



BLIND DEVOTION

SURVIVAL ON THE FRONT LINES *of*
POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER
and **ADDICTION**



SHARLENE PRINSEN

BLIND
DEVOTION

When trauma strikes, it leaves many in its wake. Sharlene Prinsen tells her family's heart-wrenching story with raw courage and stunning honesty, in a way that will resonate with everyone, especially those touched by PTSD and addiction. She shows how messy and imperfect life can become for a PTSD family, and offers useful tips for those who are also struggling to adjust to a "new normal." This remarkable book is filled with ongoing healing, fierce hope, wisdom, and grace.

—Cynthia Orange,
author of *Shock Waves: A Practical Guide to Living with a
Loved One's PTSD*

Blind Devotion is a testimony to faith and commitment. At some point, the reader becomes aware that this story isn't just about living with someone who suffers with PTSD and addiction, but instead portrays the author's emerging PTSD and addiction.

—Tracy Stecker, Ph.D.,
psychologist at the Dartmouth Psychiatric Research Center
and author of *5 Survivors: Personal Stories of Healing from
PTSD and Traumatic Events*

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Hazelden®

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Editor's note

The names, details, and circumstances may have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned in this publication. In some cases, composites have been created.

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This book is dedicated to my precious children . . .

Michael, your bravery in the face of incredible hardship and sorrow is amazing, and your gentle spirit and quiet faith melt my heart. You are such a gift.

Katelyn, your boundless energy and your beautiful singing fill my life with joy and smiles, even on the most difficult days. You are my little angel.

Amanda, I'm so blessed to have you as a stepdaughter, and I'm so inspired by your amazing strength. You lost more than any young woman should have to, yet your resilient spirit never gave up.

And to my husband . . .

Sean, you are my partner, my soul mate, my best friend—and the most courageous person I know. May your painful journey and your brave surrender bring hope and healing to many.

And to God . . .

Our healer, our source of strength, our protector in the storms of life. May your unconditional love speak to other wounded souls as it miraculously spoke to us.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is my family's story of how we learned to live, love, and—at long last—even thrive in the midst of PTSD, addiction, and depression. It is a true account, but in a few instances some names and other identifiers have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

My hope is that each reader will find something of value within these pages—whether it be a deeper appreciation for the struggles of trauma survivors and their loved ones, inspiration in seeing the resilience of the human spirit and the providence of a Higher Power, or the simple enjoyment of a dramatic story of survival in the aftermath of war. A special note to those of you who may be facing a similar situation, whether yourself or with a loved one: As you read these pages, I pray that you find in them the strength and hope you may need to move forward in your journey of healing. I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I share my experiences with an open heart, and I urge you to take from them whatever you find most helpful.

For those who want more information about PTSD, addiction, or depression beyond that which is imparted in the story itself, I include tips, suggestions, and resources throughout the book that are drawn from my own experience and research. Please do not substitute my judgment for your own, nor substitute any information in this book for professional medical or psychological care, but rather use the resource information as a starting point to lead you to the professional help that you may need.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My heartfelt gratitude goes out to my neighbor, Char. Thank you, Char, for your friendship, your help, your faith in me and in the power of this story, and for our long walks and talks down that dusty road that summer. This book would never have found its way to Hazelden Publishing without you.

Also, many thanks . . .

To Jesus, my Higher Power who came into the darkness to rescue our family. You put our feet back on solid ground and opened our eyes to what really matters. May our lives always honor You.

To my mom and dad, who stood by Sean and me with unwavering support and love. On countless occasions you dropped everything to be at our sides, whatever our need. You helped sustain us financially through very difficult years, you showered love on our children and gave them stability in the chaos, and you listened to endless hours of heartache with incredible patience. May I be half the parent to my children that you both have been to me.

To Alma and Nancy (not their real names) and their respective family members, who also lovingly cared for our children and gave so much of their time, energy, and resources to help our family.

To my friends, relatives (especially my sister Dar), church family, and co-workers who babysat, helped with cleaning and lawn care, fixed things when Sean was gone, ran errands, prayed for us, listened with love, and gave of themselves in a million other big and small ways. You all carried me when I wasn't strong enough to walk on my own.

To all of Sean's friends who stood by his side and refused to give up on him, even when Sean gave up on himself. Special thanks to our pastor, Larry Mederich, who I believe was used by God to save a dying man. Thank you for speaking truth and love into our lives.

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To Sean's sisters, mom, and extended family. Thank you for your love and support. Special thanks to Sean's uncles, Steve and Dave, for stepping up as "father figures" when Sean really needed someone to play that role.

To those in our local justice system who looked past the criminal to see the wounded soldier behind the reckless acts. Thank you for your compassion and for the second chance you gave to our family.

To the amazing military wives in my VA support group. Thank you for sharing your stories and compassion and for showing me that I am not alone in the battle.

To my friends in Al-Anon and to my wonderful sponsor. Thank you for your friendship, acceptance, compassion, and love. You've shown me that I can find peace in the middle of the biggest storms. Thanks also to the many "fellow travelers" who have crossed my path on this journey of recovery—keep telling your stories and sharing your experiences. You may never know how many people you touch as you walk your own recovery path.

To my prayer mentor, Jan, who never, *ever* gave up hope. Your eternal optimism and unwavering faith gave me strength when I wanted to give up.

