

PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	11
Guest:	Steven Sayers, PhD
Title:	#11: PTSD Resources for Family Members and Loved Ones

Pearl:

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to PTSD Bytes, the podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health, and how technology like mental health apps can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite-sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee-Vincent, and I'm a clinical psychologist at the Veteran's Affairs National Center for PTSD

Pearl:

In today's episode, we will discuss PTSD resources for family members and other loved ones. I'll be talking with Dr. Steven Sayers. He is the Director of Coaching into Care, a free service for people who are concerned about the Veterans in their lives. He is also Director of the Advanced Fellowship in Mental Illness Research and Treatment at the Philadelphia VA. And Associate Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania. Hello, Dr. Sayers, welcome to PTSD Bytes.

Steven:

Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Pearl:

So what are some of the effects that mental health challenges, and specifically PTSD, can have on relationships?

Steven:

Well, there are many effects, certainly family members and close intimate partners are concerned about what the Veteran is experiencing. One of the most important, but least talked about effects is that there's a lack of closeness and ability for that family member to support the Veteran with PTSD because the Veteran is many times trying to protect their close family member or their partner from what they're experiencing.

Pearl:

And when you talk about the reluctance on the part of the Veteran to often open up about their experience, I'm wondering, is that recommended? Should Veterans disclose to family members what they're experiencing or about the traumas that they may have experienced? Or should family members and loved ones ask?

Steven:

Well, certainly, there are some things about the Veterans experience, they're experiencing with PTSD, it's important to talk about that. When they're feeling, discomfort, how they want to manage certain challenging situations. It's actually a bit more challenging for Veterans to talk most directly about their traumatic experiences, and that really needs to be something that a Veteran might talk with a counselor or therapist about, how and when that might be helpful.

Pearl:

That makes a lot of sense. Can you tell us a little bit about Coaching into Care, why it was established and how it works?

Steven:

Sure. Coaching into Care is a VA service, and we provide this service to any family member or friend of a Veteran throughout the nation via telephone. Coaching into Care was established a little over 10 years ago because family members and close others are often the ones who really understand when a Veteran is having difficulty after their military service and may benefit from mental health treatment. So we really help family members have a productive and supportive conversation about the choices that Veterans have about seeking mental health care. And that's what we do. We provide this service over the telephone and a toll-free number. That number is 888-823-7458. We're also available if you just do a search for "Coaching into Care" on the web.

Pearl:

That's a wonderful service. And what kinds of things are people seeing when they call in, or what should folks be looking out for? What are some real signs that somebody that we care about needs more help than they're currently getting?

Steven:

Sure, some of the signs that family members may see might include a desire to avoid situations where it's apparent that the Veteran is really quite uncomfortable. Some of the classic situations are large crowds or where there are loud noises where the Veteran may perceive unpredictable circumstances with large groups of people. Other kinds of things that family members or partners who call about a Veteran might report would be increase in alcohol use or perhaps illicit substance use. So those are some of the things that we hear actually quite frequently.

Pearl:

Sometimes family members will approach a Veteran with the best of intentions, trying to offer support, or encourage them to get additional support, and those conversations can sometimes be more productive than they are at other times. Can you give us some examples of how to have a more productive, supportive conversation?

Steven:

We try to coach family members or friends to provide just a brief description about what their concern is and state, "I'm here to help. And if you'd like to talk about it, I'd be happy to listen." And when the Veteran might provide some concern about what they're feeling, what they're experiencing, a response from a family member might best be, "well, let me know what you'd like to do about it. What do you think would be helpful?" So we're really trying to ask the Veteran what they believe the solution is to be. And just simply to acknowledge that it's the Veteran's choice as to what to do, and to offer help and support to seek those solutions when the Veteran is ready to receive help.

Pearl:

And when the Veteran is ready or if they become ready to seek professional help, what are their next steps?

Steven:

Well, it depends on the situation and the connection of the Veteran to the VA and VA care. So if the Veteran is enrolled in medical care, then it's a matter of through the family member, helping the Veteran ask the right questions of their primary care provider in VA to provide them an appropriate referral. If the Veteran prefers, not to seek out care in the VA, then in Coaching into Care, our staff is really quite adept at finding community referrals that might be appropriate. Regardless of the state or, or city or town they're in, we really try to provide some good viable resources for the Veteran in their community for care.

Pearl:

That's wonderful that your staff provide those resources. What about the family members themselves? I know it can be stressful to provide support, to be a caregiver. What advice do you have for those loved ones on how to take care of themselves or resources for getting more support for them?

Steven:

Our primary mission is to help family members encourage Veterans around treatment decisions for mental health care. Our secondary mission is really to support family members and friends who have their own needs to find appropriate services for themselves as well. So we can provide some community referrals, for that family member caller. There could be groups, for example, for Veterans receiving care at a Vet Center that are educational for family members around helping to support themselves and also support the Veteran.

Pearl:

And in addition to Coaching into Care, do you have any other online resources that you recommend folks check out?

Steven:

Sure. We often will direct family member callers to the website of the National Center for PTSD, for sure. Because there's a lot of resources around mobile apps that can be quite helpful, both for the Veteran and also for family members. We will also often direct family members to the website maketheconnection.net. And maketheconnection.net is a website that's a compilation of interviews with family members and Veterans around their experiences with PTSD and other mental health issues.

Pearl:

Thank you. There's another one I've recently learned about, it's called Community Reinforcement and Family Training or CRAFT. It's a course for family members. Could you describe that one a little bit?

Steven:

Yes, Community Reinforcement and Family Training is an approach that really was developed around substance use some of the work, that I've done is to really broaden that approach where family members can learn strategies for supporting and working with Veterans around that decision to seek mental health care. Coaching into Care is currently, doing a study that provides information about CRAFT to enhance our coaching strategy that we use with family member callers. When family members reach us, we might ask them to potentially be involved in this research study. And regardless of whether family members decide to be part of the research or not, we provide the same level of services that are

free to the caller. We'll be inviting folks to be part of this study until 2024 or so, in case folks hear this podcast after that date.

Pearl:

Thank you. And we hear a lot about the PTSD Coach app, A lot of people aren't as familiar with the fact that there's also a PTSD Family Coach app. Can you tell us a little bit about that one?

Steven:

Sure, sure. I think the PTSD Family Coach is one of several great resources that were developed within the National Center for PTSD. And this app is a way for family members who are concerned about a Veteran with PTSD and may not know a lot about PTSD or the impact on relationships. It's a great resource for that family member and I encourage folks to download it and give it a try. There's a lot of very useful information and advice, a directory for resources, ways to start a great conversation and the communication strategies for talking to Veterans about their concerns, just useful information for that family member trying to help the Veteran.

Pearl:

Thank you, Dr. Sayers for joining us today, this is incredibly valuable information that's going to help a lot of people. And the work that you do is so important to Veterans and the people that care about them.

Steven:

Well, I'm happy to be here and thank you very much for asking.

Pearl:

As a reminder, whether you are looking for support for a Veteran that you care about, or for yourself as a caregiver, there are many resources available. You can use your favorite search engine to look up Coaching into Care. There's also the National Center for PTSD website available at ptsd.va.gov. Dr. Sayers also mentioned maketheconnection.net. And you can also check out PTSD Family Coach, wherever you download your apps.

Pearl:

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes. The podcast that delivers bite-sized expertise on issues related to PTSD, mental health and technology catch new episodes every other week by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Thank you for joining us.