Post-active duty ? Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

Dear Alice,

How can I help my boyfriend cope with PTSD? He just got back from Iraq.

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's wise to ask this question and anticipate some challenges upon your boyfriend's return from a stressful environment. Relationship difficulties are common when a veteran returns from war, and it can take time for both veterans and their partners to find ways to feel comfortable with each other again. The most helpful things you can do are to educate yourself and your boyfriend about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), be a supportive and non-judgmental listener, and encourage your boyfriend to seek outside help if necessary.

It's estimated that 18 percent of soldiers returning from Iraq will develop PTSD, but almost all soldiers returning from war have experienced trauma during their service, and suffer because of it when they come home. Those who suffered near-death experiences, witnessed explosions or the suffering of others, or participated in killing or wounding others are more likely to develop PTSD. The (relatively) good news is that while PTSD and its symptoms are fairly widespread upon returning home, many of the soldiers will not experience PTSD long-term.

Common symptoms are anxiety, nervousness, guilt, edginess, anger, difficulty concentrating, depression, suicidal thoughts, trouble sleeping and eating, bad dreams, and flashbacks. All of these symptoms, plus others, are normal, and will likely fade over time, usually about a month. The National Center for PTSD provides more information on PTSD, its symptoms, and its treatment.

In that first month, you can help your boyfriend feel safe, comfortable, and trusting again by being a patient, non-judgmental, and supportive listener and creating (but not forcing) opportunities for him to talk about his experiences. If at first he seems distant or closed, although it's hard, try not to take it personally. Readjusting to interacting on a regular basis or living together can be stressful. Patience and understanding will likely show him that it's safe with you and that he can begin to relax.

If your boyfriend's symptoms last for more than a month, it would be a good idea to encourage
him to go to individual or group therapy or a support group. Studies show that these treatments are very successful with PTSD, significantly reducing the risk of chronic symptoms, but that many veterans don't seek help because of the stigma that can be associated with PTSD. Group, individual therapy, or couple's therapy can also be helpful for you as you learn to cope with your boyfriend's symptoms and stresses.

Veterans can refer to the Department of Veteran Affairs [3] for a list of providers, or call the VA Health Benefits Service Center at 1-877-222-VETS.

It's important to remember that all traumas, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, take time to heal, and the length of time varies for everyone. There is no right way to heal from an experience such as serving in Iraq, but having a supportive and educated partner like you can only help your boyfriend recover more quickly and with greater ease.

Alice!

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