To the wonderful teachers at Michael and Katelyn's day care. You provided a safe, loving place for my children to call "home" when their own house was filled with chaos and uncertainty. Leaving my children with you was like leaving them with family. Thank you for smothering them with love as if they were your own.

To Sean's VA counselors, Rob L. and Rick W. Thank you for going the extra mile for our family and for helping us understand PTSD so that, in turn, Sean and I could understand each other. You go beyond the call of duty for veterans and their families, and we greatly appreciate all that you do.

To Rick G., for helping us navigate through mountains of government red tape in order to get Sean the help he needed from the VA health care system.

To everyone at Hazelden Publishing who was involved in this project, especially Sid Farrar and Peter Schletty. Thank you for believing in the potential of this story, but having the wisdom to encourage me to wait to tell it, knowing that another year in recovery would offer a much more complete and promising story.

To my amazing editor, Cynthia Orange. You made this process painless and so enjoyable. Thank you for sharing your wisdom and knowledge with me. From the moment I met you, it felt like we were old friends. God bless you for what you brought to my life during this journey.

To my amazing children and husband. Thank you for your patience as I spent hours at the computer and neglected you a bit during this project. I know that you all share my desire to bring the hope and peace of God and recovery to others who are still hurting, so thank you for your part in making this happen. This is *our* story, a story of miracles, a story of redemption. We walked through the fire together, and we came out stronger and bonded together in a way that few families will ever experience. I cannot find the words to express how much I love each of you. ■



Chapter One

June 1, 2007 (1:15 a.m.)

“I need to get out of here! Please just help me get my kids out of here!” I was yelling at the 911 dispatcher now, my voice transformed by a fear and desperation that had been mysteriously absent since the nightmare began over an hour ago.

I winced when I heard my husband come on the line again from somewhere outside the house. “Go on . . . Get the fuck out of here, then!” he screamed. It was Sean’s voice, but it was hardly recognizable, just as *he* was no longer recognizable.

I could barely hear the dispatcher’s voice as she tried to talk over my husband’s fury. “Are you sure you feel safe leaving?” she asked. “If you think you can get out safely, do it. It’s your choice.”

“I don’t know what my husband plans to do with that gun! I just need to get my children out! Please help me!” I pleaded. Yet as quickly as the words left my mouth, I hesitated. *My* choice? I felt like the weight of the decision I faced was crushing me, and I struggled to get a full breath, to find a clear thought. I didn’t know what to do. Amazingly, my four-year-old son, Michael, and eighteen-month-old daughter, Katelyn, were sleeping peacefully in their beds, oblivious to the insane battle raging outside their bedrooms. *Should I disturb my children and take them out into his war zone?* I wondered. *Or should I let them rest and pray that this nightmare in my backyard ends peacefully?*

The “what ifs” flooded my mind. *What if the children get caught in the crossfire if I try to leave? What if a bullet whizzes through a wall of their bedroom if I choose to wait it out? What if they see their dad in this state? What if they witness the unimaginable? What if?*

I cringed as the questions raced through my head. It seemed like I was frozen in my indecision, though it was really only a matter of seconds before I resolved what I needed to do. I had done all I could for my husband. I needed to get my babies to a safe place.

I grabbed a bag, trying to focus on what I should bring with me: diapers, sippy cups, a change of clothes for everyone, my purse, a cell phone, some money, a favorite stuffed animal for each of my children. I moved on automatic pilot, relying on survival (and parental) instincts. I threw the bag by the door and looked for my keys. *Damn it! Why don't I ever put them back in the same spot so I can find them?* As I searched for the keys, I took one last look out the window into the blackness that enveloped our yard. I couldn't see the SWAT team, but I knew they were out there—with a dozen or more police officers—all of them holding their positions in the line of woods that surrounded my home; their weapons trained with deadly precision on our house. And there was another gunman crouched somewhere in the darkness as well—my husband, a combat veteran who hours earlier had armed himself with a hunting rifle, declaring, “Today is a good day to die.”

With the elusive keys finally in hand, I screamed into the phone at the dispatcher, “Tell the officers I'm coming out with the kids! Tell them it's *us* coming out! Don't let them shoot at my kids!” Still outside with the other phone, my husband continued his barrage of profanity at the dispatcher, while goading the officers within earshot to come and shoot him. I was terrified that the dispatcher couldn't hear me over the commotion. As horrifying as my husband's actions were, I was actually more afraid of the police and their invisibility. But I didn't have time to dwell on my suffocating fears. I threw the phone down, looped the bag over my shoulder, and went to wake up my son. “Michael,” I whispered as I shook his shoulders. “Wake up, honey. We have to go, right now. You need to listen to Mommy and do exactly what I say, OK?”

In an instant, my four-year-old was on his feet, reminding me so much of his father, who would startle from his sleep at the slightest sound, feet on the floor and at attention, ready to receive his orders. My son's eyes were wide with fear and confusion. He was wearing nothing but his underwear, but I didn't have time to get him dressed. He clung to my leg as I went into the nursery to grab my young daughter. My sobs caught in my throat as I wrapped her in a blanket and ran for the door with Michael glued to my side.

