

Chapter 8

How to Take Better Care of Your Health

When you have experienced a traumatic event, it can take a toll on your physical health as well as your mental health. In fact, there is strong evidence that people with PTSD tend to deal with a lot of health problems. You might also find that you don't seem to pay much attention to your lifestyle choices and your health. This is understandable. One symptom of PTSD is a sense of *foreshortened future*. What that means is that you might not expect to live as long as other people—you may feel that your future is going to be cut short. You might also not expect to achieve the same milestones as other people—whether that means getting married, having children, having a successful career, or having a stable retirement. Trauma can limit your ability to think about the future and your capacity for hope. It is not uncommon to meet veterans who feel that they will not live past the age of fifty, even when they've made it out of a war zone alive. A survivor of sexual assault might feel that she doesn't deserve good things to happen to her, or that she will never graduate from school or form meaningful relationships.

Improving Your Overall Health and Quality of Life

Once you begin to tackle your symptoms using the approaches suggested in this book, you can also begin to work on improving the overall quality of your life and physical health. This means moving beyond a simple focus on symptom management. It means focusing on prevention and good self-care. Once you get some relief from your symptoms of PTSD, you should consider what you are doing to take care of your body and spirit. Taking care of your

body also will improve your mood and your ability to cope with stressful situations. Taking care of your physical health is another way to improve your emotional health, because the mind and the body are connected.

Remember that change does not have to be an “all or nothing” proposition. It is more important to make small changes that you can continue long term than make big changes that last for only a few days. For example, it’s not necessary to give up all junk food or stop smoking cigarettes cold turkey. It makes more sense to cut back gradually. People are much more likely to experience success when they approach change in this way (Miller and Rollnick 2002). In addition, you should feel free to tailor the suggestions presented here to your own lifestyle and personality. They are intended only to get you thinking about the topic of health. Only you know what specific techniques will work in your own life.

Nutrition and Exercise

One aspect of self-care is good nutrition. If you are using food as a way to cope with traumatic memories, consider whether there are healthier ways that you can cope. Perhaps you can unwind by watching your favorite television show, or you can go for a short walk. If you are reluctant to give up food as a way of coping, see if you can make your snacks or meals a bit more healthy. For example, alternate a glass of water after each glass of soda. Or eat potato chips on some days and popcorn on other days. You don’t need to make huge changes to start taking better care of yourself. The Resources section of this book lists some websites that can guide you toward healthy eating patterns.

Like good nutrition, regular exercise is a basic aspect of self-care and good health. As outlined in chapter 4, there are some basic steps you can take to increase your activity level, even in small doses. Think about ways that you can increase your activity without retriggering your PTSD symptoms. For example, parking your car farther away from a store entrance and walking may seem like a good idea at first. However, perhaps your feelings of anxiety will be very high if you are walking alone in a parking lot. Upon reflection, you may find other ways to build activity into your life. For example, maybe you watch television every evening. If you decide to stretch and jog in place during the commercials, you will be increasing your activity level in small, manageable, and non-anxiety-provoking way. Here is a list of suggestions for increasing your daily activity level. Evaluate these ideas based on your individual situation and symptoms and find what works for you:

- Use the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Walk around the block once a day.
- Stretch or do some light exercise while watching television.
- Take a walk with a coworker several times a week.
- Dance or play tag with your kids.
- Stand up when you are talking on the phone.
- Garden, or do yard work or housework.
- Wash your car.

Sleep

Developing good sleeping habits can help you deal with nightmares and improve the overall quality of your health (Lavie 2001).

- If possible, go to bed at the same time and get up at the same time every day. This may take many weeks to get used to, but it can help you develop a sleep routine.
- If possible, sleep in a room that is free from distractions, including the television and other electronic devices.
- If possible, sleep in a room that is fairly dark (as dark as is comfortable for you) and is a relatively cool and comfortable temperature.
- If you are awake for more than thirty minutes in the middle of the night, get up and do something else in another room. This will stop you from worrying about not sleeping (which doesn’t help you sleep) and provide you with a distraction.
- If you have a period of insomnia, do not sleep later to “make up” for your lost sleep. This disrupts your overall sleep pattern and does not let your body adjust to a routine.

Medical Care and Prevention

Another part of becoming healthier is going to your doctor regularly. This can be really challenging when you have PTSD symptoms. Traumatic events almost always involve something happening to your body, and they leave you feeling that you or someone else is going to be seriously harmed. So when you go to the doctor, it's normal to feel triggered, or reminded of your trauma. Because of this, many survivors put off going to the doctor and don't engage in the preventative care that they need to. Sometimes survivors don't get regular mammograms, cervical or colon cancer screenings (Pap smears, colonoscopies), or dental check-ups. You might feel anxious before going to the appointment, worry about how you will react physically during an invasive procedure, or worry about feeling powerless.

So how can you approach becoming more comfortable with going to the doctor or dentist? The first step is to find someone you feel comfortable with. The process is similar to finding a therapist: focus on finding someone with the right mix of technical knowledge and interpersonal skills. Here are some tips:

- A good doctor will welcome your questions.
- A good doctor will answer your questions using plain, understandable language.
- A good doctor will make you feel comfortable and will be understanding of your anxiety or other reactions.

