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## PTSD is a battle for veterans' spouses, too

By Kristina Scala, staff writer Aug 7, 2016



Carl Kosola / Photojournalist

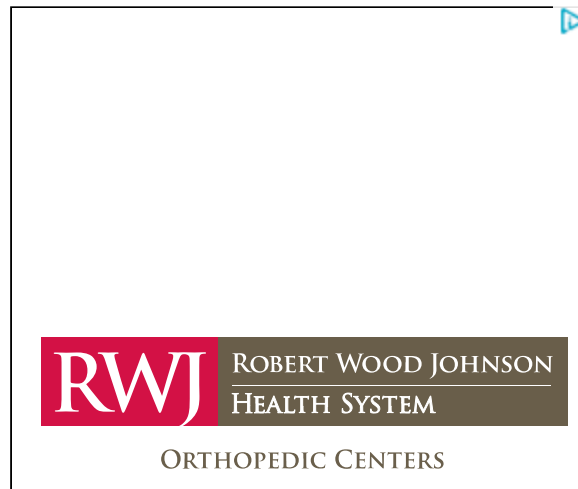
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Willy Ethier smiles at her husband, Leo Ethier, in their backyard garden in Delanco.

The waterfall trickles into the koi pond that drowns out the noise of passing cars. A pergola sits above the peaceful pond, which is nestled in the corner of a shrub-filled backyard.

Inside the house, the walls are covered with hand-painted vines and family photos. A mural of a cloudy sky is painted on the kitchen ceiling.

Vietnam veteran Leo "Smooth" Ethier and his wife, Willy, call this oasis on Burlington Avenue in Delanco their home.



But the retreat was forged out of the dark roots of war-induced post-traumatic stress disorder, the mental wounds that leave some veterans struggling to cope and their loved ones feeling like strangers.

"I kind of felt like an outsider in his life. I guess that's the best way to say it," Willy Ethier said, sitting next to her husband of 26 years. "There was that part of his life that I couldn't get into, and I wanted to be the one that was going to make him better. That's just natural, if you love somebody."

The obvious result of PTSD is the toll it takes on combat veterans when they step off the battlefield and back into civilian life. The sleepless nights, flashbacks and sudden bursts of rage and anxiety can seem never-ending.

And while many PTSD veterans isolate themselves from the outside world, their spouses often are caught in the middle of their internal battles. The conflicts they face are no less real or significant than the PTSD their spouses endure, according to those who deal with the disorder and study how it can affect the family.

### **The statistics**

The National Center for PTSD reports that between 5 percent and 10 percent of veterans with PTSD experience lasting relationship issues. Research conducted to determine the impact PTSD has on relationships found that divorce rates for veterans with PTSD were twice as high as those for veterans who didn't have the disorder. The study also found vets with PTSD are three times more likely to divorce at least twice compared with vets who don't have PTSD.

"Part of the difficulty one might have is that their loved one has changed in a lot of fundamental ways," said Dr. Rehan Aziz, associate professor of psychiatry at Rutgers University's Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick, Middlesex County.

When those veterans give up the things they used to do to avoid potential discomfort, their spouses tend to feel alienated, Aziz said.

Steven Sayers, a clinical psychologist at the Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center, said: "I think it can be a sense of walking on eggshells at times, and other times frustration with the veteran."

As the director of Coaching Into Care, a VA call center that provides consultations to those seeking mental health treatment for veterans' family members, Sayers has heard the stories firsthand.

Family members are the ones who see a veteran's varying emotions, from emotional and physical withdrawal to irritability, Sayers and Aziz said. As a result, spouses often experience frustration, anger, depression and relationship woes, according to the National Center for PTSD. Spurts of violence by the PTSD veteran also can occur.

### **On the homefront**

"Us wives should have PTSD for living with their PTSD," Willy Ethier said. "It's quite an adventure every day."

When he returned from Vietnam — and long before Leo and Willy were married — Leo would be startled awake by flashbacks of Vietnam. He would spring to his feet with his pistol drawn.

That took a fatal toll on his first marriage, he said. His first wife left him to raise their two children on his own. For the sake of his kids, he said he kept his PTSD hidden when they were growing up.

Leo was still struggling with PTSD when he met Willy, 20 years after he returned from Vietnam.

During those early years together, Leo's PTSD was an unbreakable barrier for Willy.

He often bounced from anger to sadness, and on his bad days, he'd sit in silence and stare. Meanwhile, "a good day is if he told me the reasons why he was going to have a bad day," she recalled.

Leo's nightmares gave Willy her only glimpses into his war experiences.

"He had a good buddy that blew up in front of him and body parts landed on him. He had a hard time with that," she said. "That used to come up in his dreams. (He was) trying to save people."

Despite the challenges, the two married and worked together to turn their home into a haven.

Leo said the serenity of their garden helped him escape from the world and brought peace to both of them. But most of all, he constructed it to keep his uneasy mind occupied.

"I built all of this and buried myself into the things that I do," Leo said.

The couple, who didn't have children together, lived what they described as relatively normal lives. But vacationing with another couple, sharing a room with someone, or even sleeping on the couch at her mother's house were — and remain — inconceivable since Leo's PTSD symptoms are still unpredictable, Willy said.

## Living with PTSD

Today, after 26 years of marriage, countless therapy sessions and visits to the Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center, the couple said they've nearly perfected dealing with Leo's PTSD symptoms by avoiding crowds and other situations that might be triggers.

