

Advice from Frank Ochberg about how to cope with PTSD and the Holiday Season

Holidays are notoriously difficult for those among us who are acutely aware of loss. Days are short. Gaiety is for others. Ceremony reminds us of what we are missing, rather than what we have. Survivors of cruelty and catastrophe are particularly affected by the commercialization of compassion.

So how can we cope and how can we care?

For those with PTSD and related conditions, we can limit our dose of exposure to difficult and dreaded stimuli. A previously abusive parent may be just such a stimulus. Small doses, buffered by supportive friends and relatives, may be tolerable. Complete avoidance may be a reasonable gift to ourselves.

We can bolster our resistance with reminders of our independence, maturity and network of kindred spirits. It's a good time for using the GFW email pen-pal service.

We can overcome our understandable reluctance to exercise, eat sensibly and drink moderately -in other words, practice good health habits before making New Year's resolutions.

And we can seek opportunities to help others. Nothing works as well as altruism at this time of year.

If we are caregivers, relatives, friends of those with PTSD, we can be realistic. We can't change terrible reality. But we can acknowledge it. We can't give soul-saving advice. But we can simply be there. Being there, touching (if wanted), listening, sharing silence, and backing off when space is needed -these are sensible acts of real compassion. Easy to say, difficult to do.

Advice from Dr. Angie Panos

Cope with holiday stress by planning ahead and prioritize

- a. what are the things you want to do to make this season special?
- b. what are your holiday traditions?
- c. what is it that you really value about this season?
- d. How can you focus on enriching your relationships?

Eliminating Myths

- a. Myth- you will magically find inner peace, contentment and a fulfilling happiness during the holiday season.
- b. Myth- You will finally realize it is a wonderful life- And so will your grouchy mother in law.
- c. Myth of the Perfect Family- All other families have happy, stress free get-togethers that are personally gratifying to each member.

Reality

You can't control, but you can plan for the specific problems of family members. Try to create activities that bring out the strengths and not the chaos...

- a. drinking too much
- b. talking too much
- c. shy and withdrawn
- d. angry or moody

Avoid Toxic M.S.G. (Martha Stewart Guilt)

- a. media messages attempt to make us feel deprived
- b. don't get overwhelmed with grandiose expectations
- c. simplify gift giving (service coupons, time together, drawing names, or donating to charity)

Stay Healthy

- a. don't give up on your fitness goals
- b. take time for yourself
- c. go for walks
- d. serve fruit and non-alcoholic beverages
- e. don't stay up too late

Take Care of Your Emotional and Social Needs

Challenges (alone, depressed, S.A.D., recent loss or trauma)

Ask for the help you need (flexibility, tolerance and acceptance, etc.)

Watch Your Self-Talk

try to say 10 positive things for each negative thing you say.

Remember What Children Most Want for Christmas

- a. a relaxed fun and loving time with their family
- b. realistic expectations about gifts
- c. an evenly-paced season, that respects their normal routines for eating, sleeping etc.
- d. reliable, consistent, meaningful family traditions.

Enjoy the Beauty of the Season

Visualization Exercise

A Gift of Peace

Dr. Panos is a board member of Gift From Within.

Advice from GFW Support Pals on how to cope with PTSD and the Holiday Season

"Do something for someone less fortunate, go to church, keep spending to a minimum, choose safe activities to go to, be with safe friends. Eliminate friends or activities who/which would trigger depression or stress. Get a massage. Work out. Take a walk in the snow with a friend. Build a snowman. Avoid alcohol and drugs. Sing and dance to music on the radio or record player. Count your blessings."
Carol

"I've also found helpful finding a large jar or covered can (it has to be large because memories and flashbacks are so large, overpowering and enormous) and when I had a flashback or a memory or dwelling thoughts of the past, I would write a one or two word "reminder" and then put that in the jar, promising myself I could bring it out later and examine it, hopefully at the therapist's office. I also wrote down things that were too hard to discuss "right now" but knew eventually I needed to look at those particular issues.

After I got into the habit of putting these unthinkable in a jar literally, I got to the point that eventually I could mentally toss them in the jar. This was very helpful to me, so if any part of it helps others, great! I do have to say, though, that doing this is really hard and requires tremendous concentration.

