

FINDING HOME: A STORY ABOUT TWO MILITARY FAMILIES

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by

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## FINDING HOME: A STORY ABOUT TWO MILITARY FAMILIES

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## **ABSTRACT**

Facing the difficulties that often come with military life, many service members experience unimaginable hardships. Long after the event is over, its affects may still linger with the individual who endured it and manifest into PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder. When an event has a certain level of trauma, it can affect the individual to the point of making them relive the event, cause nightmares, anxiety, depression, anger, and other unhealthy behaviors. As the individual interacts with family members, their emotional turmoil is often projected onto those they love, even though they may have no desire to do so. After researching multiple articles on families dealing with military PTSD, I began to understand the negative ramifications of PTSD not only on service members, but on their families as well. PTSD has tremendous potential to break down the family unit, cause disruption, and even break families apart altogether. Aside from hurting the family, it can actually transfer to family members in the form of secondary PTSD and continue to transfer for generations. While the articles were very informative, many of them simultaneously pointed out the lack of research on this topic. With a passionate desire to help these hurting families, I determined to use my research to write a children's story about families going through these very challenges. The characters of the story not only model the realistic trials of actual families, but also depict various solutions that families can use. It is my greatest hope that my final project will be a blessing to those who read it by providing scenarios they can relate to and offering tools that will help them heal and strengthen as a family unit.

Finding Home:  
A Story about Two Military  
Families



On a bright and sunny morning in the Matthews' house, ten year old Riley woke up earlier than usual. "Today is the day!" he excitedly thought to himself as he jumped out of bed and hurriedly threw on his clothes. Then he went down the hall to the bathroom mirror, put water on his comb (just like his dad had showed him), and slicked back his hair. Just as he was finished brushing his teeth, he heard a knock on the door. "Honey, can I come in?" his mom called as she slowly opened the door. At the sight of her son



dressed and ready to go, Mom smiled widely. “Well now, who is this handsome young man, and what have you done with my little boy?” Mom teased. Riley played along, and in his deepest voice and said, “Howdy ma’am,” pretending to tip his hat. Mom laughed, and together they walked into the kitchen where had pancakes waiting.



Even though pancakes were Riley’s favorite breakfast, he didn’t pay much attention to them as he ate. Instead, all he could think about was that, today, Dad was coming home. Because Dad was in the Army, he had received special orders to go across the ocean and work in a country called Afghanistan. It

had been a whole year since Riley had seen his dad face to face. I can't wait to show him the birdhouse I made!" Riley exclaimed. "And when we get home he can show me how to put the roof on it, and"-“Riley,” mom gently interrupted, “Dad is probably going to need a nap when he gets home. He’s had a long trip.” “Oh yeah,” Riley agreed, “then we can work on it when he wakes up!” “Honey, remember our talk about how Dad might be a little different when he comes home?” Mom asked. Riley thought for a moment and nodded. “You said that he’s been in a different place for a long time and he might have a hard time remembering how to be back home.” “That’s right,” Mom replied. “It's like when you go back to school after summer break. Even though you know just what school is like, it still feels strange for a while.” Riley knew what Mom was talking about. “But it’s not too bad because Luke and Tyler are there, and we get to play soccer after school,” Riley said. “Yes! And in the same way that you feel better because you have Luke and Tyler, Dad will feel better because he has you.” Riley thought for a minute and said, “Then I’ll help him remember all

the best things about home!” “I know you will do a great job!” Mom said, and they walked out the door.



