

*Symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder can be caused by combat, rape, family violence, and natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes, fires and floods. But what happens when more than one spouse is affected?*

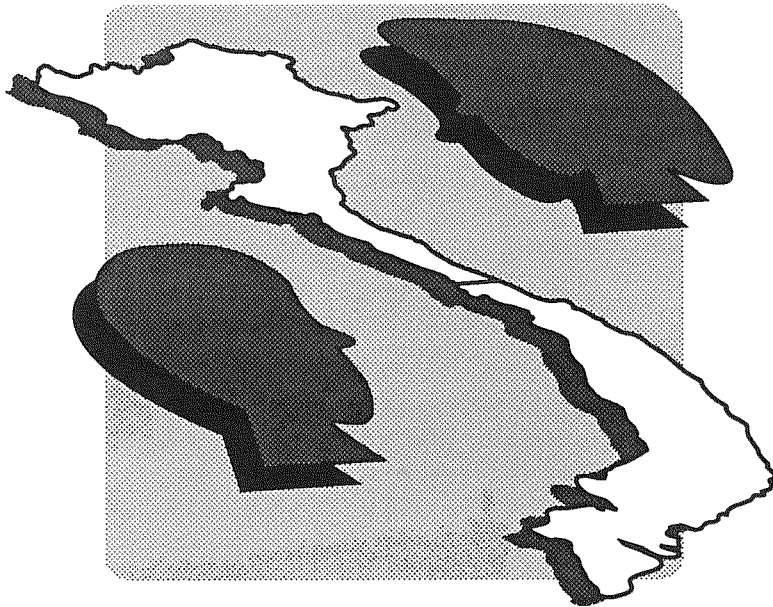
# Dual trauma couples

Some Vietnam veterans and incest survivors frequently have much in common. They have both endured massive psychic and/or bodily trauma and they can both suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder.

Symptoms of PTSD have been found among the survivors of a wide range of trauma: man-made traumas such as combat, rape and family violence, and natural trauma such as earthquakes, hurricanes, fires and floods. Yet symptoms are hypothesized to be more severe and long-lasting among the former than the latter because survivors of made-made traumas usually experience either personal betrayal or a loss of trust in human beings or societal institutions in addition to other losses.

Just as Vietnam veterans often felt, and were in some cases, betrayed by their government and by society, female incest survivors were betrayed by people they loved and who allegedly loved them. The fact that incest survivors were not violated by anonymous strangers, but by people from whom they expected nurturance, protection and sexual distance only intensifies their pain and humiliation, feelings common to most victims.

According to John Wilson, Ph.D., Vietnam veterans are not, "victims in a traditional sense of being coerced and helpless victims of circumstance." However, some were victimized in the sense of being, "rejected, exploited, and pushed down by government and society both during and after the war. Victimization was compounded by denial of adequate benefits, lack of proper treatment for mental disorders associated with

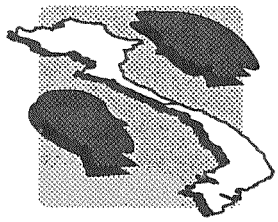


combat, and inadequate educational and vocational benefits."<sup>1</sup> In addition, some Vietnam veterans usually were exposed to not just one, but many traumatic combat situations with little or no time between to process the event(s). In a parallel manner, the majority of incest survivors have not endured just one or two sexual assaults, but have had multiple traumas and often were not believed or supported when they reported the abuse or somehow tried to stop it.<sup>2,3</sup>

During the past five years the Silver Spring, Maryland, Vet Center has seen couples in which both partners have PTSD symptoms: the veteran from his war experience and his wife or girlfriend from sexual victimization by a trusted loved one. There are no statistics, however, on the number of PTSD-afflicted Vietnam veterans who are married to or live with women who

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also have been traumatized. An informal estimate, based on five years experience at the Silver Spring Vet Center, is that approximately one-tenth of the women

who have attended women's groups at this particular Vet Center are incest survivors.

This figure is not surprising since a higher percentage of children are abused sexually by family members than most of us would care to admit.<sup>4</sup>

*Over  
more*

Reliable data show that one-fifth to one-third of women surveyed report childhood sex-

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ual experiences with adult or older males. The parallel figure for males is 8-14 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Of the women who report childhood sexual victimization, 14 percent report being abused by people outside the family. However, a larger percentage, 23 percent, of boys report abuse by people outside the family. These outsiders were not necessarily strangers to the boys. They were coaches, the mother's boyfriends, neighbors, etc.<sup>6</sup>

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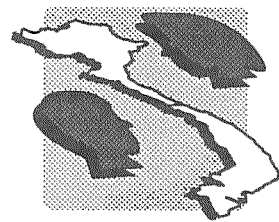
Dual trauma couples have many of the same relationship problems as couples in which only the veteran has PTSD symptoms. Yet they have additional stresses. For example, because the wife typically was assaulted as a child, at night and while sleeping, she may suffer from nightmares and sleep disorders just like her husband. Hence the couple may be kept awake quite often. In addition, the couple must cope not only with the veteran's flashbacks, emotional numbing, depression and limited tolerance for emotional intimacy, but with the wife's similar symptoms. It is not only the veteran who may need to emotionally withdraw from the family at times, but also the wife.

