Praise for
When Someone You Love Suffers from Posttraumatic Stress

“Being in a relationship with someone with PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] is extremely hard. I was constantly wondering what I was doing wrong and why my fiancé was upset. This informative book helped me understand exactly what PTSD is, why it isn’t always me that is causing the problem, and why I can’t just ‘fix it.’ It is a great resource for those looking for help in understanding their loved ones. I learned how I not only can help my fiancé, but also can help myself.”
—B. M.

“An easy-to-read, comprehensive, research-based resource. This book is filled with practical advice.”
—Andrew Christensen, PhD, coauthor of Reconcilable Differences

“Finally, a resource for all sufferers of PTSD and their families and friends. As the wife of a veteran and an advocate who works with families dealing with combat trauma, I have been searching for a book like this. It provides up-to-date information that is relevant for readers worldwide. This book will save many relationships. It’s not a book to borrow; it’s one you have to own!”
—Donna Reggett, Head Advocate, Ipswich District Veterans’ Support Centre, Australia

“I only wish that I had had this book when my husband and I were dealing with the full force of his PTSD last year. My husband is heading to Afghanistan for his third tour any day, and after reading this book, I feel more prepared to handle any symptoms that may re-emerge when he returns. The book helped me understand what he was going through and give voice to my own feelings and struggles. The authors provide actual strategies for dealing with the symptoms and making sure that everyone’s needs are met, not just the survivor. Just fabulous!”
—M. C.

“Zayfert and DeViva are to be applauded for recognizing the ripple effects of trauma on loved ones, and their important role in the recovery process. . . . Anyone who cares about someone who has been traumatized will be grateful for this book.”
—Candice M. Monson, PhD, Department of Psychology, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada
When Someone You Love Suffers from Posttraumatic Stress
To my mother, Ada, for being there through this
—C. Z.

To my parents, for always believing in me;
to my wife, for her unquestioning support;
and to the wives and partners of the CT NG
AVCRAD, for telling me how things really are
instead of listening quietly
—J. C. D.
We would like to acknowledge all the people who contributed to the writing of this book. First and foremost, we thank our patients and those who love them and support them during treatment for having the courage to trust us with their stories and their recovery. Without the work that patients and their loved ones have been willing to do, we simply would not have been able to write this book. We are immensely grateful to our editors at The Guilford Press: Kitty Moore, whose vision made this book possible, and Christine Benton, whose insightful and meticulous editing helped us bring it to life. Their inspiration, guidance, and diligent feedback helped shape our ideas and experiences and sharpen our focus on the needs of the loved ones who stand, quiet and steadfast, beside trauma survivors everywhere.

Many mentors and colleagues have influenced our thinking on trauma and its effects on those around the survivor, and contributed to our professional development over the years. We would like to acknowledge Dharm Bains, Carolyn Black Becker, Bill Bloem, Scott Driesenga, Candace Monson, Jacqueline Persons, Paula Schnurr, Kelly Bemis Vitousek, and VA Connecticut’s OEF/OIF Outreach and Clinical Team. We are also grateful to all the trauma survivors, veterans, family members, and clinicians who have given us feedback in our clinical practice and at the various workshops and outreach talks we have presented over the years.

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Joe could not understand why he never saw his brother, Tom, anymore. They had been close all their lives and lived only a 45-minute freeway ride apart. Since the car accident last May, Tom had visited less and less frequently. He used to drive up to see Joe every weekend. After the crash, he was making it up only once a month. Then Joe noticed Tom wasn’t making the trip at all. The times when Joe drove to visit his brother, Tom never seemed happy to have someone else in his house; in fact, it seemed to Joe that Tom hardly left home at all. It was like his brother, his best friend, was pulling away from him; and worse, because of all the negativity coming from Tom, Joe could sense himself pulling away, too. It didn't make sense to Joe; after all, when the other car slammed into Tom’s, all his airbags had deployed correctly. Even though both cars were totaled and the other driver had to be pulled out of the wreckage, Tom had walked away from the accident with only a bump on the head. Why would the accident bother him so much?

Juan knew that after his wife, Estelle, had been attacked and almost raped downtown she would be different. He really thought he was trying his best to give her space and not push her back into her normal life. But sometimes he wasn’t sure he was doing the right thing. Was he “enabling,” like they said in Alcoholics Anonymous? And now that he thought of it, Estelle was drinking a lot more than she had before she was attacked. She wasn’t doing it to get drunk,
just to get to sleep at night, but still, Juan was concerned about her health.

Jenny and the entire family were at the airport to welcome her husband, Marcus, home from Iraq. He was happy to see everyone at first, but that seemed to wear off pretty quickly. He was irritable and jumpy all the time, and couldn’t stand any noises or loud voices. It seemed like the harder Jenny tried to reach out to him, the more he pulled back. And it wasn’t just her; he didn’t seem to want anything to do with anyone. In the fall, their eldest daughter, Marion, was so concerned about him that she didn’t want to go back to school for her junior year of college. Jenny finally convinced her to return, but when they made the trip Marcus, who usually drove her and all her stuff up to school, stayed home.