At the airport, Mom and Riley waited with several other families for their loved ones to arrive. All of a sudden, Riley spotted Jess. Jess’s family and Riley’s family were friends, and Jess’s mom had been in Afghanistan the same time as Dad. “Mom look, there’s Jess!” Riley said and ran to greet his friend. Jess was waiting with her grandma and little sister Emma for her mom to arrive. When she saw

Riley coming her way, she gave him a big wave. “Hi Jess!” Riley said. “Is your mom coming home today?” “Yep! And your dad is too, right?” Jess replied. “Yeah! We’re gonna work on my bird house when he feels better.” “What do you mean? Is he sick?” Jess asked. “No, but my mom said that he might be tired and need help remembering how to be home again.” Riley said. “Oh yeah, I wouldn’t sleep at all if I was stuck on a plane with a bunch of babies crying like Emma does,” Jess said, and she and Riley laughed. Then Jess continued, “My grandma told me that Mama might be scared of things now.” “Scared of what?” Riley asked. “Well, Grandma said that part of Afghanistan where Mama was can be really scary, so she might still be a little scared when she comes back. Do you think your dad will be scared?” Riley couldn’t remember his dad being afraid of anything. “I don’t think my dad gets scared,” he said. “I hope Mama doesn’t either,” Jess agreed.







Suddenly, they saw a large group of people coming their way. And then Riley spotted Dad's face in the crowd of people. Before Riley could stop himself, big tears were welling up in his eyes and pouring down his face. Dad and Mom hugged for a long time, and then Dad scooped Riley up in his big,

strong arms. “There’s my boy!” Dad said as he held Riley close. When Riley got down, he looked over where Jess had been and saw that she was hugging her mom too. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starved!” Dad exclaimed. Mom and Riley laughed, and together the three of them walked out of the airport.



At home, Riley really wanted to show Dad the birdhouse he had been building. But he remembered that Mom had said Dad would be tired, and decided it would be best to wait. All through lunch, Riley, Mom and Dad talked and laughed together like they used to



do. Dad told stories about what life was like in Afghanistan. “There’s more sand there than at the beach. You could build the world’s biggest sand castle!” Dad told them. Riley pictured a sand castle big enough for him to walk around in, complete with a moat and twenty-foot crocodiles guarding the bridge across. Just as Riley was imagining the suit of armor he would wear, Dad said, “Well gang, I think I need a nap. You have both made this such a fun homecoming, thank you!” Dad gave Mom a kiss, wrestled Riley into another bear hug, and headed towards the bedroom. "Things are going to be great!" Riley thought. Dad was back and Riley couldn’t wait until the real fun started. He wondered how Jess was doing and if she was having as much fun with her mom as Riley was with Dad.





Jess listened as Mama told her about her adventures in the strange place she had been. “Mama, do they have fireflies in Afghanistan?” Jess asked, thinking about how she and Mama would catch fireflies at night. “They might, but I didn’t see any, baby. Do you know what they have instead? Giant, ugly bugs called camel spiders!” “Ewwwww spidews!” Emma said sticking out her tongue. “Mama, do you think we could catch fireflies tonight?” Jess asked. “Well, sweetie, I don’t think I’ll be able to do that for a while,” Mama replied. “It might sound weird, but

I'm actually a little afraid of the dark!" "What?" Jess couldn't believe it. Mama was always the one to check under Jess's bed for monsters and help her fall back asleep when she had a nightmare. "You can't be afraid of the dark!" Jess exclaimed. Mama laughed. "Thank you, but adults can get scared just like kids can. You see, I had fun while I was gone, but I was also in a scary place. So, I got scared of the dark there just like you get scared sometimes when you're alone in your room at night. Even though there's nothing in the world that I love more than doing special things with you, it's hard for me to go outside in the dark right now." At first, Jess felt sad that she couldn't spend that special time with her mother. But then she had an idea. "It's OK, I understand. Can we try something else instead?" Jess asked. "What do you have in mind?" Mama replied. "Wait here!" Jess said as she jumped up and ran to grab some supplies. A few minutes later, she was ready. "Would you please come with me? I have a surprise!" Jess said. "How exciting! Lead the way!" Mama replied. Mama followed Jess outside while Grandma put Emma down for a nap. When they came to the grassy lawn beside their house, Jess stopped.