The wife tends to experience her PTSD symptoms during anniversary times (her abuser's birthday or the anniversary of the first

assault) or during activities which remind her of the original trauma, for example, sex. This is especially the case if the veteran is rough or assumes sexual positions or makes sexual demands similar to those of the woman's former abuser.

As available research shows, incest survivors who have yet to receive help often manifest a variety of sexual difficulties, ranging from an extreme aversion to sex, to a tendency to sexualize relationships or to become promiscuous. In some cases, the survivor flips back and forth between periods of puritanical avoidance or disdain of sex and periods of hypersexuality.<sup>5</sup> In one instance a Vietnam wife, who had been assaulted sexually for over eight years by her brother, ran away from home as soon as she was 16 and supported herself via prostitution. Today she has an active sex life with her husband. Yet she never has experienced pleasure in connection with sex, much less an orgasm. For her, sex, even marital sex, is dirty, horrible and repulsive. Although she loves her husband, she wishes that sex was not a part of marriage.

When this woman has flashbacks during intercourse or nightmares afterward, sometimes she tells her husband and other times she does not. If he is in a bad mood or a "PTSD mood," she usually remains silent for fear of aggravating him further. However, even when her husband is feeling well, she hesitates to speak up for fear that her husband will become so enraged that he will seek vengeance against her brother. She also remains silent because she wants to maintain her denial.

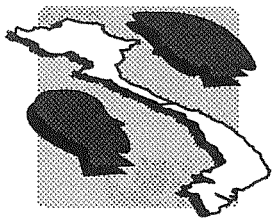


"If I don't talk about it, maybe it will just go away," she says. "But if I talk about it, either to my husband or in the women's group, that means I have to deal

with it and I'm just not ready or willing to do that yet." When she does not explain to her husband why she is sexually disinterested or unresponsive, he easily can interpret her coolness or indifference as rejection.

This wife has been suicidal three times in the past two years. So has her husband who has yet to respond definitively to PTSD treatment. When the veteran becomes suicidal his wife, "pulls herself together," and becomes the family strong person. When the wife becomes suicidal, the veteran quickly assumes the leadership role. Like other dual PTSD couples, neither partner has been willing to commit to an indepth therapeutic process for themselves. Yet they both insist that their partner not only needs, but deserves help.

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"There's nothing more I want in life than for my husband/wife to get over this thing," they both say. For some incest survivors, their husband's healing has become an imperative.

"He's got to get better, he's just got to," they often implore. One can only wonder if the intensity of their desire for their husbands to be healed reflects their own need for healing and their hope that if their husbands can achieve some inner peace, so can they.

In my limited experience there have been no divorces among dual trauma couples where both partners have failed to receive help with PTSD symptoms. Women who are incest survivors often cherish their marriages because they were cut off, or have cut themselves off, from their families of origin. In addition, they are accustomed to living in households where their needs are not always met. Even though life

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with a PTSD-afflicted veteran may be trying at times, for the incest survivor, it may seem like heaven compared to life with an incestuous family member.

In dual trauma marriages, the partners tend to identify with each other. The fact that they both have been hurt by life and suffer deeply acts to bind them together. Typically they do not want to abandon each other as they were once abandoned themselves (the veteran by society, the wife by her assailant). Since they both suffer from low self-esteem, they may be more tolerant of one another. On the other hand, when they become angry with each other, they may experience a double anger. First, anger at their partner and, second, anger toward the person (or institution) who let them down or abused them in the past.

There have been divorces, however, among couples where one or both partners have made significant progress in dealing with their PTSD symptoms. At this point, either one or both partners may realize that they married each

other for the wrong reasons. For example, the wife may realize that she married the veteran primarily as a means of escape from a violent or abusive home. Or, the veteran may realize that he has different needs than his present wife can provide. As each partner's self-esteem grows as a result of therapy, they may develop interests or traits incompatible with their present partner. Or, they may decide they deserve someone "better" than their present mate.

Special problems arise when the veteran was abused physically or sexually as a child and suffers from two kinds of PTSD symptoms: one from his war experience and one from his childhood, which is another subject beyond the scope of this article. ■

*In our next issue, read about triple and quadruple trauma couples. —Ed.*

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Wilson, John, "Understanding the Vietnam Veteran," in *Post Traumatic Therapy and Victims of Violence*, edited by Frank Ochberg, Brunner/Mazel, New York, N.Y., 1988, pp. 227-228.

<sup>2</sup>Herman, Judith, "Father-Daughter Incest," pp. 175-195.

<sup>3</sup>Courtois, Christine, *Healing the Incest Wound: Adult Survivors in Therapy*, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, N.Y., 1988.

<sup>4</sup>Herman, op cit; Courtois, op cit.

<sup>5</sup>Herman, op cit, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Finkelhor, David, *Childhood Sexual Abuse: New Theory and Research*, Free Press, Macmillan Press, New York, N.Y., 1984.

