



LANDING STRONG



12

**STRATEGIES  
FOR LOVING  
SOMEONE  
WITH PTSD**





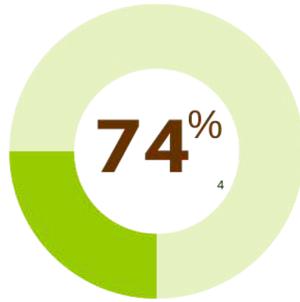
*A Guide provided  
by Landing Strong.*

Experiencing or witnessing traumatic events can have profound effects on one's life. Some changes are predictable, while others might come as a surprise. It's scary when someone you love is struggling and doesn't appear to be getting better. We may be tempted to think they're not working hard enough, be tempted to fix them, or feel that we have somehow failed them. The truth is, the effects of trauma are long-lasting. Sometimes, knowing what to expect isn't enough. Knowing how to respond effectively is critical.

We have compiled a list of suggestion that we hope you will find helpful in supporting someone you love who may have PTSD.



Partners of individuals diagnosed with PTSD take on a larger portion of household responsibilities, such as finances and raising children.<sup>2</sup>



of caregivers have had to make a career change or stop working.<sup>4</sup>



say their caregiver role is a source of pride because they are making a difference for their loved one.<sup>3</sup>



More than 33% of people who support a loved one struggle with personal health issues.<sup>5</sup>

1 Caring.com (2011). Depression Levels Among Caregivers More Than Two Times National Average. Retrieved July 26, 2018 from <https://www.caring.com/about/news-room/depression-levels-among-caregivers-more-than-two-times-national-average-caring-coms-newest-study-reveals>

2 Price, J., Stevens, S. (2017). U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Partners of Veterans with PTSD: Research Findings. Retrieved from [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treatment/family/partners\\_of\\_vets\\_research\\_findings.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treatment/family/partners_of_vets_research_findings.asp)

3&4 Caring.com (2011). Family Caregivers Face Major Financial Burdens, Increased Stress, and Work Struggles. Retrieved July 26, 2018, from <https://www.caring.com/about/news-room/family-caregivers-face-major-financial-burdens-increased-stress-and-work-struggles>

5 Family Caregiver Alliance (2006). Caregiver Health. Retrieved July 26, 2018 from <https://www.caregiver.org/caregiver-health>



## **STRATEGY 1: DON'T TRY TO FIX THEM**

Although it may be tempting to offer direction to a loved one when they are struggling, it is frustrating for both sides when these suggestions are not accepted or are viewed as criticism. Sometimes, the most powerful thing we can do to support someone with PTSD is to just listen.

Think about a time where you may have reached out to a friend to talk about something that you were struggling with. They may have responded by offering “helpful” suggestions. Maybe all you really wanted was to express your feelings and feel understood.



Simply being present with someone we love, hearing them, and offering silent support can be the most powerful support you can offer. You are part of helping to create a space where they can talk about how they feel without fear of judgment or criticism. In those moments, they are not alone.



Check out a great YouTube video called **"It's Not About The Nail"** which illustrates this topic. 



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**Activities that can be done in 1 hour:**

- Stretching
- Walking
- Working out or going for a run
- Journaling
- Colouring
- Trying a new skin-care product
- Getting a massage
- Going out for coffee with a friend
- Listening to music
- Gardening
- Working on a puzzle
- Make a smoothie

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**STRATEGY 2: MAKE A POINT OF TAKING TIME FOR YOURSELF**

Recovering from a traumatic experience is a long term process, and supporting a loved one through this process can be emotionally demanding.

If someone you love has experienced a traumatic event, the impact on you has probably been quite profound. It's not unusual for friends and extended members of the family to also feel the ripple effects

It may be natural for you to want to lighten the load for your loved one, especially if they are unable to engage in life as they did before. Offering to take on a larger portion of household responsibilities can be significant in supporting a partner's recovery, but can also introduce tension into the relationship.



Allowing yourself to have fun might be hard, particularly when you know your loved one is struggling at home. However, taking the time to do something you enjoy each day can positively influence all aspects of your life.

Having a friend to talk to about your feelings can give a lift to dark days, even if they haven't experienced a similar situation. Pursuing interests for even a short period of time can bring pleasure and satisfaction. This may mean trying different activities until you find one that you love.



### **STRATEGY 3: ACCEPT THAT RECOVERY MEANS CHANGE**

When someone we care about develops PTSD, we may not recognize them. We might find ourselves missing the way things used to be, or feeling as though we are stuck with a stranger.

