



# The Conflict at Home:

## Soldiers Confronting PTSD

by Rev. Dr. Steven Hokana

This booklet is dedicated to those who struggle with the rawness of war and to the families who support them in their journey. It also goes out to pastors and chaplains who point to the cross and, above all, to our Christus Victor who has destroyed death and leads His church to life.

### “Now Hear This!”

This is dedicated to you—fellow service personnel who protect our great nation. You put your life on the line and you do it without question. Thank you for your service. This also goes out to our families. They, too, struggle as we come back physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Finally, this is dedicated to the One who was with us during those moments of danger, fear, and loneliness—our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who always loves us no matter how we think and feel about ourselves.

We are in this together. Tomorrow is going to be a better day. Just as sure as God loves you, you can get through this “300-pound gorilla” called, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD). The materials in this booklet are divided into three sections. The first describes PTSD in the form of a **Story** about a serviceman back from deployment. Look for yourself as the story unfolds. The second part is **The PTSD Toolbox**. If you’re like me, you can never get enough drills, drill bits, screwdrivers, hammers, and wrenches. In this section, six important tools are listed that are helpful in PTSD. In the final section, **Thoughts and Recommendations**, ideas to use and places to go for help are provided. There is a lot of pain, guilt, and even shame you may be feeling right now. Part of the challenge is sorting this stuff out. As real as these emotions are, it’s just as important for you to know with absolute certainty that God in Christ Jesus loves you and desires to journey with you by giving you hope and healing.

Listen, I know you’re hurting. You also have strengths and abilities that God has given you. I want to talk with you about PTSD. Thanks for grabbing this booklet. Take time to thumb through it. Before you go too far into it, let me *cut a deal* with you. If at any time during the reading you feel like you need to take a break and get some air, please do. I’m cool with that. If you fall into a blue funk, want to hurt yourself, or someone else, I am not cool with that. Stop and get help.

### “Why Faith in the Fight?”

When we go to war we take everything necessary in order to win the fight. Just like artillery, comms, medical, and intelligence assets are necessary to any soldier, for the person struggling with a difficult illness faith is a fundamental and indispensable component. When it comes to being a warrior and struggling with PTSD, remember the word, **S-P-I-R-I-T-U-A-L:**

- S** - Strengthens relationships, God holds us with His grip
- P** - Peace of mind knowing God is “on point”
- I** - Inspires us to rise above our situation
- R** - Reconnects us with our loved ones
- I** - Invigorates us to move in a positive direction
- T** - Transforms us by His love
- U** - Unifies us into a body, a community, Christ’s church
- A** - Attitude of positiveness, we can adjust to the “new normal”
- L** - Life principle (faith gives us a new mission statement: By God’s help, I can \_\_\_\_\_.)

We use faith and our beliefs in conjunction with medical care. When you put both together it is a dynamite mixture that leads to restoration and healing.

## “Oh God, What’s Happening to Me?”

First and foremost, the best way to deal with PTSD is out in the open. Let’s not dance around the seriousness of PTSD. If you have symptoms similar to those portrayed in the story below, talk to a medical provider and get help! It could be a simple readjustment issue. It could be a physical injury that looks like PTSD, or you could have a variety of health issues. Sit down with a care provider and sort this out.

### Back from Deployment

Check out the following story and see if you find yourself in it. Notice the thoughts, feelings, and actions of someone who served on a deployment. These are real events rolled up into single account.

You’ve come home from the Iraq and Afghanistan area of operation. The ceremony is over. It’s been about three to six months, and you’re starting to settle in to the routine of life. There’s a problem, however; something is not right. You are not gliding into “normal.” Some of it’s the awful nightmares. There are horrific images of battle, buddies wounded, and friends who have died. You decide to go to the garage and work on that engine. You wanted to rebuild that thing since before you deployed. The smell of diesel fuel works its way into your nostrils. Like a “butt stroke” you are back in the motor pool where wounded and dead are brought in from an IED blast. That’s creepy. That incident reminded you of that time you saw that dead raccoon by the road and swerved quickly to avoid it. You’re also reminded of the time you heard the backfire of a dump truck and *hit the dirt*. You felt like such a dipstick—like you were losing control.