"Michael," I said, trying to keep my voice calm for my son's sake. "When I open this door, I need you to run with me as fast as you can to the car. And when you get in, I need you to get down on the floor in the backseat." Now he was terrified, his tears welling up. "Mommy . . ." he started, but I cut him off. "Just do it, Michael, *please!*"

My little girl, still lost in slumber when I picked her up, was now stirring in my arms, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. I took a deep breath, opened the door, and ran with my children to the car parked outside. As Michael climbed in, I could hear my husband just a few yards away, still raging at the officers who were concealed in the darkness. My heart raced as I threw my baby girl into the car with such haste that she rolled across the seat and bumped her head on the passenger door.

The sound of her startled cries and Michael's whimpers from the backseat were too much for me. As I tore down the long driveway, my head swirled with the surreal sounds around me—the baby's screams, Michael's sobs, the drone of the search helicopter overhead, the ranting of my husband. It all blurred together into a chilling soundtrack. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. I knew from the direction of my husband's voice just a few minutes ago that I was driving right between him and the officers with whom he was locked in a deadly standoff. My mind grappled to make sense of it. *This is like a movie. Is this really happening to me?*

I gripped the steering wheel and braced myself, convinced that the next sound to join the eerie symphony would be a gunshot echoing through the night.

And then my husband would be dead. Or I would be. Or one of the children.

The flash of the helicopter's floodlight through my windshield snapped me back to the moment, and I willed myself to focus. As I neared the end of the driveway, there was another flash from the woods. I stopped tentatively. A police officer emerged from the shadows, tapped on the window with his flashlight, and told me to move over. I grabbed my wailing daughter and put her in my lap as I slid clumsily into the passenger seat. The policeman quickly jumped in and took over the wheel while another officer climbed into the backseat with my son.

As the car lurched forward, I squeezed my little girl tightly to my chest and buried my face in her dark brown hair. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, still unable to fully grasp what was happening. I was only sure of one thing, the *only* thing that really mattered: We were safe.

"Where are we going?" I asked, as the officer barreled my car down the dirt road through the woods.

"We're going to the end of the road, and then we need you to stay with us in case you can help us talk your husband out of here," he answered.

"I need to get my kids to a safe place," I said, my voice barely a whisper.

"No, we need you here," he responded firmly, sounding cold and unfeeling to me.

"I need to get my kids out of here!" I shouted with the ferocity of a mother bear. "We can bring them to a friend's house down the road, but I am not helping *anyone* until I know my children are safe!" The officer reluctantly agreed.

A few minutes later, I walked like a zombie to Alma's door. Alma was an elderly neighbor who had befriended Sean and me when we built our home in the country a few years earlier. Sean often helped her with yard work and snowplowing and, in turn, Alma smothered our kids with love as if they were her own grandchildren. Michael and Katelyn adored her. She answered the door in her pajamas, her hair ruffled from sleep.

“Sean’s got a gun and he’s in the woods somewhere,” I told her without much emotion. She didn’t even seem surprised; just opened her arms to receive my precious cargo. I was thankful she didn’t ask any hard questions, for which I had no answers. Numbly, I hugged my babies one last time before I handed them over to her and walked slowly back to the police car.

I waited for hours with the half dozen police officers who had set up camp at the end of our road. I shivered in the cold darkness in stunned silence, watching the hypnotic circling of the helicopter overhead and trying desperately to hear what was happening when the officers talked over their two-way radios to the SWAT team members who were positioned in the woods closer to my home. My emotions cycled wildly between shock, anger, embarrassment, anxiety, guilt, and sheer terror. Mostly, though, I was just numb. No tears, no hysterics—just an overwhelming sense of helplessness and an unsettling realization that my life, and my children’s lives, would never be the same again.

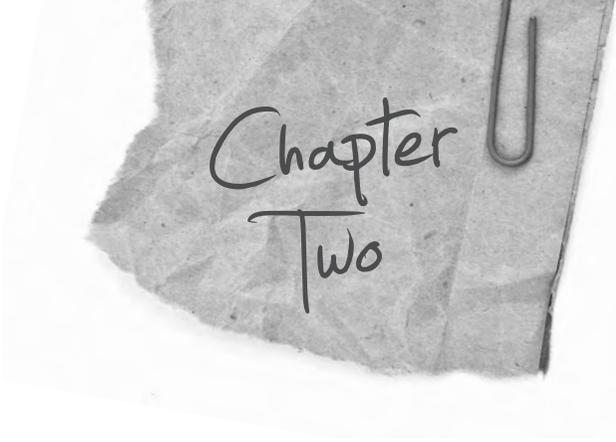
Sean was in even deeper “Army mode” now. I had seen that faraway look in his eyes many times before, but never this intense. I suspected he was no longer in his own backyard, but half a world away, hunkered down in battle, surrounded by the enemy.

A female police officer interrupted my dark thoughts and asked, “Is your husband the type of guy who would shoot at someone or shoot into the air in order to entice someone to shoot him?”

I looked at her with annoyance and total disdain. *What a stupid question*, I thought. *As if this sort of thing happens to me every day.* In a pointed voice, I answered, “I don’t think so.”

I paused a minute and quietly added, “But then . . . I didn’t know he was the type of guy who could do *any* of this, so what do *I* know?” I turned my head away from her and stared out the window of the police car. The truth was—I didn’t know who my husband was *at all* anymore.