Recovery from PTSD does not mean returning to a former self. Overcoming trauma involves reclaiming important aspects of self that have been lost, while creating a new way of viewing the world that protects from further injury. This will mean letting go of the person they used to be. That person will not be back. A new and more resilient person will emerge. Being open to new routines can help someone who is overcoming trauma feel welcomed and accepted for the person they have become.



When a friend or someone we love is changed by their experiences, it can be upsetting to think that we may never connect with them the same way again. Recovering from trauma is a long process. However, cherished parts of a trauma survivor's identity will resurface as they recover. We call this post-traumatic growth.

Re-establishing intimacy after trauma is possible, but this is often in the final stages of recovery.



A request should communicate your needs, and provide explanation for why you want this change to happen. A command tells the other person what you think they should do, without any indication of support.

For example:

**You need to get help.**

(command)

Versus:

**When you act this way it scares me and it makes the kids react strongly.**

**We have the right to feel safe in our own home.**

**We need you to get help.**

(request)

## **STRATEGY 4: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: TRY REQUESTS RATHER THAN COMMANDS**

The way we say things can play a big role in how our message is received. When something is wrong, it is important to address it with sensitivity.

Giving a request allows you to offer your opinion in a way that doesn't feel like criticism. Giving a command may not convey the concern, fear or anger that lies behind it. The difference between a request and a command is that a request allows for the recipient to say no or offer an alternative solution.



## **STRATEGY 5: EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS, NOT YOUR INTERPRETATIONS**

People are not mind readers. If we don't clearly express to others how we are feeling, chances are they won't know. When expressing ourselves, it is helpful to separate how you perceive a situation from what you believe someone's underlying intentions to be.

For example, a friend regularly shows up late for coffee dates. Without reading their mind, how could we possibly know the true intentions behind their actions? **"You don't care about our friendship, you always make me wait."**

This is an example of making assumptions. We assume they don't care about the friendship. Instead, we can let them know the effect of their actions on us. **"I feel sad and unimportant when you show up late."**



*A good rule of thumb is speaking from the place of "I" rather than "you". This way, the listener is less likely to feel attacked and respond defensively. You are simply telling them the effect that their actions have on you.*

*Imagine how different our interactions could be if we respond with open statements of how we are feeling, rather than criticisms or judgment. It can immediately change the tone of the conversation. Most likely, neither of you want to fight, but want instead to be heard and understood.*





## **STRATEGY 6: TAKE SMALL STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION (BITE SIZED CHUNKS)**

Returning to old routines after experiencing a traumatic event can be overwhelming. It can also be challenging being with someone who isn't up for the activities you used to do together. Avoidant behaviours are difficult for everyone.

It can hurt when you try to reach out, but there's no response. If someone with PTSD, anxiety or depression isn't answering the phone, door, or emails, it can be hard not to take this personally. However, these avoidant behaviours are a common aspect of these conditions.



Avoidant behaviour is a natural way people protect themselves. Whether it's side stepping a direct reminder of a traumatic event (people, places, sounds or smells), or being asked to do something that feels overwhelming, avoidance becomes the easy solution. The challenge is, this avoidance prolongs the injury because the thoughts and feelings associated with the trauma never get processed. Instead, they are compartmentalized on the back shelves of our minds, only to spill over in unwelcomed ways through flashbacks, intrusive memories and nightmares.

Fear of these things happening in public can provoke anxiety attacks, which in itself feeds this vicious cycle.



The only way through this is to encourage our loved ones to take manageable, bite-sized chunks in any task.

For example, instead of setting a goal to work-out in a crowded gym for an hour, a manageable alternative might be to leave the basement and take a 5-minute walk outside. **One step at a time.**





## **STRATEGY 7: REALIZE THAT FORGETFULNESS DOES NOT MEAN THEY DON'T CARE**

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*Being in a state of “high-alert” interferes with our ability to engage in activities or conversations. A trauma survivor may have a hard time concentrating and remembering both old and new information.*

*Know that this is not intentional, nor a sign that they don't care. It's a part of the condition.*

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Individuals who live with PTSD may seem overly forgetful. It can be concerning when we are asked the same things repeatedly, have to repeat ourselves, or feel as though we cannot rely on a partner.