Not every trauma survivor worries about doctor and dental appointments, but some do. Once you find a doctor you are comfortable with, it is up to you to decide how much of your trauma history you want to share. You don't have to tell the doctor you are a survivor of something traumatic unless you feel comfortable doing so. If you decide to tell your doctor, practice ahead of time how much detail you are willing to reveal about the experience. You might even find it useful to write out what you are going to say (and not say) ahead of time. If you decide not to tell your doctor what you've been through, you can simply say that certain procedures make you nervous. Here are some ways you can make your medical and dental appointments more comfortable:

- Ask your doctor to explain how the appointment will flow and what to expect during a specific procedure.

- Ask the doctor if you can come up with a signal to indicate that you are in any discomfort, and whether he or she can stop a procedure (or give you a short break), if necessary.
- Think about how you can cope with anxiety. Consider calling upon the exercises in chapter 4 before and during the appointment. You can plan to use techniques like deep breathing, distraction, or simply observing the thoughts you are having.

Finding Meaning, Purpose, and Social Support

Finally, when it comes to taking care of our health, there is a lot we can learn from resilient people. In the area of PTSD, *resiliency*—the ability to heal and grow after stress—is called *post-traumatic growth*, or *adversarial growth* (Linley and Joseph 2004), and it's received a lot of attention in recent years. Obviously, no one would ever voluntarily choose to live through something traumatic. However, once it happens, resilient people tend to think about how their traumatic experiences will fit into a bigger picture in their lives, and how their lives can have a sense of meaning and purpose. That purpose might be related to what they've lived through, or it might be about something else entirely. People who focus on getting involved in their communities, supporting a cause they believe in, or working for social change can experience a lot of benefits, in terms of both their physical and mental health. For example, after getting her symptoms under control, a sexual abuse survivor might decide to volunteer at an organization for at-risk kids. A veteran might decide to get involved in a local group to lobby Congress for more funding for PTSD and veterans' programs. A survivor of gun violence may decide that her true calling is to spend more time at home, and volunteering at her daughter's school. The key is finding something that fits for you—something that is deeply meaningful, but not overwhelming emotionally and spiritually. For example, Megan, a sexual assault survivor, feels that volunteering at a rape crisis center is too triggering and emotionally upsetting. Instead, she decides to volunteer at a senior center, spending time playing cards with and serving meals to residents. She always had a close relationship with her grandmother, so spending time with seniors is a way for Megan to feel useful and needed. Megan also joins a Listserv for assault survivors and writes letters to her congressman urging stronger penalties for perpetrators of violence. Megan has found a way to get involved and find purpose in a way that is emotionally healing and not overwhelming.

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Feeling connected to others is also an important aspect of resilience. Resilient people are not afraid to get the social support they need. This means seeking support from community, friends, and/or family. Of course, when you have PTSD, connecting to other people can be really difficult. Some people take the first step by joining a support group for people with PTSD—for example, a group for veterans or a group for survivors of crime. The Resources section of this book has some suggestions on issue-specific social support.

Of course, support doesn't always have to be focused on PTSD. Many people with PTSD benefit from generally increasing their level of social activity. For example, you can join a club or other organization that is based on something you are interested in. This can feel overwhelming, but often the biggest challenge is simply getting started. Once you start attending an activity, you may find that eventually you look forward to it. The key is not to wait until you feel like you want to attend. As strange as it may seem, sometimes you have to change your behavior first, and wait for your feelings to catch up later. Remember that you do not have to talk about your PTSD or trauma history in various social gatherings. It can be useful to think in advance about what details of your life you are comfortable talking about, and what you would rather not discuss until you know someone well. Thinking about this ahead of time can help you feel a little more at ease in new social situations. Chapter 9 has a longer discussion on social support.

Worksheet 30: Self-Care for Healthy Coping

Purpose: To think about ways to improve your overall health.

Instructions: Place a check mark in front of the suggestions you would like to try, and add other options to the lists below.

Diet and Exercise Suggestions

- Increase water intake.
- Increase fruit/vegetable intake.
- Take vitamins daily.
- Decrease junk food (specify what food and/or at what times of day):

- Increase daily activity (specify how; for example, "Stand up while I'm talking on the phone").
- Increase exercise level (specify what you will do, how often, and how long).
- Other nutrition and exercise related ideas:

Suggestions for Health Care and Doctors Visits

- Tell my doctor about my PTSD symptoms.
- Tell my doctor about my traumatic event(s).
- Ask my doctor to explain all the parts of the appointment.
- Ask my doctor for start/stop signals to use if I get anxious.
- Make an appointment for preventative care (specify when and what type):

- Other health care ideas:

Suggestions for Finding Meaning

- Volunteer (specify where and how often):
- Lobby for a political change (specify how; for example, "letter writing to my congressman"):
- Join an organization or Listserv (specify which):
- Become more active in a spiritual tradition (specify what tradition, and what you would do):
- Other ideas for finding meaning:

Suggestions for Getting Social Support

- Join a club or organization based on your interests (specify which organization/which kind of organization):
- Join a PTSD support group (specify which group/which kind of group):
- Other social support ideas:

Conclusion

Part of healing from PTSD is taking better care of your body and spirit. Once your symptoms are under control, it is important to think about prevention in addition to symptom management. This means eating well, exercising, and going to your doctor regularly. It means thinking about a deeper meaning and purpose for your life, which can include volunteering and social activism. It also means getting social support, which can be focused on PTSD or focused simply on companionship and common interests. Trauma doesn't have to define who you are, but it is something profound that you have lived through. Finding ways to survive and thrive is challenging, but it is very possible.