In an attempt to hold back the flood of emotions and pain, you try anything. Head-banging, metal, grunge rock pushes back some of the restless feelings. Video games kind of work. But it’s the booze and drugs that best do the trick. You drink because sleep escapes you. You tell people it helps, but you know it’s BS. Sex is too “complicated,” so you fill the void of loneliness with internet porn. It’s just easier. In an attempt to get help, you try going to church, but you look around and you’re anxious about *security*, of all things. Is this place really safe? You try to listen to the pastor. He talks about sin and God, and you’re zoning. You think he doesn’t have a clue what *ugly sin* looks like.

Your friends want to go out and party, and you’re getting pumped about going. Your palms are sweaty; you’re stressing and don’t know why. After a short time, you invent a great excuse to leave. Now your family and friends are ticked off at you. They say you’ve changed. You want to tell them about the bodies, the death, the gore, the crap, but the stories are so ugly. The images might frighten them and then they may not love you. So you clam up. You stuff it. You push people back. You use that favorite tool learned in war to cope—*anger*. You are afraid you are going to “lose it.”

## “So What’s Going on Here?”

Here is what I described. First, it’s okay to have a few bumps in the road as you’re readjusting to a normal life. So, nightmares, a hyperactive startle response, re-experiencing war zone episodes, feeling flat, and the occasional excessive drinking are normal. Sex can seem flat, and bouts of anger are expected. Anger is something I’ll talk about a little later. Here’s the main thing to remember: if all this stuff continues for longer than three months, get help. PTSD is a medical condition. **You don’t treat yourself for cancer or a broken arm, and you don’t treat yourself for PTSD.** Get the help you need. Veterans Affairs has resources for you as does the Military Onesource. (See links in the last chapter.)

If you have the diagnosis of PTSD or mild traumatic brain injury (MTBI) post-traumatic stress, follow the guidance of your care provider and case manager. The simplest steps can make all the difference: take your meds and make all your appointments. Talk to your care providers. Tell them about what you’re thinking and feeling. They are not mind-readers. Of all the current treatments out there for PTSD, faith and hope in God are so vitally important. God has given you awesome tools in your toolbox to make your situation better. Be sure to use them.

### The PTSD Toolbox

*The first tool is Truth.* This is powerful. Even Christians who are strong believers are going to go through a difficult period when exposed to levels of appalling violence. No one walks away unscathed. It is absolutely normal to have periods of re-adjustment, to develop post-traumatic stress and, in some cases, PTSD. Let me make this clear: you are not weak. This is not a shot at your strength. This is about horrific exposure to bloodshed and death where sights, smells, beliefs, feelings,

and thoughts are pushed to the max. The garbage of war overwhelms a person's ability to deal with it. Let me say it again: no one walks away from war unaffected by its brutality and violence. It's not like you just saw a movie or played a round of your favorite video game. This is ugly stuff, and it impacts everyone. Even the most hard-core, war-fighting killer is going to go through spiritual and emotional upheavals—just as you are experiencing now. Although you may feel like holing up somewhere, you are not alone. Thousands of good people are journeying through the pain of war.

*The second tool is **God's Love** and **God's Power**.* This is personal. Christ died for you. Jesus knew the price of our freedom, and our eternal hope was paid for with His blood. He poured His out for you and all people. He sacrificed His life for you, so you can have life. His death gives meaning to your life. The resurrection of Christ is like a Mike Tyson uppercut on Satan's glass jaw. The fear of death is gone. Satan is defeated! How awesome is the power of the cross! Now, place that *muscle* next to what's happening to you. You are going through blistering thoughts and feelings. Sometimes they hit you all at once: anger, distrust, rage. This stuff is normal. Powerful feelings are a way to express deep hurt and mistrust. War brings this out. Those relationships we take for granted seem to be the biggest target of our lashing out. The pain can revolve around a lack of trust with God, the church, our family, our friendships, or some combination of these. Your feelings are yours. They are honest and they hurt. But let's set the record straight: your relationship to God is not based on your feelings or your emotions. God sent Christ Jesus to suffer, die, and rise for the sins of the world. His desire is to restore you to life.