Good luck to all during these stressful times." Rita

"The Christmas season has always been my favorite, but I do wind up crying on Christmas Eve or Day. I just try to stay upbeat, and be extra "tuned in" to my moods so I can, hopefully, offset a problem before it begins. As to my crying spell, NOTHING seems to alter that, so I deal with in the following ways. I go off by myself and let the cry run its course. I then remind myself that the memories can't hurt me and that I am safe. Also, I remind myself that I am a worthwhile person who was not responsible for what happened to me 54 years ago. That all seems to help make things easier." Pat

"Regarding how to cope with the holiday season: I find it helpful to remind myself that it's ok to not go to family functions or to leave early if I need to. Making plans for after the visit with relatives is helpful. For example, I try to rent a nice movie or treat myself to something special; it doesn't have to involve \$\$\$. I like hanging out with my dogs and cats!" Patty

Here are some passages from my book, "Aware of the Wicked" that may help:

"The Order of Things"

"There are no set rules of recovery, no instructions. Each survivor's path winds a different way. Still, it is my guess that most survivors will follow the same general order of things.

There are certain emotions that I am not ready to handle at this time. I give myself permission to say: I am not ready to deal with that right now."

"Asking for Help"

"We cannot control a trauma that has already happened. However, we can take control our recovery. There is a difference between receiving help and being passive. Receiving is an act of strength, not weakness. Admitting the need for help should not add to your sense of defeat. Taking any step to recover is a sign of initiative. Enlisting the help of family and friends is good, so long as they do not take power away from you. Some of your family and friends may be unable to give you the kind of support you need. Though usually well-intentioned, there are people who display a lack of confidence in your ability to make decisions. They are always ready to make choices for you, and may try to discourage you from feeling what you feel. Just remember that the goal of recovery is not to relinquish more control to others. The idea is to put power back into your world."

Holidays are especially difficult for me as my trauma happened Dec. 28-29. So basically my Holidays are batten down the hatches, anniversary time too. I try very hard not to do anything that I do not feel comfortable doing. It is okay to say "no"! This is the first year I have decorated for Christmas in five years. So there is hope.

Best Wishes, Judy

Judy is the author of "Aware of the Wicked: for survivors and their shared path of recovery from violent crime," Readers and Writers, 108 Cedarwood Drive, Louisburg, NC 27549. The books are \$19.95 plus \$3.25 shipping.

Keeping breathing and only do what you can. Stay away from those people that cause you the most stress. Definitely come up with your own safe traditions that do not include those who have hurt you.

Jodi

Santa Claus came early this year!

I scanned through my book of daily mediations to find inspiration to write a Christmas message again this year. My mind needed a nudge especially this year because so much has happened to me physically and emotionally.

Then, I remembered a recent visit from someone. A nephew I care deeply about who was visiting me the other day explained to one of his friends, a friend who came to my house a little later, "Uncle Sean" he told his friend "used to be able to walk but now his legs are dead, it's really sad, maybe one day he'll be able to walk again." He said it in such a caring and loving manner I knew my disease had affected him in a way I had not thought of before. I knew in an instant I had become self-absorbed or at least I was still mourning the loss of my body. What he said to his friend he said with such compassion and understanding that I knew I would love him forever. Then, for a moment I thought, 'I am not as alone as I thought,' if no one else in the world cared, it meant everything to me that he did. That was Jake. Then last night while visiting another nephew and his family I turned my head at one point in the evening to find him standing on the back of my powered wheelchair. He said, "Take me for a ride uncle Sean." I told him to hang on as he stepped onto the back of my chair. I put the mechanical device I have grown to hate into motion. I moved from his living room into the kitchen while listening to the familiar sound of his laughter. After our little ride he stepped off the back of my chair and said with a chuckle, "See even though you can't walk we can still have fun." That was Kyle. He was indeed right. Unexpectedly I felt a lump of heartwarming emotion in my throat. I held my emotions because I realized he still cared about me. I smiled and replied, "Sure we can still have fun."

