

*Learn more about multiple-trauma families in this article which continues discussion started in our last issue.*

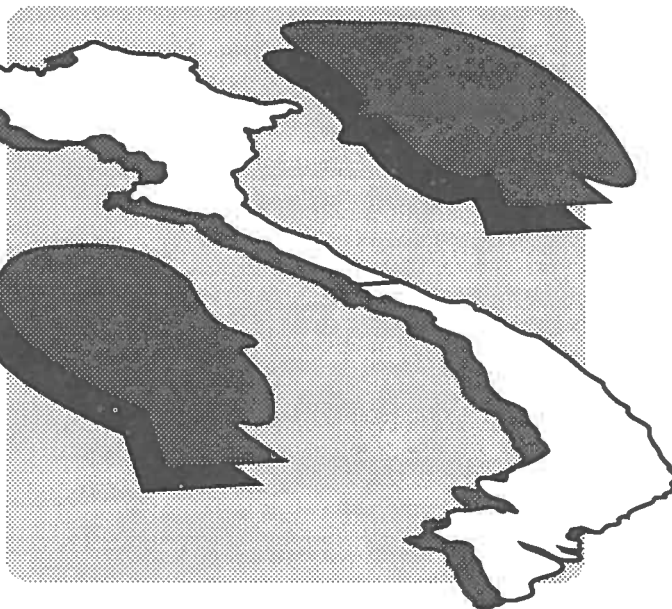
# Triple and quadruple trauma couples

To date there has been little or no research completed on dual, triple, or quadruple trauma couples. This article is based on the clinical impressions of one psychologist working with couples who are contending with not just two, but three or even four traumas.

Examples of multiple trauma includes couples in which the veteran suffers from one set of unresolved issues regarding his Vietnam War experience, and yet another set of problems from being sexually and/or physically abused as a child (or prisoner of war). At the same time, his wife or girlfriend also has PTSD symptoms from being abused sexually and/or physically victimized as a child or in a previous relationship or marriage as an adult. Since PTSD symptoms also can result from witnessing the murder, rape or suicide of one's parent, if either the veteran or his significant other were exposed to such events they may be suffering from PTSD symptoms even if they were not injured themselves.

For example, several incest survivors who have attended the Silver Spring, Maryland, Vet Center women's support group are married or living with veterans who joined the military to escape a physically and/or sexually abusive family of origin. In one case, the veteran had been sodomized by his father and two uncles. This veteran could not wait to become of age and enlist in the military where he hoped to find some peace and stability. Instead his Vietnam experience only gave him another set of bad memories.

Other examples include marriages or relationships where the woman was abused incestuously as a child and then went on to marry or

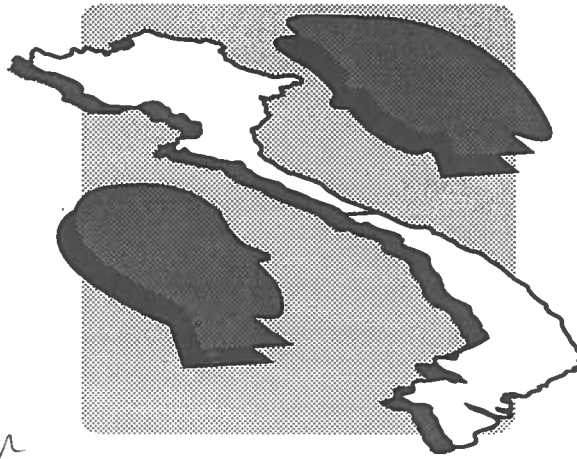


live with a physically abusive man. As research has shown,<sup>1</sup> women who were abused as children have relatively high rates of revictimization: they are more likely than other women to be raped or to become involved with abusive males. For these women, PTSD symptoms from childhood or adolescent experiences exist alongside PTSD symptoms derived from living with or being married to a violent man.

A clinical 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.

In all such cases observed by the author, these women came to the Vet Center not to

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resolve past issues with their former husband or family of origin, but to salvage their present marriage or love relationship with a Vietnam veteran. Yet in order to work on their present intimate relationship, these women eventually had to confront the psychological aftereffects of their past misery. For example, they had to work on their own emotional numbing, suppressed rage, tendency to isolate, passivity and persistent low self-esteem.<sup>2</sup>

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In one case, a veteran's wife had a 13-year history of physical abuse by her mother and sexual assault by her father. At age 16 she ran away from home only to marry a man who beat her regularly. After she gained the courage to leave him, she vowed never to become involved with men again. But a certain Vietnam veteran won her heart and she remarried.

She brought many interpersonal problems to her second marriage, as did her husband, who had been sexually and physically abused by his parents in his formative years prior to his tour of duty in Vietnam. After this veteran completed two years of PTSD therapy for his Vietnam War experience, he found that he still was not free of PTSD symptoms. His combat dreams now were replaced with dreams of his father beating him and calling him names. Eventually this veteran came to see that even

though he had made substantial progress in making peace with Vietnam, he had yet another challenge before him in dealing with his childhood.