A defining feature of PTSD is hyperarousal. This is a state of always being alert, scanning the environment for potential threats. Anger protects against threats. It doesn't help with focus or concentration. Think of a time when you may have been scared. You probably wouldn't have been able to remember any complex instructions in such moments. Have you ever tried assembling Ikea furniture, only to find that the more frustrated you got, the harder the task became?



## **STRATEGY 8: SUGGEST THE USE OF MEMORY AIDS**

Using a phone as a memory aid can make a big difference for someone who has difficulty remembering things. You might encourage them to do the following:

- Set reminders for appointments, prescription renewals, paying bills, birthdays and anniversaries
- Have a daily alarm for taking medication or feeding a pet
- Log events into your phone calendar like a child's soccer game or school field trip
- Write down usernames and passwords
- Set a timer when doing laundry or cooking food

**Be consistent to eliminate the need to rely on memory:**

- Keep keys in a specific place so they are never lost, like in a bowl by the front door
- Store medication somewhere where you will be reminded to take it, such as in the kitchen or bathroom
- As much as possible, try sticking to a routine so you don't forget to do things (doing things in the same order each day)



## STRATEGY 9: SET BOUNDARIES WITH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

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*It's important to recognize anger as a common tool people use to cope with difficult feelings. Sudden and unprovoked outbursts of anger are usually related to deep feelings of fear, shame or helplessness. Setting boundaries is important so that you can feel safe and respected.*

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Living with someone who is aggressive or unpredictable can be very stressful. Anger is a common symptom of PTSD which acts as a shield to protect against deeper, harder feelings. In some ways, anger is like a suit of armor. Being angry can make it possible to live with intense feelings of sadness, guilt, loss, grief, shame or despair that may arise after experiencing trauma.

Under the anger, there may be feelings of hopelessness or sadness. Anger may appear to offer a sense of control and strength. It may externalize feelings of shame or despair.

You want to be understanding, but not allow aggression into your home. **This is the line that differentiates support from abuse.**



It is important to let your loved one know what is and is not acceptable. Don't do this when they are enraged. They won't hear you. Wait until a moment of calm, and gently let them know the impact their anger is having on the household. This can be a good bridge conversation to encourage them to get help.

**“When you act this way, I feel unsafe. This is not acceptable to me. It’s time to get help if we are to continue together. I want to be with you, but can’t be in a place where I do not feel safe or respected.”**

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*Have a pre-planned exit strategy or safety plan for times when they are being unreasonable. This may be an hour away to allow them time to cool off, going into a separate room, or if need be, going to a friend's for the evening. Ideally, they are learning anger management strategies in the work they are doing in therapy. The trick to anger management isn't stopping things once the fuse is blown, it's recognizing early warning signs and knowing how to take the off ramp before things escalate.*

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## **STRATEGY 10: ENCOURAGE THEM TO TAKE ON LIGHT RESPONSIBILITIES**

It may feel like you are walking on eggshells around someone with PTSD, trying not to upset or provoke them. You may have taken on additional household tasks to avoid overwhelming them. Although it may be helpful for them to have lighter responsibilities, it is important that they still have some. In cases where the trauma has made it impossible to return to work, individuals may feel as though a part of them has been broken or damaged. Asking a loved one with PTSD to help with certain tasks can help them feel important and needed again. Ask them which activities they are still comfortable doing and encourage them even if it feels like something small.



## **STRATEGY 11: PLAN DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS – SEPARATE THE PERSON FROM THEIR SYMPTOMS**

**It can be challenging to separate your loved one from their PTSD symptoms.**

Even if we know what to expect, the healing process can still be emotionally exhausting and long. Each journey is going to be unique. The development of PTSD means changes in many aspects of life, and it is not just the trauma survivor who will need support through this process.

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*Being honest with our partner, listening to their perspective with an open mind, coming up with solutions to issues as a team, and considering the best way to say our message before beginning a conversation can set you up for success. Good communication is a skill that gets easier with practice, so don't be discouraged if it takes a couple of tries before you start seeing a new outcome.*

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## **STRATEGY 12: PLAN SIMPLE OUTINGS DURING QUIET HOURS**

If you want to go out, be aware that crowds and noises can be overwhelming to someone with PTSD. If you want them to go out with you, consider visiting 24 hour stores when there are quiet times to shop. Or arrive first thing in the morning, before anyone else is there. If you are thinking of going to a movie, consider a matinee when fewer people are likely to attend.

*Try to only do one thing each outing, as opposed to stacking multiple chores together.*