I only knew that he was a soldier, trained to kill or be killed. I just couldn’t see any way that this could turn out well. ■



Chapter Two

Seven Years Earlier—April 2000

She spoke in a quiet, hushed voice, leaning in close to my ear, like she was sharing an intimate secret with me, “You need to move out of this small town if you ever hope to find a good man to marry.”

This unexpected advice came from Claudia, a sweet, motherly woman from my church whom I respected greatly. I looked up and smiled at her, but her face was serious and her eyes were filled with concern. I was a teacher, living in a small town in northern Wisconsin—population 1,600. I was twenty-seven years old, hardly an old maid. “Mr. Right is out there somewhere,” I assured her. “I just haven’t found him yet.”

She was unrelenting, not to be dissuaded. “Well, you won’t find him here. Seriously, you should consider moving someplace where there are more potential candidates.”

Her insistence and the certainty of her statement sent a tiny panic through me. *What if she’s right? Is God trying to tell me something through Claudia?* Heaven knows I had looked, and I had gone on a fair number of dates in the five years since I moved to this rural town, but I was looking for something deeper and more meaningful than the carefree life of barhopping and good times that most of those men offered. And the truth was that I was still haunted by a disastrous relationship from college, and I wasn’t sure if I would ever open my heart again.

My college boyfriend was handsome and exciting, an ex-Navy man

who swept me off my feet in a matter of weeks. Looking back, it was no surprise that I fell hard for the first charming man who showered me with attention. I am the youngest of four daughters, and living in my sisters' shadows my whole life had not done much to boost my self-confidence. My sisters and I were all high achievers—three of us followed in our father's footsteps and graduated as valedictorians of our respective classes. Yet despite my many accomplishments, I spent most of my life trying to shake crippling feelings of inadequacy that I believe stemmed from the chaotic home in which we were raised.

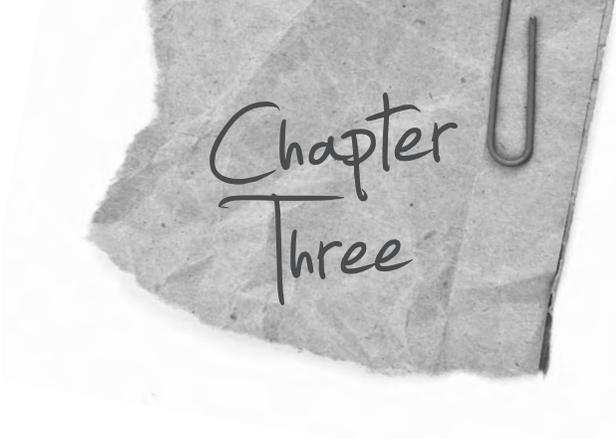
I don't begrudge my parents for my upbringing. They are wonderful people—warm, loving, supportive, and generous. They did the best they could with the lack of resources and support systems that were available to them, but the fact remains that my childhood was tainted by my father's sadness, my mother's anger, and their frequent arguments.

My senior year of high school was the most difficult. I was the only child left in the house to face their battles, and I felt helpless and isolated. I couldn't wait to get to college and escape. Yet by the time I arrived there, my self-esteem and confidence in my ability to control my own world were completely shattered.

Perhaps that explains why I ignored every warning sign back then that my seemingly perfect suitor wasn't all that he appeared to be. Even as I began to see inklings of a darker side to him, I was so flattered by his attention and so desperate to feel loved that I chose to continue in denial. He was a master manipulator who drank heavily, was overly flirtatious with other women, and controlled every aspect of my life. He systematically cut me off from all my friends and alienated me from my family (who knew from the start that he was bad news).

I was a straight-A student in college, but I wasn't smart enough to see what was happening to me. Even when I did begin to recognize it, I had such a low opinion of myself that I didn't believe I could ever find anyone else. So I clung to him despite his dangerous faults, even going so far as to get engaged.

Thankfully, I was spared from making the biggest mistake of my life the day a girl from my dormitory came to my room with devastating



Chapter Three

Sean was officially discharged from the Army in August of 2000, and he made the two-day trip back home to Wisconsin, this time for good. When we finally met again face-to-face for our first date (three months after our first phone conversation), I already knew that this was a man unlike any other I had ever dated. He clinched that when he turned down my less-than-original idea for a first date—drinks and a game of darts at a local bar—and instead planned a beautiful sunset picnic in the park, complete with a bottle of wine and a blanket for stargazing once the sun disappeared behind the river bluff. We talked for hours with a spectacular starlit sky as the perfect romantic backdrop.

Sean had a mysterious depth to him that drew me in. He conversed in an easy and charming manner, sharing fascinating stories about his life in the Army and his wild high school days. Yet it was evident that there were many more layers to him, some of which he kept heavily guarded. This only fueled the intrigue.

Despite the mystery that surrounded him, he seemed genuinely sincere. This was a man with old-fashioned values and a good, kind heart. As the night drew to a close, any lingering doubts I had about “wild military men” melted away, and my heart melted as well.

Still, I took things slowly. I had been burned badly in my last ill-fated relationship, and even though many years had passed since those naive college years, I was reluctant to get too close too fast. Sean showed incredible restraint and patience, even waiting a full month for our first

kiss. I remember the softness of his voice as he asked for permission to kiss me, and I knew that any man who was willing to wait that long for a simple kiss was worthy of my trust.