*The third tool is **Forgiveness**.* A number of warriors feel they lost the *right* to take a pull from the deep well of forgiveness. Their reasoning is powerful: some killed kids in war; others had buddies die, and they came home without a scratch. *That* really hurts, especially when you make a promise to watch each other's back and bring your buddy home. The reasons for getting voted off the "forgiveness island" vary. A sergeant told me he didn't deserve forgiveness. He watched an enemy insurgent plant a roadside bomb. He waited patiently for him to finish and then blew him away with a main gun round. Another soldier shot a kid. The insurgent was a child and about to take out the CO with an AK-47. But to this warrior, it doesn't matter. Through tears they declare that God can't forgive someone who kills kids. Here's my point: many soldiers carry survivors' guilt, grief, and unresolved pain. It doesn't get better with age. The remorse, profound sadness, and deep spiritual anguish won't go away by shoving them down deep in your gut. The lack of forgiveness slowly kills you, and it's not with bullets. It's with anger, guilt, booze, drugs, and fights with loved ones.

Truth be told, no one *deserves* forgiveness from a perfect God, but here's the good news. *Forgiveness is not about you.* Forgiveness is about God's activity, and it's freely given. We can't meet God even halfway on this one. He demonstrates His forgiveness in dying for us while we were His enemies. Did you catch that? While we were His enemies! The big question is how do I grab hold of this thing called forgiveness? First of all, forgiveness is a *power* word! It means when you forgive you are willing to set yourself free from the junk that keeps you from moving on with life. This means you can forgive your release, your CO, your 1SG, the enemy you were forced to kill, your friend who died, your country that can't understand war, your family that loves you—and you can forgive *yourself*.

This should get you fired up! No matter what you are feeling, Jesus' death on a cross takes it away. You have a right to a full pardon. The rotten, ugly pain that sits in your gut is now placed on the shoulders of Christ. From God's own Son resides the power to trump anything war can do to the soul. Forgiveness comes to us by hearing the words of peace and taking them to heart.

*The fourth tool is **Prayer**.* God wants us to talk with Him. When I visited a wounded soldier at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, he asked if we could talk. He lost a leg and was having a very difficult time with physical and spiritual wounds. The future, the realization that some of his friends weren't coming home was weighing heavy on him. His relationship with his wife would be different. There was lots of stuff coming at him all at once. So we talked and all was cool until he suddenly went "agro." His voice raised, his face turned red, and his eyes welled up with tears. He told me that he and God had a long talk last night. He yelled, screamed, spat, and insulted God in just about every way he knew how. Now before you write this brother off, let me go on. It may sound like he was being rude with the Almighty. But no way! This was the beginning of his rebirth. This soldier was starting a new life. He was beginning a new normal and a new relationship with God. He calmed down. His beet-red face returned to normal, and the tears ceased to well up in his bloodshot eyes. The soldier said, "So me and God ... we're cool now." This is a form of prayer.

Prayer can take many forms. Most of us *talk* to God. I do it all the time. Try something different; why not write Him a letter? Better yet, write one every day. No joke. Keep a daily duty log or prayer journal. There is no limit to what you can tell God. Tell Him what ticks you off; tell Him what's troubling you. Talk to Him about your family or your job or being unemployed. Not long ago, a vet told me he liked writing to God because no one interrupted him. Check it out and give it a try. If you write 15 minutes every day for two weeks you stand a good chance of feeling better. Another prayer is that of

thanksgiving. No matter how bad you feel, forcing yourself to thank God for even one good thing may be that shot in the arm that gets you back on the road to life.

Silent prayer is helpful. Try this: read a Scripture passage, Psalm 4. Then, with no interruption, just sit in a quiet place and reflect on its meaning for 15 minutes. Try not to go to sleep. Many warriors who have sleep problems become so relaxed with God's Word they fall asleep and lose out on the power of the silent prayer method.

*The fifth tool* is the **Church**. This is a community that builds up like-minded people. Church is where we gather under Christ's leadership. Church is a great place to hear God's truths. There is no better place to grab on to His promises of hope. Church is a place where you team up with those like you who are working through the challenges of life. It is a community of believers, and its members include both the living and those who have died in Christ. Church is so much more than a brick and mortar building. This community is important when you struggle with PTSD and when it's hard to hear that you do belong. You feel cut off from the herd. You are a welcome member of the Body of Christ. The church is the local community down the street with the steeple. The church is also the huge body of believers that cares for you. Nothing can hold back the church.

*The sixth tool* is the **Bible**. I'll never forget watching CPR performed in the Combat Support Hospital. By forcing air into the lungs, a battered hero is brought back to life. It is God who breathes life into our soul. His breath is in the pages of the Bible and its promises. The Bible is the book that opens our eyes and emboldens us to a deep relationship with Christ. Look at how military personnel are portrayed.