On the grass lay glass jars and two nets. “What’s all this?” Mama asked. “Well, I thought that since the dark is scary right now, we can do things in the daylight. Last week in school, I read in my science book about how to catch caterpillars and raise them. When they become butterflies, we can set them free and watch them fly for the first time! What do you think?” Mama scooped Jess up in her arms and

squeezed her tight. “I think it’s the best idea I’ve ever heard!” After spending the next couple of hours making temporary homes for their crawling friends, Mama and Jess were having so much fun that they had forgotten about the fireflies altogether.







While Riley didn't spend the afternoon catching caterpillars, he was having just as much fun helping Dad in the woodworking shop. After Dad woke up from his nap, Riley showed Dad his birdhouse. Then, they started on a new project with Dad showing Riley how to use a saw. But just as Riley finished cutting a board on the line Dad had drawn for him, the board

split in two and fell off the sawhorse with a loud crash. Immediately, Dad whirled around and furiously yelled at Riley to go in the house. Riley had only seen Dad yell a few times and had never seen him this mad before. He didn't know what to say, so he just ran towards the house and straight to his room. Once inside, he felt like crying but couldn't. What had he done to make Dad so angry?





Then he heard a knock on his bedroom door and in walked Mom. “Dad told me what happened,” she said as she sat on the bed and patted the spot next to her for Riley to sit. “I’ve never seen him like that before,” Riley said, and he realized for the first time that his hands were shaking. Mom put her arm