I soon learned that Sean was quite the romantic in many other ways. He left sweet cards on my windshield to brighten my frantic mornings and picked wildflowers from the roadside on the way to my apartment for our dates. His voice was often on my voice mail at work or waiting on my answering machine at home—“Just wanted to say ‘hi’ and tell you I was thinking of you.” He worked two jobs to make up for years of low military pay, but he never failed to stop by my apartment after work—no matter how late—to give me a hug or bring me a new music CD that he thought I would enjoy. The sound of his old diesel truck rattling down my street always gave me butterflies, even after we were well settled into a comfortable relationship. His kind heart and sweet, romantic side contrasted so intriguingly with his strong military persona. It was impossible by then to stop myself from falling completely and blissfully in love with him.

October 2000

It was a crisp fall night, adorned by a magnificent full moon that shone through the trees, and Sean and I were taking a stroll around the quiet neighborhood near my apartment. It was never easy to convince Sean to take a walk with me. He was a task-oriented man, and a casual stroll served no purpose for him unless there was a particular reason for it. I teased him that his “mission” tonight was to spend a quality evening with me under the stars, but he didn’t really buy it. For a man who had only recently left behind the adrenaline-rushing adventures of the Army—jumping from airplanes, navigating grueling obstacle courses, taking part in live-ammo training sessions—this undefined “mission” seemed considerably less thrilling.

Still, he had agreed to walk with me, and he actually seemed to enjoy it once we set out. As always, our conversation flowed freely and comfortably. I had known him for five months now, and I was still as captivated

by his stories as I had been the first night we talked. I found his accounts of daily military life fascinating, perhaps because I knew that I wouldn't last an hour in basic training. I was equally enthralled by his tales of traveling to countries I knew nothing about.

Occasionally, I would ask him about his longest deployment—a seven-month stint to Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1999 to 2000. Nancy, the neighbor who had introduced us, had mentioned Sean's deployment to me several times but had given me very few details about his duties there.

"What do you want to know?" Sean had asked the first time I questioned him about it.

"Everything!" I answered eagerly.

"There's not much to tell," he had said, matter-of-factly. "It was a peacekeeping mission. We were sent there along with troops from a bunch of other countries." He didn't elaborate, which only fueled my curiosity. Whenever I broached the subject thereafter, he would humor me by launching into some lighthearted story about the Russians supplying truckloads of warm, carbonated water that was disgusting to drink, or about the time he ran into the Hungarian mafia when he was traveling in Eastern Europe on Christmas leave. While I enjoyed those stories, I could never seem to pry out of him any details about what he had actually done in Bosnia in a military capacity.

I admit that I hadn't watched the news much during that time period, so the extent of my knowledge about the Bosnian conflict was that the U.S. had sent troops to join the NATO "Stabilisation Force (SFOR)"—a peacekeeping mission established in the aftermath of Slobodan Milošević's genocide campaign. Having minimal experience with anything military, I assumed, naively, that Sean's job there consisted of guard duty and humanitarian work, which Sean would have probably found boring. *Maybe that's why he doesn't care to talk about it*, I thought. At any rate, he was pretty good at changing the subject whenever it came up, and I had no real reason to push the issue. After a while, I simply accepted his repeated assertion that there just wasn't too much to say about the deployment.



Epilogue

A year ago, I wrote as a *victim*. Today, I write as a strong *survivor*, willing and ready to grow and mature and take responsibility for my own happiness—and my own misfortunes.

When I submitted the original draft of this book to my publisher, it was rejected. The editor who turned it down encouraged me to give it some time, let recovery take hold, and then consider a rewrite. Discouraged, yet determined, I took his advice and set the book aside. When I picked it up to read it again, nearly fourteen months after that first submission, I was shocked and embarrassed at my blatant dishonesty, my unabashed finger pointing, and my self-righteous anger that permeated my initial telling of the story. In that first draft, I was too proud to acknowledge the abuse that had occurred in my home, too arrogant to admit my own deficiencies, too blind to see my part in my own misery, too angry to let go of my resentments, too filled with self-pity to find gratitude for all that I had, in too much pain to see things objectively, and in too much denial to see that I needed a recovery program of my own.

Today, the words *I am a codependent* can freely pass my lips. I am not proud of those words, but I am not ashamed of them, either. I can accept them as my reality. I no longer fear that descriptor, because I now know that beyond that label, there is hope. With the appropriate help and guidance from a Higher Power, I've discovered that learned behaviors can be unlearned, earning me the gift of serenity.

I have finally learned to separate my identity and my well-being from that of my husband. I am my own person, with my own unique experiences and emotions. If Sean is moody or detached or agitated, I don't have to follow him into that misery. As my counselor told me more than once, his crisis is not my crisis, and I finally have come to believe her words. Sean's recovery is also not my recovery. If my husband misses a meeting, I've learned to resist the urge to panic and try to manipulate him to go. If he doesn't call his sponsor for weeks, I know now not to pick up the phone and do it for him. I have learned the sanity-saving difference between advocating for someone and trying to control or fix him. As another wise counselor once reminded me, I cannot make my husband want to live. I believe only God can do that.

