

# How combat vets' PTSD affects families

August 4 2017, by Don Mcswiney

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Soldiers who experience the horror and terror of conflict often return home far different people than they were when they left. Many are angry, suffer from depression, harbour suicidal thoughts or attempt to isolate themselves from the world, hoping to avoid triggers that can instantly force them to relive their experiences.

While increasing attention has been paid in recent years to helping armed forces members cope with post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), not as much attention has been paid to the experience and grief of intimate partners and families who experience trauma in trying to deal with the changes a loved one, coping with PTSD, goes through.

There is some research on the impact on partners, but not so much on [children](#)," says researcher Tara Collins, a Faculty of Social Work, Clinical Social Work PhD candidate who is conducting a new study on the impact of PTSD on [military families](#).

"I wanted to look at the experience of both the partners and children. There are definitely not many services for children, and I'm finding that secondary trauma for the spouse and children is quite prevalent. The knowledge from the professionals isn't always there in terms of how to treat the secondary trauma or treat the families."

## **A huge issue: Nearly 40 per cent of Afghanistan mission personnel experience PTSD**

Nearly one-in-ten Canadian military personnel who took part in the mission in Afghanistan collect disability benefits for PTSD. However, Collins, along with many other experts believe the number affected (but not, for example, collecting disability payments) is much higher. Some research indicates that up to 36 per cent of Afghanistan mission personnel are experiencing PTSD to some degree.

Collins recently received a prestigious Wounded Warriors Canada Doctoral Scholarship in Military and Veteran Health Research for her study that she says seeks to unpack the lived [experiences](#) of families residing with a military member coping with PTSD.

## Personal interest sparks research project

Her interest in the study sprang from personal experience, after her partner returned from Afghanistan and struggled with PTSD.

"We were at a military parade and they were shooting the guns type thing," recalls Collins. "His reaction was to hide my daughter in his arms, and he squeezed her really tight – as if to really kind of hold her and protect her. His father noticed that he was really holding her tight, and he kind of said, 'Whoa. Whoa.' He was in his own world – really trying not to get triggered – but he was being triggered."

Collins says when her partner returned from Afghanistan "there was a lot of anger." He struggled with alcohol use and isolated himself from the [family](#), he also wasn't sleeping and did anything possible to avoid having nightmares.

"He wasn't dealing with anything," recalls Collins. "He was just trying to ignore it as much as he could. I mean generally military members don't speak about their conflict experiences at home, and it's not always recommended that they do. However, the little pieces that I have heard are quite horrendous, and I don't blame him for trying to mask that. Eventually he got to a point where he basically didn't want to deal with it at all in terms of even living. I eventually said, 'No. We can't do this. We can't live like this.'"

Collin's partner was in agreement, and he agree to attend the eight-and-a-half week Bellwood Treatment Program in Ontario. The program included a brief four-day program for Collins and the children.

## Study hopes to better inform counsellors and social workers about PTSD in military families

The road back from PTSD is long and Collins says that, not surprisingly, her [partner](#) "still has good days and bad days." This is why she believes her research is so important. While programs for military personnel are available, partners and children may not have the same access and may receive help from a social worker with little background or experience with this kind of trauma. Given her position as an "insider" to military life and someone who has lived the experience, she feels like she is in a unique position to help and in a unique position to find willing study participants. In the end, she hopes her research will better inform clinical [social workers](#) and others who provide support to families, to help the family heal as well.

"I always believe that approaches to family practice can always be improved," says Collins. "The services for children, in particular, are not anywhere near where they should be. The understanding of what is involved for these families is not there. I think PTSD is quite complex in general, and then when you get into the systemic issues associated with the military, because it really is a very different way of living."

Provided by University of Calgary

Citation: How combat vets' PTSD affects families (2017, August 4) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-08-combat-vets-ptsd-affects-families.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.