Dear Alice,

I recently returned from a combat deployment in Iraq and have been having some problems sleeping with my girlfriend. I haven't noticed any signs or PTSD during my waking hours and didn't know I was experiencing any during sleep until last weekend when we were able to spend a few nights together. In the morning when we woke up after every night she said I seemed easily disturbed and even frightened during the night. She said I did things ranging from jumping and being startled by noises all the way up to putting her in a head-lock for a few second at one point. We've been dating for about a year and a half now and this is the first time she has said that I do any of this. This is more than a little disconcerting for the obvious reason that I'm nervous about hurting her. I am also nervous that I may have some underlying psychological issues. Is this normal for someone just returning from such a stressful situation or should I seek professional help for my sleep issues?

Thanks,
Violent Sleeper

Answer

Dear Violent Sleeper,

It must be difficult to hear that you are doing things in your sleep that seem out of your control, especially if you are concerned about hurting your partner. What you are describing could be post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), even though you mention that you haven't noticed any signs of PTSD during your waking hours. PTSD, also called shell shock or combat stress is a fairly common disorder affecting people of all ages. In the U.S., approximately five million adults have PTSD. It is more common among individuals who have served in combat.

You mention that you recently returned from combat deployment, so it makes sense that you might be experiencing these symptoms, since PTSD typically begins within three months after the traumatic event. Symptoms vary widely among individuals but may include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Irritability
- Problems with memory
- Difficulty concentrating
- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Feeling hopeless or depressed
- Being “jumpy” or easily startled or scared. You might wake up during the night a number of times worried that something is wrong.
- Any of these symptoms interfering with your daily life

The symptoms you describe, though they must be difficult for you to hear about from your partner, are very normal after experiencing a traumatic event such as combat. It makes sense that you may be experiencing some stress since returning from your deployment, however these symptoms do not necessarily mean you have PTSD. Individuals can have these symptoms after a stressful event without having PTSD. However, if these symptoms last for longer than one month, they may be due to PTSD.

Although the exact causes are not known, PTSD is thought to be affected by:

- Genetics
- Experiences, such as combat or a frightening event
- Personality
- Changes in brain chemicals

If you find that your symptoms persist for longer than one month, or if you are concerned about the severity of the symptoms, it’s a good idea to consider talking to a mental health professional. As a veteran, you may also find help by going to the Department of Veterans Affairs [2] for a list of providers and other benefits.

In addition to seeking professional help, there are a few things you can do to help deal with the sleeping problems associated with PTSD. Try:

- Cutting back on caffeine, or eliminating it from your diet
- Sticking to a schedule for sleeping and waking
- Eliminating distracting sounds that might wake you while sleeping

When PTSD-like symptoms persist longer than one month it’s important to get them checked out, because they can get worse if left untreated. You may want to talk to your partner about the possibility of PTSD and how she can support you if you seem to be having difficulty sleeping peacefully. Together you can figure out what works for you both so you can enjoy a good night’s rest.

Alice!
Category:
Emotional Health [3]

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