I am under no illusion that our journey together will be a fairy tale as we move forward. Many unresolved issues remain. We still struggle to recover financially—years of lost income coupled with extraordinary expenses while Sean was in treatment have left us with a large debt and have forced our family of five to make do in a one-bedroom house. (Katelyn still sleeps in our closet, Michael's room is carved out of a corner of the living room, and we recently made space for Amanda to move in as well.) Years of neglect have left our home, which Sean built with his own hands, in great disrepair; nonetheless, we're thankful that we never lost it to foreclosure as so many others did. Finances are tight and tensions often build between Sean and me. If we aren't careful, battles over money can easily disrupt our family and threaten our recovery. The good news is that just a few days ago, after five years of denied claims and lengthy appeals, Sean was finally granted full disability from the VA. We are so grateful for the financial relief that will soon come and hopeful that it will allow us to focus even more fully on other aspects of our recovery.

Our six-year-old daughter, Katelyn, still struggles with separation anxiety and an unhealthy expression of emotions. Michael, now nine, still worries incessantly and already exhibits signs of obsessive caretaking, a defining characteristic of codependency. Sean's oldest daughter, Amanda, has largely been left to deal with her difficult teenage years

and young adulthood all on her own—including the loss of her mother to leukemia—because Sean was emotionally unavailable for many years. She is working to get traction in her life after so much loss and heartache, and she hopes to begin a nursing career in the near future.

Though Sean's relationships with all three of his children have greatly improved, he still has trouble fully engaging with Michael and Katelyn in the activities they love or connecting with them on an emotional level. All too often, he is "there but not really there"—physically in the same room, but emotionally a million miles away.

Sean understands that he must be vigilant about self-care and that he must "Let go and let God" every day as he continues to face his demons. His PTSD symptoms are still ever-present, and he still experiences periods of moderate to severe depression, though he now "bounces back" from these setbacks more quickly. Despite recommendations from his health care team and fellow veterans that he should address his trauma head-on through intensive desensitization therapy, Sean still prefers to leave most of the trauma buried, choosing for now to simply manage the symptoms of PTSD rather than revisit the painful memories of the past. While I don't agree with his decision, I accept that it's not my place to set the timeline for my husband's healing.

As for me, it is still difficult to trust my husband after all the lies that accompanied his substance abuse, and I continue to work with a counselor to deal with my guilt and to process the trauma of the terrifying police standoffs in my backyard. I still have severe anxiety about being away from my children. Irrational fears about their safety keep me self-imprisoned in a "comfort zone" that extends no further than an hour's drive from my house. The cries of children still trigger involuntary reactions (rapid heartbeat and breathing, anxiety, rage) in both Sean and me, making it difficult for us to discipline our kids effectively.

Sometimes I feel frustrated that our family faces these continuing battles, but before self-pity can take root, I remind myself how far we have come and how far we can still go if we continually surrender our control and the outcomes to God. Our family finally understands that recovery for each of us is a process, not a goal to be checked off as "achieved."

Every good day is a gift. Sean has been sober for more than two years. He may stumble; he may even fall. But he knows what to do now and that it is *his* job to do it. I, too, can celebrate a period of emotional “sobriety” all my own. I am still devoted to my husband—but I am no longer blinded by love, loyalty, and codependency.

We are not alone anymore. Sean and I have a strong support system that we have slowly rebuilt over the past couple of years. It is composed of old friends and new ones, and a few devoted family members who never left our side. Sean has reconnected with most of his biological family and has begun the slow process of reconciling with his mother after more than twenty years of estrangement. These are the miracles that recovery brings. We are now fully committed to seeking help from our Twelve Step programs and the fellowship of the Twelve Step community, which provide us with the tools we need to live in serenity one day at a time. We also know that the resources of the Veterans Affairs health care services are readily available if needed. And most important, we have a faith born of miracles that played out in our lives day by day, in big ways and small. These pages are filled with examples of God’s grace in the darkest of hours. We need only look back at our history to find hope for a promising future.

On July 11, 2010, five months into Sean’s sobriety and after almost nine years of marriage, Sean and I stood before God and our loved ones to renew our original wedding vows:

I come here today to join my heart with yours. I vow to be faithful to you, to respect you, and to be honest with you always. I will encourage you and strengthen you in your walk with God. I will be at your side as you follow your dreams. I will stand by your side always. When you fall, I will catch you. When you cry, I will comfort you. When you laugh, I will share your joy. Everything I am, and everything I have is yours, from this moment on. You are my friend, my love, my life’s companion—today and forever.

The renewal ceremony was Sean's idea. He felt ready and healthy enough to honor those vows in a way that he was not able to do for most of our previous nine years of marriage. It was a magical day for us—a new beginning and a chance to step out into a new life together in recovery. We have no idea what challenges still lie ahead, but we know that we are committed to continuing this journey together, no matter where it takes us. ■



How Can You Cope with Your Loved One's PTSD, Depression, or Addiction?