I was not in the mood for Christmas this year, I felt so unloved, alone and isolated from the rest of the world because of this disease. Yet, suddenly these two growing young men made me understand I had no reason to feel that my life had somehow ended. I may have a neuromuscular disease but I am still uncle Sean to them. I am still the same man who used to be able to sneak up on both of them and surprise them by lifting them off the floor with the sort of ease most men are used to, tuck them under my arms and swing them around while listening to them laugh heartily. Yes, Santa Claus came early this year. If I do not receive another gift over the next few days, what they said to me meant more to me than I can explain, they will remember me but not as another man in a wheelchair, they will remember me as uncle Sean.

I awoke very early this morning remembering what both young men had said and silently said to myself 'okay, I can live with their acceptance why then can I not

live with it myself?' As I perused my book of daily mediations, I opened it to what would have been my mother's birthday, April 7. It said:

**"Adversity introduces a man to himself"
-Anonymous**

Indeed it does. Even from her new home, somewhere I have yet to see, she was still giving me the somewhat quirky advice all of us think our parents give us while we are growing up. However, it was not so quirky to me now. All of a sudden, I realized no matter what I have had to face over the last two years I do not have to feel that I am facing it alone. Even if there is no one there to grab onto when I feel scared, they are there with me in my mind, in my heart and my soul what more could a man ask for I asked myself.

I guess my message this year would be never forget what we are capable of accomplishing. Because we are human, there is often a sense of fragility but I know first hand that we can overcome far more than we think. No matter what mountains we may have to climb we do not have to do it all in one day, nor do we have to face those mountains alone. No matter what your spirituality maybe, even if you have none, remember we do not walk this earth completely alone.

Yes, Santa came early this year and I am a happy man.

**"It is the greatest of all mistakes to do nothing because you can only do a little, do what you can.
-Sydney Smith**

**"Picture a summer sunset the sound of children laughing in the next room, the fragrance of a single rose; things we all take for granted that we will never take for granted after we face our own mortality and survive."
-Ann Wilson**

Merry Christmas to all of you and have a wonderful New Year make it a year where love and companionship exist for you even in its simplest form. Make it a year where limitations do not exist for you and never forget that with help from others, we can overcome anything.

Sean

A Good Day Insurance Journal

**My therapist suggested that I begin a "Good day Insurance Journal" as a coping tool. I would like to share this idea with other trauma sufferers. Begin to gather pictures, quotes, words of encouragement, memories of a good day, etc., and paste these into a journal. When you start to downward spiral and can't find the strength to combat the bad messages, take out your journal and find a safe place to remember the many good and supportive stepping-stones that certain happy memories supply. Flashbacks come at us without our control or invitation; these stored good memories are something we can do for ourselves to bring us back to a positive place. Try it and let me know if it helps. :)
Yvonne**

Start a journal or notebook including only those things that make you feel good. Suggestions might include: A favorite comic strip that makes you smile or chuckle. Cut it out and paste it into your Good Day Insurance Policy. A pressed flower that reminds you of the first day of spring. Look at it on a rainy dismal day.

A list of friends and people who like you, and maybe a few emails from them that say something nice (for when you feel that no one cares.) A drawing of something you have made when you last visited a peaceful place, like a meadow or a sunrise, or the ocean. Poems or writings you have made that helped you "get through it" to one more day.

Affirmations that you know to be true about yourself that you can look at when you feel like eating worms and dying. A page of "lifelines" those people you can call upon to pull you out of a downward spiral. A wish list of places you would like to escape to if you could do so at any time and a special piggy bank that saves for a quick get away. Make a plan that allows you to take time to escape and be at peace, or find the peace of an ocean wave, etc. Clip out pictures of places you can dream about visiting and add to the pages certain plans such as costs of local motels, friends who might allow you to stay in their spare bedroom, A realistic cost of what it would actually take to go there for 3 days or so, then write that cost down and save pennies or nickels or whatever it takes to make your goal possible. Don't tell anyone about this money and when you have it, don't spend it on anyone but yourself (such as a bill).

These are a few ideas. Perhaps others could think of more things to add. The idea is, when things get desperate, pull out your book and find a smile for yourself in the pages. Empower yourself to overcome the negative and destructive thoughts of abuse.