to handle it in a healthy way. Some terms used are that they get “triggered,” “activated,” or “hijacked.”

PTSD affects millions just in the United States alone, along with all those who love them and live with them.

It is not a chosen situation, an illness, or a temporary condition, nor is it 100% curable. People who struggle with it are not crazy, weak, failures, or bad people, nor are they without help and hope.

Because the trauma can impact them on every level (physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually), the manifestations are quite extensive. Some of the typical symptoms may include flashbacks, intrusive thoughts of the trauma, avoidance, numbing, putting up walls, withdrawing, hypervigilance, irritability, being easily startled, memory blocks, sudden bursts of anger or other emotions, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, fear, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and other addictive behaviors, difficulty holding a job, relationship problems, and sometimes even suicide. They are people who are reacting normally to an abnormal experience.

The PTSD may be here to stay, but the good news is that they can learn to thrive again!

I encourage everyone to take advantage of every opportunity to learn more about PTSD and its effects. It is also related to Traumatic Brain Injury. Include TBI in your research also. We are fortunate to have an abundance of resources, including classes, the VA, books, support groups, the internet, and those who live it firsthand. We are continually updating our website as new resources and information become available. www.LoveOurVets.org



2. Can his PTSD affect me?

Hard as we try to not let it, it does. It is inevitable for two reasons. First, ever notice that when two people live together and are close on any level, they can't help but rub off on each other? Conscious and subconsciously we affect each other. This goes for both positive and negative (sorry...I

was hoping to just give out good news today).

The other reason we are affected by their PTSD is the nature of the disorder. Having lived with it ourselves, we do not need to be psychologists to know that those around are indeed impacted. The effects vary because each situation and each person is unique. However, the following may be considered typical when living with a PTSD vet: anxiety, fear, anger, mood-matching, taking on their obsessive-compulsive behaviors, trying too hard to fix them, being diligent to avoid anything that triggers them, sleep disturbances and deprivation, depression, isolation, avoidance, mood swings, hyper-vigilance (sound like someone you know?), negativity, wanting to run away, wanting to throw in the towel, wondering if you made a mistake, feeling trapped, entertaining thoughts of suicide, filling your life with busy activities to distract, finding yourself trying to try harder, wishing someone understood, dreading going to sleep at night and dreading getting up in the morning, feeling terribly alone, feeling unloved, experiencing road rage, getting triggered yourself, trying really hard to figure things out, seeing things with a distorted perspective, poor self-esteem, feeling irritable, struggling with food or other comfort addictions, feeling callused with walls up, wondering when you stopped living, feeling hopeless, questioning your faith, feeling drained and exhausted—and the list goes on.

It has been said that there is such a thing as secondary PTSD. Similar to getting cancer from second-hand smoke. It has also been labeled “vicarious trauma.” As loving, caring individuals, we have over time been exposed indirectly to their trauma. It will affect us on every level: emotionally, physically, spiritually, and psychologically.

Camille’s vet came home from a lunch meeting with his fellow veterans. At the restaurant, a lady had come up to them and started bragging about what she did to help the other side during the war. The enemy! He got so enraged (understandably so!) he stormed out and sped home. All the rest of that day he spilled his anger on her. Trying to be a good wife and to be supportive, she listened. That night she could not sleep. It was an awful night.

The following day, she was perplexed (and exhausted), trying to figure

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out why she was such a wreck. At her next visit to her counselor, he explained what is called “limbic contagion.” Like vicarious trauma, the limbic system (part of the brain) gets activated under acute stress. In severe cases, this leads to PTSD. For those of us who live with it, we can indeed be affected by it. Camille was experiencing her husband’s PTSD. His encounter at the restaurant put him back in the war. To him and his brain he was literally there. Again. In battle. Fighting to survive against the enemy. What she had not realized was that she was there as well.