My experience in working with dual or more-than-dual trauma couples—couples struggling with more than two sets of traumatic experiences—has shown these couples tend not to separate or divorce. While these marriages and relationships often were conflictual, with both partners complaining that their needs were not being met, each partner tended to identify with the other's pain and cling to the other as perhaps one of the few sources of affection in their lives.

Typically, abused children are starved for nurturance and positive regard because physical abuse seldom occurs without concomitant emotional abuse and physical neglect.<sup>3</sup> Even as an adult, abuse survivors usually do not know how to nurture themselves, not only because they were not nurtured as children, but because their parents (or caretakers) provided poor role models for self-love or self-nurturance.<sup>4</sup>

While it is difficult to form generalities about such a diverse group as abusive parents or spouse abusers, research has consistently found that, on the whole, they are immature emotionally, needy and suffer from deep feelings of insecurity and poor impulse control. Abusive parents (or spouses) lash out at their children (or spouses) when the child or spouse fails to quell one of their inner anxieties or one of their frustrations with the outside world.<sup>5</sup> Abusive adults often were raised in violent or otherwise abusive homes. Hence they lack the self-love and skills necessary for self-nurturance, expect their children to take care of them and pass on to their children a legacy of low self-esteem and self-neglect.

Because their families of origin provided little nurturance, men and women who were hurt by their parents or other caretakers often have an intense need for nurturance and love which they may hope will be fulfilled by their spouses. Yet they may also fear receiving nurturance and love because, in the past, loving care was associated with pain and they received both rewards and punishment from the same person.

As a result, in the triple or quadruple trauma family where one or both adults were victimized as children by their caretakers, a pattern of approach/avoidance may develop toward marital intimacy and loving.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes it is the veteran who needs to withdraw or be angry; at other times, it is the wife or girlfriend who pouts and has the temper tantrums. Often the anger or withdrawal occurs after a particularly loving experience, as a defense against antici-

pated rejection or some other form of "punishment." This can be extremely confusing and painful to the other partner who, at this point, may threaten to leave or seek a divorce.

Yet because this partner also was abused as a child, he or she may be accustomed to receiving double messages and therefore not act on his or her threat to leave. Undoubtedly, his or her abusive caretakers said, "Get away from me," or, "You're so bad you deserve the punishment I'm giving you," only to say eventually, "I love you," or, "I need you." Abuse survivors tend to stay in dysfunctional or partially rewarding marriages because they are accustomed to living in households where they are scapegoated and their needs are not met.<sup>7</sup>

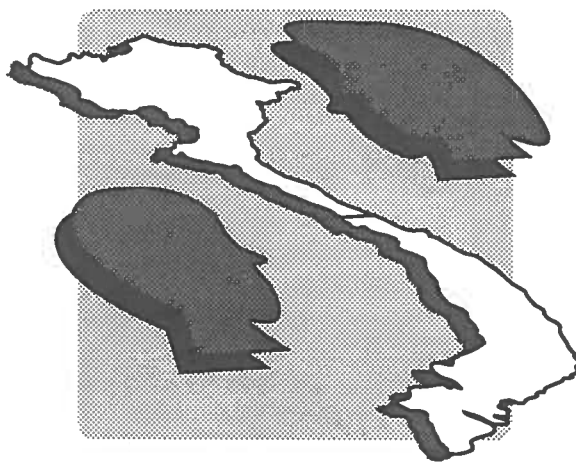
Triple and quadruple trauma couples also tend to stay together because of their children. Although survivors of childhood physical and sexual assault often have been described in the literature as having deficiencies in their parenting skills, many abuse survivors who have sought help at the Silver Spring Vet Center have proven not only to be adequate but superior parents. In giving their children the love, attention and protection they craved but failed to receive as children, they somehow redeem their past pain. In addition, they can enjoy vicariously a normal childhood by providing their children with good care.

On the other hand, almost every instance of child abuse I have encountered working at the Vet Center has involved a triple or quadruple trauma family. The stresses of living with multiple traumas and the possibility that, on some level, abuse survivors developed an "identification with the aggressor" syndrome can sometimes lead to assault on one of the children, even a highly cherished child. These outbursts of violence, however, usually are followed by periods of intense remorse and giving to the child who has been hurt. In order to avert additional child abuse, the parent(s) need to learn to set limits on what they can give to their children and to learn alternative ways of coping with one another and the problems of living. ■

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Savina, L., *Help for the Battered Woman*, Bridge Publishers, South Plainfield, N. J., 1986; Walker, L., *The Battered Woman*, Harper & Row, New York, N.Y., 1979; Herman, J. L., *Father-Daughter Incest*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1981.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Matsakis, A., *Relationships and the Compulsive Overeater*, Hazelden Press, Center City, Minn., 1988.

<sup>7</sup>Matsakis, A., *Vietnam Wives: Women and Children Surviving Life with Veterans with PTSD*, Woodbine House, Kensington, Md., 1988.