

Common Children's Reactions to a Parent with PTSD

When a parent is struggling with mental health issues, almost all children quickly figure out that the parent who returned from war is NOT the same parent who left. All children will react differently, but every child will have feelings about their parent's changed behavior – feelings usually expressed through their behavior.

Confused and upset

Children will sense there is a problem, sometimes before parents are comfortable acknowledging or discussing the issue. Children will be confused by your changed behaviors, as well as the “atmosphere” at home. Often, children will first blame themselves for any changes in your relationship.

Emotional distance

Some children will distance themselves to cope with changes at home. Emotionally, a child's “I don't care about you” attitude is a form of protection from feeling hurt or rejected. A child might even physically distance themselves, as they isolate themselves in their room or escape family stress by spending more time with friends.

Take on more

Children also may react to a parent's changed behavior by “doing more.” They may adopt a more adult role as they seek to take care of the parent. Or they may try to be “perfect,” by making better grades or being careful to not cause any trouble for the family. Being a caretaker or a perfect child may seem helpful to an already stressed family. However, children can miss out on many equally important tasks of childhood.

Feels like a loss

Having a parent with a mental health issue can feel like a loss for children. They sense their parent is there physically, but not emotionally. Older children miss the parent they remember. Common responses to such feelings are to cling more tightly for reassurance or act out negatively for attention.

Common questions

Remember, even if your child isn't asking the questions, they are probably thinking them: What did I do wrong? Can I catch it? Why does Daddy sleep all day and stay up all night? Why doesn't Mom come to my games anymore? When will Dad be like he used to be and read to me at bedtime? Will it ever go away?