If someone you care about has been through something traumatic, the preceding stories probably sound familiar to you. You may have picked up this book because someone you care about suffered a terrible event and was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and you want to know more about this diagnosis and what it means for your loved one and her future. Alternatively, someone important in your life may have withdrawn from you and the rest of the world after something awful happened to him, and you want to do what you can to make sure he gets help. Or you may have watched someone you love endure a traumatic event, and even though everything seems okay so far, you’re concerned about what to expect.

Most people don’t know what makes an event traumatic or how trauma can affect the survivor’s life. When you first learned about what happened to your loved one, you probably felt sad and angry that someone you care about had endured something terrible. You may also have felt frightened that he had been endangered and then relieved when he survived. Perhaps you thought that once it was all over everything would go back to normal. Many people do pick up the pieces and get back to their lives quickly after traumatic events, but for some, life is changed irrevocably and they feel stuck, unable to move forward. When things didn’t go back to the way they were, you probably felt confused, and maybe even angry at the survivor for not “getting over it” or “moving on.” In fact, one of the most common questions that family members ask us is “Will she always be this way?”
Survivors of traumatic events such as physical or sexual assaults, combat deployments, accidents, or natural disasters can experience a variety of problems. As recently as 40 years ago, little was known about how survivors of traumatic stress are affected by their experiences. Since that time there has been a tremendous amount of research on psychological trauma, greatly expanding our knowledge of its effects on the lives of survivors. This research has led to the development of effective treatments that can help survivors of traumatic events live healthier and more satisfying lives. In our work as clinical psychologists, we have used these treatments to help countless trauma survivors recover from posttraumatic stress and move forward in their lives. Our experience has shown us that treatment can work. It offers hope for many trauma survivors who have otherwise felt stuck trying to cope on their own.

We have also come to realize that although a wide range of information and services is available to help trauma survivors, the difficulties faced by the friends and family of those survivors are often overlooked. There are books, pamphlets, websites, and even DVDs for survivors of trauma, but few resources for the people in their lives who are indirectly yet seriously affected by the trauma. Loved ones and friends of trauma survivors often read materials written for the survivor, which can be informative but don’t tell them much about what they can expect or do for themselves. In the course of our contact with the husbands, wives, partners, sons, daughters, parents, and friends of our patients we have found that they invariably have many questions about trauma and its effects and about what they can expect. Although most want to know what they can do to help their loved ones, frequently we see signs that they also are in need of help for themselves. Traumatic stress can be a source of anguish, frustration, sadness, and fatigue in loved ones as well as trauma survivors. Therefore, our main reason for writing this book is to fill a gap and offer help specifically for family and friends of trauma survivors who want to understand the changes in their loved one and take better care of themselves. Of course, we hope that in offering this guidance and support we’ll also help those who have experienced trauma. Research has shown that when survivors of trauma have good social support, their chances of recovery improve. If family members and friends understand the effects of trauma and feel equipped to take care of themselves, they will be better able to help their loved ones, which could speed the recovery of
the trauma survivor. By helping to strengthen the coping resources of the important people in our patients’ lives, we can bolster the support provided to our patients so they have a greater chance of healing.

Hope for Healing, Hope for Change

The most important information we can offer about the effects of trauma on you and your loved one is this: *It doesn’t have to be this way.* There are things you can do to help yourself and to make your life better. There are things you can do to improve your relationship with the trauma survivor in your life. There are things you can do to help the survivor heal. We wrote this book to guide you in doing these things.

We hope that by the end of this book you will realize that you are not alone in caring about someone who has been traumatized. Many loved ones of trauma survivors share your feelings—helplessness, loneliness, frustration, sadness, and anger may be intermingled with love, empathy, and caring. It is common and perfectly normal to experience such a complicated mix of feelings. We hope this book will help you take care of yourself and make sure your needs are met while you care for the trauma survivor in your life. And we hope that you will gain knowledge about what you can do to help yourself and your loved one to live healthy, meaningful lives.

What’s in This Book?

This book has four parts. In the first section, we describe the effects of trauma on the survivor and on the people around him. We want to help you understand all the ways that the trauma has affected your life, as well as all the different ways it has touched your loved one. We talk about how the effects of trauma can change over time. We also outline the treatment options available to your loved one and provide guidance for how to seek professional help.

In the second section, we talk about what you can do to help yourself and help the person in your life who has been traumatized. We describe different ways in which you can take care of yourself and make sure your needs are met. We also talk about how to decide how much you are willing to do to help the trauma survivor in your life.
Finally, we describe methods of communicating with your loved one that will bring you closer together.

In the third section, we provide specific information relevant to two particular types of trauma: military trauma and sexual assault.

In the final section, we talk about the effects of trauma on intimate relationships as well as on children in your life. And we end the book by exploring an aspect of trauma that often is neglected—the positive changes that can occur in the trauma survivor and loved ones.

Real Stories of Hope and Change

We have tried to include as many stories as possible to illustrate the things we talk about. Each story is based on real people like you—people who struggled to cope with a loved one who was traumatized. Although we have changed the details about each family so that trauma survivors and their loved ones cannot be identified, we want you to keep in mind that these stories are based on real people and show their genuine feelings and thoughts. As you read, pay attention to similarities between your experiences and the stories in this book—we hope their examples will help you feel less alone. There are a lot of people out there who, like you, have seen someone they love experience trauma and then struggled to resume their lives. Their stories are an inspiration, and we hope their examples will help guide you to better days.
PART I

Understanding Posttraumatic Stress