Although not all veterans with PTSD deal with relationship issues, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and medical professionals recognize the mental illness can impact relationships, and that impacts the veteran's treatment.

There's no cure for PTSD and there's no quick fix, experts say. It can be managed only with a combination of medication, therapy and social support.

"Even though families might feel alienated, they might not understand what's happening," Rutgers' Aziz said. "It's really important for them to remain supportive."

He advises spouses to remain vigilant and patient when dealing with spouses with PTSD, and to seek their own mental health care if they're depressed or chronically anxious or irritable.

Military couples who have stayed together for years say they've mastered dealing with PTSD in one way or another. They've learned to live with the pitfalls of mental war wounds, but they stress that the symptoms are one of the biggest hurdles in their marriage.

"I think the hardest thing I had to learn how to deal with was the nightmares," Lyn West, of Southampton, said of her husband, Bill "Tonto" West, 66.

Nightmares occurred often, and late nights at the bar were frequent as Bill struggled for years with PTSD.

A Marine squad leader from 1968 to 1970, Bill was only 18 when he saw 10 of his 14 men die in an ambush that wounded him. He periodically relives that moment in his sleep, according to Lyn. He always limps for a few weeks after the flashbacks, even though it's been decades since he was shot in the knee.

One night, when Bill was screaming in pain, Lyn shook him awake and was caught in the crossfire of his nightmare and choked. She said doctors had warned her about waking him up during a nightmare flashback, but she couldn't bear listening to him scream.

"As a spouse, that's hard to do," Lyn said, tears welling in her eyes.

Lyn didn't give up on Bill. She helped him raise his son from his first marriage, who was just 3 when they got together. And they had three kids of their own. She stuck by him through some unbelievably rough times, Bill said.

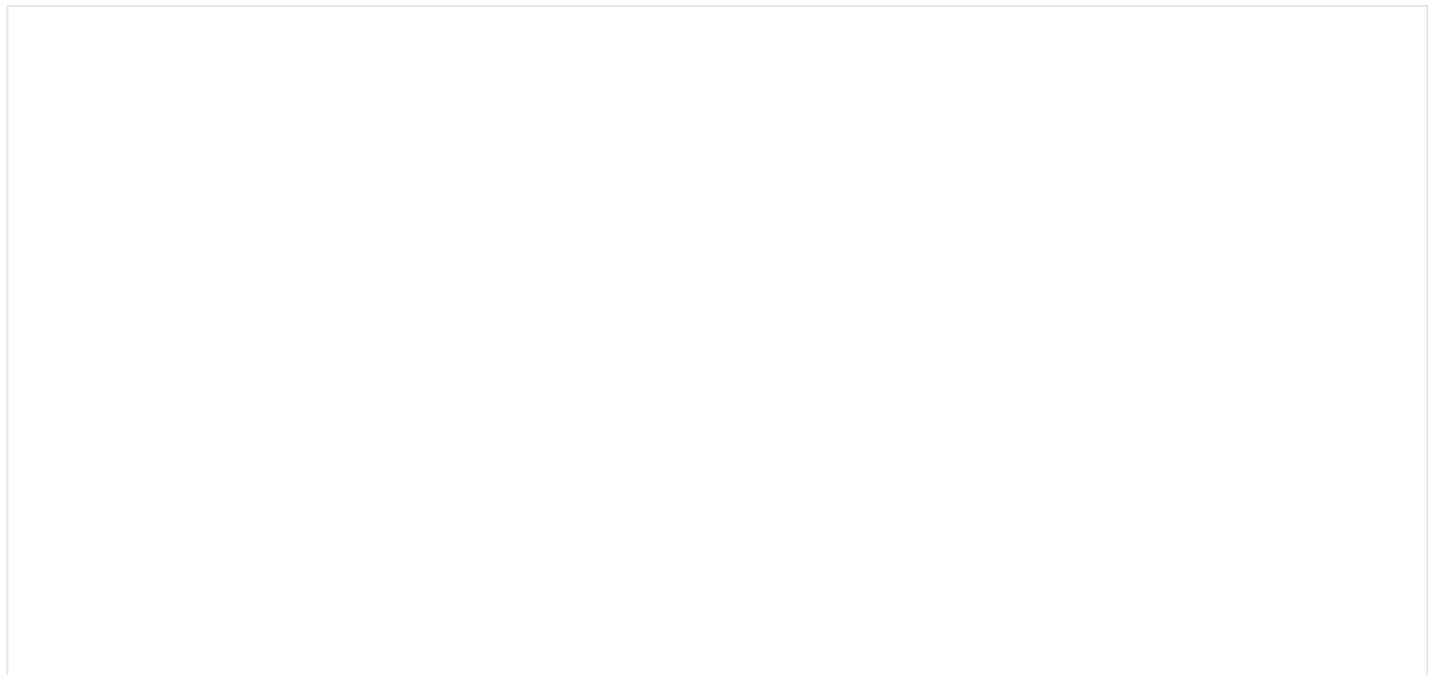
"She's the one that's been through hell," he said.

During the years Bill avoided sharing his war experiences with Lyn, she said she also suffered in silence.

And if she has learned anything from their experience, it is this heartfelt advice for struggling military couples: Suffering in silence will eventually destroy your relationship.

"They (veterans with PTSD) don't share ... this nightmare that (they're) living with. And until you open up and share, it's not going to get any better," she said. "That's the biggest thing that I tell them."

## MORE INFORMATION





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