- Work on *acceptance*. The longer you allow yourself to “play victim” or feel sorry for yourself, the harder it will be to cope with your loved one’s illness.
- Recognize that PTSD, depression, addiction, and other mental illnesses are just that—*illnesses*. Accepting that these disorders have a physical or biological root may help you develop more compassion—and less resentment—for your loved one. When Sean’s PTSD or addictive behaviors exasperate me, I now ask myself, “How would I react or treat him if he had *cancer*?” On the same note, it’s OK to explain to other people that your loved one just can’t handle certain activities at this time. No one would find fault with a cancer patient saying, “I just don’t feel well enough to do that today.” The same can be true of mental health issues if we have the courage to be honest.
- Educate yourself about your loved one’s illness *and* about the effects it may have on family members. Read books or articles about the topic, join support groups online or in your community (the local hospital may be a good place to start in finding a group for you), attend Al-Anon if your loved one struggles with addiction, attend the family program if your loved one enters treatment. Learn all that you can—knowledge is power.
- Understand that your loved one’s need to go to treatment *multiple* times does not equate to multiple *failures*. Just as cancer sometimes requires multiple rounds of chemotherapy and/or radiation to put it into remission, it can also require multiple rounds of relapse and treatment before a lasting sobriety comes. My husband completed a total of six treatment programs for substance abuse and/or PTSD, and he once shared the following analogy with me (which I share here in my own words): “It’s kind of like making chocolate chip cookies. You can’t just throw all the



ingredients in at once and try to make the dough, because it will just make a mess and it won't bind together right. Instead, you first add sugar and butter, then eggs and vanilla, and finally—*slowly*—you add your dry ingredients. In the same way, every treatment program in which I participated gave me a few more 'ingredients' or 'tools' to add to my recovery. I couldn't add too much at once, and I couldn't skip ahead to the 'flour' until I had first gained and incorporated a few crucial 'ingredients' (education, coping strategies, healthier attitudes/thinking patterns, and so on). When I was ready for the next ingredients, I gained them in the next treatment program. Finally, I was able to put it all together and create sobriety in my life." Such a beautiful analogy. Acceptance of how this process of recovery actually works (not how we *wish* it would work) will help you cope with your loved one's illness with greater peace and patience.

- Consider seeing a counselor or therapist yourself—it is helpful to have support in dealing with the range of emotions that a loved one's illness can evoke.
- Work with your loved one to develop a safety plan that lists warning signs of stress or relapse, names and phone numbers of people your loved one is willing to let you call in case of a crisis, phone numbers for professional services (the suicide hotline, your loved one's mental health provider, the local emergency room, and so on). For great information and a template to help your family create this safety plan, visit Mary Ellen Copeland's WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) website at www.mentalhealthrecovery.com/wrap/.
- Establish a "check-in" time with your loved one at least once a week. This should be a quiet time to talk *without distraction* in order to address issues or concerns while everyone is calm. Be proactive—the worst time to solve a problem is in the middle of a crisis.
- Consider going with your loved one to see a counselor who is skilled in helping you both communicate in a safe setting. In such an atmosphere, it is easier for your loved one to share about triggers and the traumas behind them. It is also important for you to share how the illness is affecting you and what you need from your loved one.



- Celebrate progress rather than dwelling on setbacks. Take some time once in a while to remember how far you and your loved one have come. It may have been a journey of “two steps forward and one step backward,” but as long as you are making progress, there is reason to feel good and hopeful.
- Be prepared to have a Plan B (and possibly a Plan C, D, and E). PTSD symptoms can be triggered at any moment. An alcoholic or addict can come home high and disrupt your plans. Your loved one may need immediate medical care without warning. If you have a backup plan always in mind (an alternate babysitter, a friend who can drive your child to his or her activities, a trusted friend who can deal with your loved one’s crisis instead of you), it will reduce stress and will usually allow you to enjoy your plans (albeit somewhat altered), regardless of what is happening with your loved one.
- Work together to create an “escape plan” before you go to public places or on family outings if your loved one has PTSD. Assure your loved one that it is OK if he or she becomes overwhelmed and needs to leave early. Take two cars, if necessary, so you won’t be resentful and so your loved one won’t feel guilty for having to pull you away from an activity you enjoy.
- Plan your outings during off-peak times if your loved one suffers from PTSD and can’t tolerate crowded places. For example, go to a restaurant at 4:00 p.m. or after 7:00, or go to the movie theater for a Sunday matinee instead of a busy Friday night.
- Learn how to set healthy boundaries. It’s OK to say to your loved one, “I’m sorry that you’re sick, and I’ll support you in getting the help that you need, but I won’t tolerate that behavior around me (or around the children).” It’s also OK to separate yourself from abusive or inappropriate behavior—for a short time (a few hours) or for a longer period of time (a few months or more)—until your loved one gets the intensive help he or she may need. You can still love and support your loved one from a distance should you decide it is not healthy or safe to be in close proximity for a period of time. Taking care of yourself and your children does not equate to abandoning your loved one.