It will affect me when he is triggered. The question is not how to keep it from affecting me, but *how is it affecting me?* My key lies in tuning in to what is going on inside of me—learning to be more attentive to my needs and internal signals, and not just working hard to try to make it all go away. Here is some of the wisdom from Camille’s journal that she gleaned from her counselor:

“When I feel something is wrong, tune in to it. Name it. Feel it and experience it. Feel the sensation (stomach, neck, heart, short breaths, etc.). Ask myself: What part of my body is not right at this moment? For me, it usually is that I stop breathing or breathe shallowly and am stooped over forward. Hunched. Tight neck. I feel like crying inside. Stay with it. Don’t rush or try to fix it. Breathe!!!!!!!!!!!! It may move. Do a body-scan mentally. Slowly go from top of my head to the bottom of my toes and feel every sensation. No analyzing. Just notice the sensations. Then, still relaxing, ‘go’ to a place where I love to be. A happy place where I can feel good, and find comfort.

“My goal is not to not have it affect me but to *be aware of the effect. Tune in!* Feel it and release it. Not being aware of it creates the tension that is destructive. Differentiate and acknowledge. His pain. His trauma. My pain. My trauma. Talk about it. As I take care of me and feel and communicate, it helps him. Do not do it only in order to help him, but know that it will benefit him.”

As loved ones, our challenge, along with Camille, is how do we get ourselves back to where we are not hijacked emotionally? Learn to calm ourselves. We need to learn how to regulate our emotions by indentifying them and getting ourselves back to a place where we can think. Clearly.

Soundly. Our safety skills are to regulate us, not to stop others from affecting us. Our theme should be “feel; don’t fix.” I like to think of it in three steps:

1. Feel my body: Where do I feel it physically?
2. Feel my emotion: Name it. “I feel ticked off.”

Pause here as long as you want. Take time. Don’t rush to figure or fix.

3. Feel my need: What do I need right now that would nurture and comfort me in a healthy way?

Whatever labels one may select, the bottom line is that we are indeed affected. No question about it. But there is hope. Don’t stop here. Just know you are not alone. You are going in the right direction with people who care and understand.



3. Is there a cure or can it improve?

Sort of, and possibly. (I could have said, “Of course. Take this green pill and in six days everything will be super duper.” Wouldn’t that be nice?) We all wish we had a definitive answer to this age old question! And as the great debate continues, millions of vets and their loved ones struggle with the relentless battles of posttraumatic stress. Is there hope or not?

At first, I thought we were stuck. Forever. Just deal with it. And unfortunately that is what many people say. But now that I have personally experienced growth and healing and have seen it in others, I am excited to say, “Yes!” There are all sorts of possibilities.

Our vets we love will never totally get over it. Even in the best cases, the PTSD will always be lurking inside them. But, together, we can learn how to handle it better and how to have a healthy relationship in spite of it.

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A brave young veteran recently shared with me that she has it from Iraq, her father had it from Vietnam, and her grandfather from WWII. He may have been one of many who was locked up in an asylum and tortured with shock “therapy.” Have we come a long way since then? Absolutely! Do we still have a long way to go! Unequivocally!

The good news is that there are many very effective therapies available today that are resulting in significant improvements in those with PTSD. In some cases, the symptoms of PTSD appear to totally subside. Numerous variables combine to determine what treatments will benefit individuals and to what degree. And new research and developments continue to emerge.

The hard news is that no matter how effective the treatment, or how wide the possible range of recovery, it will never be able to take away the fact that a person experienced the trauma in the first place. The trauma itself can never be erased. So in that sense, the posttraumatic stress will never be 100% cured.

However, the effects of the trauma can be reduced so they no longer control one’s life 24/7. That is where our efforts as loved ones, caregivers, supporters, and therapists are primarily focused: minimally, to help those who struggle to manage the symptoms. We encourage them to develop as many coping skills and personal support systems as possible. As we say at Love Our Vets, “They can learn to thrive again!”

