

The War at Home – Iraq War Veteran's Wife

MY HUSBAND'S SAFE RETURN FROM IRAQ WAS JUST THE BEGINNING OF MY FAMILY'S BATTLE

When my U.S. Navy SEAL husband, Mark, returned from Iraq with only a broken leg, I praised God he was home safe and sound. In the months following his homecoming, however, I sensed his leg was the least of our concerns. Although Mark recovered physically, his soul still walked with a limp. His unseen wounds, caused by war-zone experiences, slowly but surely infected our marriage, our children, and our family life.

MARRIED TO A STRANGER

The first change I noticed in my husband was a disruption in his sleep patterns. Nightmares menaced the few hours he did sleep, causing him to awaken, sometimes startled, sometimes shouting, always drenched in sweat.

During his waking hours, Mark avoided discussions about the war and television newscasts. He kept to himself and seemed to have trouble concentrating or remembering things.

Months later, Mark's moods became unpredictable. The kids and I walked on eggshells. I noticed certain sights, sounds, and smells had the power to transform a fun family outing into a day I'd rather forget. Mediterranean foods, hot weather, sand, the smell of smoke or burning oil, the sound of low-flying aircraft, a slamming door, or the whine of a vacuum cleaner made his heart race and catapulted him to another place and time.

UGLY SHOWDOWNS

Discussions that previously caused minor tension, such as tight family finances or discipline of the children, combusted into major, ugly showdowns. Simple home repairs and the normal

clutter of a busy, growing family, which never bothered him before, seemed to overwhelm him. Mark became more aggressive behind the wheel and was easily offended by other drivers.

My husband's changing personality and surprising behavior played games with my mind and heart. At first, I was confused; I was never sure what would happen next. Home life was highly flammable. I didn't know whom I could trust with my breaking heart, where to find help without dishonoring or upsetting my husband, or how to approach the topic with him.

INVISIBLE FORCE HELD HIM CAPTIVE

Then I got angry at him—for hurting my feelings, for emotionally scarring the children, for embarrassing me in front of others, for denying the existence of a problem, for refusing to get help. Also I was angry at the invisible force that held my best friend, my lover, and my children's father hostage.

At times I wrestled with guilt. If I were a better wife, I would handle this crisis with more grace, forgiveness, and tenderness, I reasoned. Frankly, I was sick and tired of it and wanted to walk out. Divorce crossed my mind a few times, something we promised 20 years ago would never be an option.

STEPS IN THE GRIEF PROCESS

I learned later my confusion, anger, and guilt were all steps in the grief process. But why was I grieving? I thanked God every time I read the newspaper that Mark had made it home alive. What right did I have to grieve? Yet I was grieving a very real loss, the loss of the man I fell in love with and married.

BEYOND THE FRONT LINES: Medical studies, military surveys, and the media all report our family's struggle isn't unique. The spouses and families who love and live with these vets fight from unfamiliar foxholes against an enemy no one prepared them to face—post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For men, combat

exposure ranks second only to sexual abuse as the leading cause of PTSD.

NOT ALL WOUNDS ARE VISIBLE

The U.S. Army reported in 2004 that of the nearly half million troops who've served in Iraq or Afghanistan since 2003, one in six returning soldiers showed signs of acute stress. Today, more than 3,000 U.S. deaths later, that percentage is rising quickly as troops deploy, return home, and redeploy. Most soldiers who say they suffer combat-related anguish don't seek help from their loved ones, much less from professionals, fearing they'll be seen as weak or unfit for service and promotion.

Daily confusion, anger, guilt, and grief didn't add up to the kind of life I knew God intended for us. And though smaller than the tiniest mustard seed, my faith began to challenge the mountain standing in our way. I took some important steps toward healing for myself and on behalf of my husband and children:

CALLING IN REINFORCEMENTS

I went to God. More frequently on my face than on my knees, I called on the Lord. I relied on my Savior to intercede for me and on his Holy Spirit to pray for me when I couldn't find the words. While my human tendency in my pain was to pull away from God and other believers, I committed to guarding my one-on-one times with God and to continue to worship and fellowship with his family—come what may. I called in reinforcements.

I asked the inner circle of my closest, most trusted sisters in Christ to pray for us without ceasing. "The church needs to wake up to these problems and provide the intensive care that is available through the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit," says Gary Sanders, founder and president of Military Missions Network, an emerging association of churches, parachurch ministries, and military chaplains that are coming together

around the world to reach military members and their families for Christ.

FINDING TRUE FREEDOM

I got godly counsel. My husband wouldn't get help, so I did. My counselor helped me to see my situation objectively. She assured me I wasn't losing my mind. She gave me the tools I needed to interact at home in healthy, life-giving ways. According to Cory Cathcart, chaplain of Naval Special Warfare Group Two in Norfolk, Virginia, "Traumatic events are like cancer cells; they do not go away on their own, but must be addressed and confronted. Although many try to self-medicate their PTSD with alcohol, drugs, or excessive exercise, it's only by the power of God in and through counseling, prayer, and dialogue that there is ever true freedom."

UNDERSTANDING MY HUSBAND'S PAIN

Given the choice between merely minimizing the impact of PTSD versus trusting God in agreement with other believers for complete healing of my vet and family, I chose the miraculous over the minimal. I went to my counselor regularly for more than a year. My research gave me the information and perspective I needed to better understand my husband's pain, its source, its logic, and its potential.

"Military wives and families can learn to recognize PTSD and be better prepared to handle its effects in three ways: by acquiring information, by networking with others in similar situations, and by finding a mentor," adds Cathcart. "An older, more experienced wife who's already walked this road can help a younger woman know what to expect and how to prepare to face the effects of combat stress."

KEEPING THE HEALING PROCESS IN GEAR

I worked toward oneness. Satan's plan is simple: to separate believers, isolate them, and squelch their ability to glorify God. Christian marriages and homes are the devil's bull's-eye. I've learned to dress in the full armor of God before my feet

hit the floor each morning. I try to work toward unity with my husband until my head hits the pillow. I guard our date nights. I flirt with him. We make love more often than I feel like it. Romance and physical intimacy continue to keep the healing process in gear and running more smoothly.

I participate in “wait” training. I do my part, and wait on the Lord. He says, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). I’m doing all I know to do. The rest is God’s to sort out. I know he has the desire, power, and will to work all of this for our good because we love him and, I believe, are called according to his purpose. God wisely selects the tools he wants to use to make us like his Son. If the effect of painful war memories is one tool God chooses to chisel Christ’s likeness into our lives, then he can be trusted to give us the grace we need to stay on his workbench.

THE ONGOING BATTLE

The U.S. [and its Allies] continues to fight the War on Terror. So we on the home front need the proven wisdom of others who’ve lived through similar experiences, the practical advice of specialists and, most importantly, the God-given promises necessary to protect our marriages, families, and communities from the destructive potential of a soldier’s unseen wounds.

“The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name” (Exodus 15:3). God knows a warrior’s heart and can make it whole again. He also recognizes the cry of the warrior’s wife because he has a Bride himself whom he knows intimately and loves dearly—us. He’s able to care for his Bride’s needs and present her to God one day complete and spotless. He can do the same for this earthly warrior’s wife—in his perfect time.

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