The person with the greatest faith Jesus ever encountered was a soldier, a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:10)! Approach this *tool*, the Bible, differently. First, look at people who went through some lousy periods in their lives. Second, see how God deals with them. Third, see yourself in the story and ask, "How am I like/not like that person?" This lets you know the Bible is real. Holy Scripture is for people who go through toxic times. Find these folks in your Bible. Look in the Old Testament. Job went through disasters and God rescued him (Job 42:12). Read it for yourself. Have you ever read about King Saul? Now *that's* not a pretty picture. He is a tortured soul who suffers fits of rage, jealousy, and a hunger for respect from a father figure, Samuel. Sadly, and unnecessarily, King Saul—a once proud warrior—kills himself (1 Samuel 31). He's a warrior who feels rejection because he did not follow God's way—get the picture? If you spent one minute in a military uniform or have been in a firefight or an ambush, it will jump start your life to spend time in the life of King David. He is a warrior. David made serious mistakes, but he always loved God. David expressed himself by talking with God through prayer and music (Psalms). Now that you're an adult, start with the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17). You will find new insight as a fellow warrior. As you thumb through your Bible, you will begin to see a lot of military themes in its pages. In the New Testament alone you see soldiers who listen to John the Baptist. You read about centurions and other soldiers in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In the book of Acts, we know the name of the military commander responsible for safeguarding Paul. Who can ever forget the great passage of Ephesians 6, which speaks about "the armor of God"? Explore your Bible and see how you belong in the Kingdom.

## Thoughts and Recommendations

Thank you for checking out this **Project Connect** booklet on PTSD. It is intended to strengthen and inspire you to hang tough in the fight. Like all difficult and challenging events in our lives, you can grow from it. With the help of a great and powerful God, *you will persevere*.

### Websites:

#### Men's NetWork

<http://www.lhm.org/men>

This is a great website for men to grow in their faith and strengthen one another in Christ. It's full of free resources, video Bible studies, men's group events, and more.

#### Operation Barnabas

<http://lcms.org/ministry-to-the-armed-forces/operation-barnabas>

This is a website designed to help those in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It's a network of care for military servicemen and women, their families, and others.

### **Military Onesource**

<http://www.militaryonesource.mil>

This website is dedicated to military personnel, spouses, and their families. It offers a wide range of assistance and help. You can also call them 24-7 at 800-342-9647.

### **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

<http://www.va.gov>

This website is packed with all kinds of help, information, and useful resources.

Every state has a local Department of Veterans Affairs office. Contact your state VA for help. Do a Google search by typing in "Department of Veterans Affairs in the state of (enter your state here)." Each state also has a "Yellow Ribbon" program. The benefits vary from state to state, but it's definitely worth checking out.

Remember as you journey through war and deployment, you're not alone. Your family and loved ones are concerned and worry about you. So take care of your family by taking care of yourself. Let your loved ones know when you have a bad day and that it has nothing to do with them. Have the self-awareness and respect for them to let them know your PTSD is "kicking your tail." Tell your family what you need from them. Your loved ones are not mind-readers. Do not neglect your children. Kids aren't little adults. They don't know what's going on with you. All they know is they love you and are very proud of you. Children don't understand the pain of PTSD. Be mindful not to make serious life decisions while in a treatment program. It takes time to find the right treatment for you, and then it takes additional time to make it work. Rome wasn't built in a day. Your PTSD won't be controlled in a couple of *easy sessions*. Be patient with yourself and others. The military trained you to be a hard-charger. Let time be a weapon in your favor to bring about a cure. Take good care of your body: watch the booze, eat healthy, exercise, pray often, and love those who love you. Remember always that it is Christ who will see you through this and any other challenge you face in your life.

As Paul says to Timothy:

*"Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in His own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To Him be honor and might forever. Amen"* (1 Timothy 6:12-16).

Thank you for your service, and God bless you!

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Hokana is a retired active-duty U.S. Army chaplain with more than 30 years of service to our nation. His military experience has taken him to the Middle East, Cuba, Bosnia, Germany, Alaska, and multiple stateside assignments, which have included service to the Airborne Infantry, Armor, and to major medical centers and military academic institutions.



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