I recently received a message from a veteran’s loved one about the PTSD not being 100% curable. “I am a fixer and this I can’t fix! It scares me, especially for all of our loved ones returning from war. I am so very sad for this.”

My reply to her was, “We cannot *fix*, but we *do* have hope! There is a lot that *can* be done to help those with PTSD. I know. I live it!”

Without hope, we cease to thrive. But at the same time, we have to be cautious not to promise a total cure we do not possess. Here are my thoughts on what *can* be done:

1. Accept that there is no quick or easy fix.
2. Keep an open mind, but proceed with open eyes.

3. Be willing to do some hard or uncomfortable work.
4. Connect regularly to a good support network.
5. Stay current on PTSD therapies, resources, and developments.
6. Surround yourself with people who care, and hold on tightly to those you love.

DEBBIE SHARES A LITTLE HOPE FROM HER LIFE:

“When we first learned about PTSD, all I spent my energy on was analyzing and trying to understand it all. Just daily functioning in our marriage was overshadowed constantly by the awareness of the influence of the PTSD. For many years I worked at making it work. I journaled, got counseling, read everything I could get my hands on, joined the support group, took classes, etc. And it helped. It was intense and hard work. I am glad that he got help too and was willing to talk with me about stuff.

“But recently I have noticed that things are going better without all the conscious effort. All the work we put into understanding it and each other, and doing the things that were good for us and the relationship, are finally paying off. The intensity is lifted. The good things we put into place are starting to take hold without so much focused effort. I did not know it would get better.

“We are laughing more and discovering silly moments (we could have our own comedy show if rating was not an issue)! We are enjoying passion and sex (when things work) more than ever. We pray together, which is huge. It is so wonderful to be able to enjoy each other rather than analyzing all the time. I know the PTSD will always be there. And I keep on guard for triggers. But what a nice place to finally be in, where we can experience joy and love and peace for the first time in our lives.

“At our group support meetings, I notice those who have fulfilling (not perfect) marriages and relationships with their vets are those who have been at it for years. And are doing the right things. Those who struggle are mostly those who are new to PTSD. So be encouraged that the hard work will pay off. It does get better as long as we make good choices and he is willing to do his part too. Even if he is not, our good choices will pay off.”

26 LOVE OUR VETS

We and our vets wake up each day with new opportunities for growth. Faith and love are powerful in the successful process of growing with PTSD. Connection with God and connection with others who care are common threads woven into the lives of those who find fulfillment while living with PTSD.

We all would welcome the day a complete and total cure for PTSD were discovered. But until then, let us continue to support and LOVE OUR VETS. They deserve it!



4. Can I help him?

Simply put, you can help him, but you cannot fix him. Curious how it seems that those of us who are drawn to vets are also very caring people. It would be an interesting study to follow the lives of those who fell in love with vets either with or without knowledge of their PTSD. I often wonder if there is something at the subconscious level that identifies the disorder and resonates with it. Maybe we are more of a match than we realize. Most of the people I have met who love their vets are by nature very loving and caring people, the type I would want around if I had a problem.

The drawback to being of that nature is that we are wired to care, as well as to fix the problem. It is in our nature to find the problem and solve it. How simple. But alas, here we are with a lifelong problem that does not have a fix. The good news is that it is not a black and white issue with only two extreme options. There is plenty of middle ground where we can indeed be of help. The key is to hold on to ourselves as we reach out. Do not kill yourself in trying to fix him. As we take care of ourselves and remain mindful of our own needs, we have more strength from which to draw. It is a balance. We have to stay nourished and nurtured ourselves on a continuous basis if we are to be able to give and encourage and help them.

It is very meaningful to our vets when they see us wanting to understand them. Anything we can do to learn more about PTSD and about



**A network of people just like you, learning to overcome
the challenges of PTSD one day at a time.**

**Follow Welby's blog
Link to other helpful resources and organizations
Gain support and encouragement**

Our Motto is Love Our Vets, Love Ourselves!

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