- Work with your loved one in a calm moment to negotiate reasonable expectations for your loved one's contribution to the family. Although my husband works when he can, Sean cannot work full time because of his mental health issues (especially the anxiety induced by his PTSD symptoms). His periodic bouts of depression can also be debilitating, but it is still reasonable to expect him to shower, shave, and get dressed each day, and to do a negotiated amount of household chores—even during his most difficult seasons. Setting these expectations ahead of time will prevent resentments from building up in you and prevent your loved one from developing destructive feelings of inadequacy. (Seek a trusted third party to help you with this negotiation if necessary.)
- Understand that there may be some small sacrifices in the name of peace. Life isn't always "fair"—accepting this truth will help you avoid resentment and bitterness. In order to support Sean and preserve harmony in our home, the kids and I have had to sacrifice many things: a beloved dog (whose quick movements continually triggered Sean's startle response); going to favorite restaurants where the bar is too close to the dining area for Sean's comfort; going to a mall, a zoo, or other fun attractions during peak season due to the crowds (which overwhelm Sean); the small pleasures that we can't afford because Sean's disabilities don't allow for a reliable second income; Sean's absence three nights a week when he goes to AA meetings. I found that when I lamented my great "misfortune" at these sacrifices, I was miserable. When I learned to accept them, I found peace and even joy.
- Start your day out right—read something inspiring to get a positive mind-set before you have to face the challenges of the day. One book that has helped me a great deal is *A Life of My Own: Meditations on Hope and Acceptance* by Karen Casey. For loved ones of alcoholics or addicts, Al-Anon offers many similar devotional books as part of their available literature.
- Maintain good friendships so you can still enjoy all your favorite activities even though your loved one is unable to go with you because of anxiety or depression.



- Maintain a good strong network that will be there for you if you get overwhelmed or have an emergency. If possible, find ways to give back to others (no matter how small the gesture). For example, if your children are old enough, volunteer at a local food shelf or homeless shelter, be a Salvation Army bell ringer, or babysit your friend's children so she can paint her bathroom. Giving back will take your mind off your own problems and will also help relieve any guilt about having to frequently ask for help yourself.
- Get into a recovery program of your own (such as Al-Anon), regardless of whether your loved one is in recovery or not.
- Practice the art of gratitude and strive to look for the small joys that life offers even in the darkest times—the smiles and laughter of children, a beautiful sunset, a warm summer rain, a flower peeking through the sidewalk, a fun song, the incredible flavor of your favorite dessert. You will miss all of these things if you keep your eyes focused on what is *wrong* in your life instead of noticing all that is right in the world.
- Practice good self-care—see the resource box at the end of chapter 29, page 300, for suggestions.

Compiled from personal experience.

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These articles, books, and websites were of great use to me during the writing of this book, as well as finding help for my family. If you or a loved one is going through the daily struggle of PTSD, addiction, depression, or codependency, you will find these and other resources offer sound advice, information, and hope.

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Sharlene Prinsen teaches world language at a high school in northern Wisconsin. An award-winning educator, she has spoken at professional educators' conferences at the state and national level. This is her first book. Sharlene lives with her husband, Sean; her two children, Michael and Katelyn; and her stepdaughter, Amanda. She and her husband are active in their local church, and they are committed to helping other trauma survivors find their way to peace and stability. As part of this commitment, Sean and Sharlene will donate 40 percent of their personal profit from this book to charities that help service members and veterans with physical or psychological impairments as a result of their service. An additional 10 percent will be donated to their local church to help families in crisis in their own community. You can follow Sharlene and Sean's continuing recovery and find hope and encouragement for your own journey at Sharlene's blog site: blinddevotionblog.com or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/SharlenePrinsenRecoverySupport.

Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden offers a comprehensive approach to addiction that addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

A life of recovery is lived “one day at a time.” Hazelden publications, both educational and inspirational, support and strengthen lifelong recovery. In 1954, Hazelden published *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, the first daily meditation book for recovering alcoholics, and Hazelden continues to publish works to inspire and guide individuals in treatment and recovery, and their loved ones. Professionals who work to prevent and treat addiction also turn to Hazelden for evidence-based curricula, informational materials, and videos for use in schools, treatment programs, and correctional programs.

Through published works, Hazelden extends the reach of hope, encouragement, help, and support to individuals, families, and communities affected by addiction and related issues.

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One woman's startling account of her struggle to protect her children while facing the man she married, a combat veteran plagued by addiction, rage, and depression born from PTSD

Sharlene peered out the window into the blackness that enveloped her yard. She couldn't see them, but she knew they were there—police officers and a SWAT team pointing their weapons at her home. “Don't let them shoot at my kids!” she shouted into the phone to the dispatcher as her drunk, enraged, and armed husband picked up the other line and said, “Go on; get the hell out of here then!”

When she first met Sean, Sharlene never imagined he'd someday be the catalyst to this terrifying scene. He was a handsome, charming conversationalist, and his sincerity was unmistakable. The two married and started a family.

But Sean's drinking soon took over, and signs of depression and his raging outbursts amplified. Something was seriously wrong. He never talked about his tours overseas, including his peacekeeping mission in the aftermath of Slobodan Milošević's ethnic cleansing campaign, but there were signs that what he experienced left him reeling. Sharlene's worry for his well-being began to trump her basic needs. She knew her husband was suffering from tremendous inner turmoil—which she later learned was PTSD—and helped him seek treatment so that he could discover the loving partner and father she once knew him to be.

A powerful story of pain and forgiveness, horror and hope, *Blind Devotion* gives voice to the thousands of families who are struggling to heal and to achieve a sense of normalcy stolen by PTSD.



SHARLENE PRINSEN and her husband have been married for eleven years and have two children. She is a teacher in northern Wisconsin. This is her first book.

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