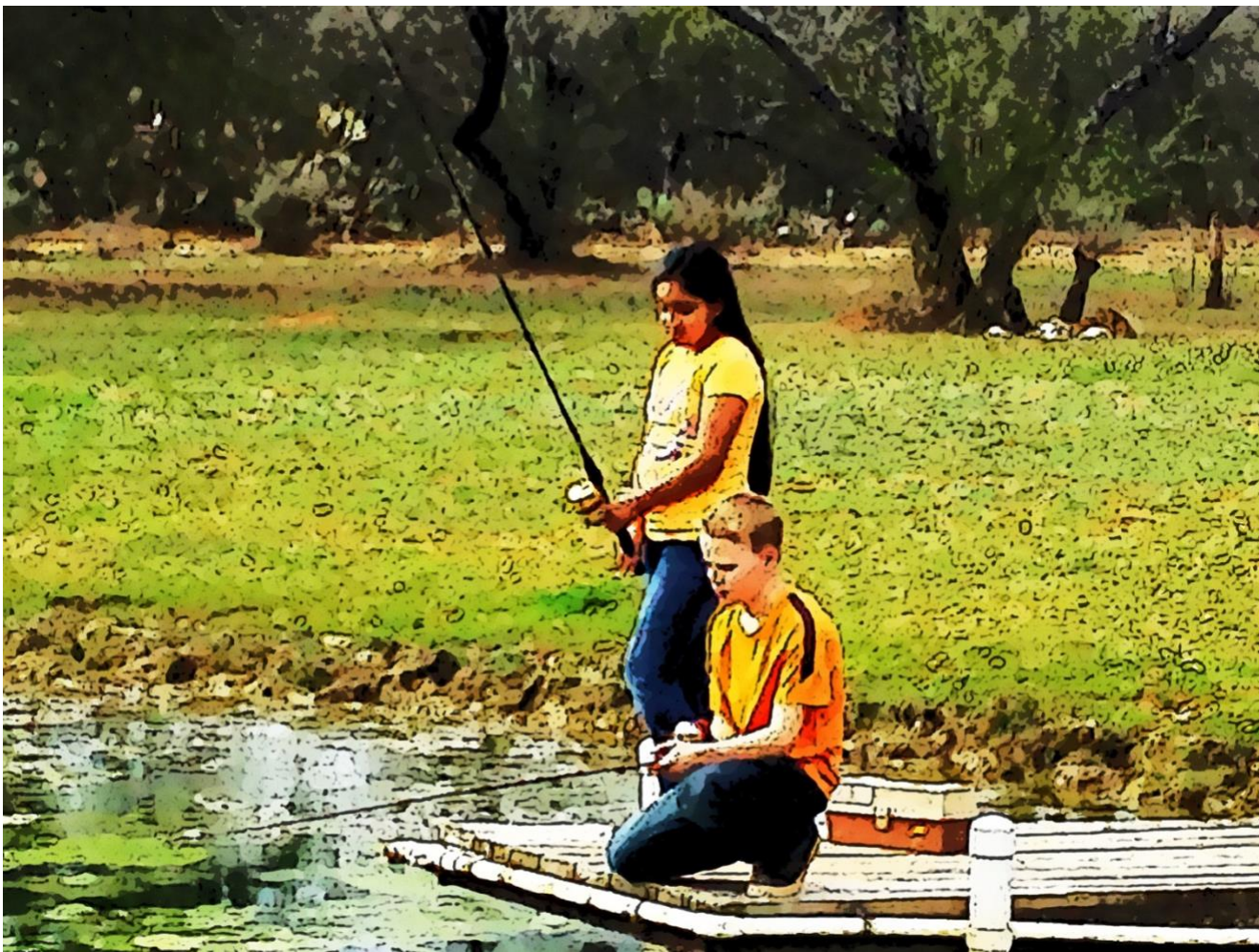


around his shoulders and said, “Sweetie, he didn’t mean to get angry with you. When people get scared, they often act differently. That’s just what Dad did, and he’s really sorry.” Riley remembered what Jess had told him about how her mom might come home feeling afraid. “You mean I scared Dad? But he never gets scared!” Riley said, surprised. “Oh, all grown-ups get scared!” Mom replied soothingly. “Dad was in a place where there were lots of loud noises. Usually, those noises were caused by something harmful, and Dad had to be really careful. So even though he knows that he is home and in a safe place now, he still has a hard time not being afraid. He loves to spend with you, but I think you two may have to find some other fun things to do together.”



Just then, Dad appeared in the doorway. “Riley,” he said, kneeling down, “I am so sorry that I yelled at you. I never want to scare you or lash out in anger.” “It’s OK, Dad. Mom told me that loud noises meant there was danger nearby when you were in Afghanistan,” Riley said. Dad could see that Riley meant what he said but was still sad about what happened, and continued, “But hey, that doesn’t mean we can’t have fun together! I know we can’t do some of the things we used to do, but maybe that

means it's time we learned how to do something new. How would you like to learn how to play chess with me?" Dad said, smiling. Riley grinned. "That sounds cool!" he replied. "But honey, you don't know how to play chess!" Mom said to Dad. "But you do! Can you teach us?" Dad asked with a wink. Mom smiled and shook her head, and the three of them went to living room to embark on a chess adventure.





Over the next few weeks, Jess and Riley tried to help their parents feel at home again. Sometimes they had lots of fun together, and sometimes things weren't so easy. One day, Jess and Riley's mothers took them to the lake to go fishing. As they cast their lines into the water, Jess asked Riley, "What's it like with your dad being back?" "It's different," Riley said, disappointment in his voice. "I wish we could do the same things we used to do, but it's hard not to make my dad angry. My mom says he's not angry with me, but it still seems like he is sometimes." "My mom can get angry, too," Jess said. "But mostly she gets scared, and it makes me feel sad." Jess looked back to where Mama and Riley's mom were sitting under a big oak tree. "But things are getting better," Jess said, sounding hopeful.



When Jess and Riley were done fishing, they returned to where their mothers were sitting. “We have something exciting to tell you two!” Riley’s mom announced. “This weekend, the horse stable is having a special retreat for military families and we are all going!” Jess gasped. “Really? We get to go see real horses?” she asked, hugging Mama. “We sure do, baby!” Mama replied. “Wow! I can’t wait!” Jess jumped up and down. “Is Dad going?” Riley



asked. “We’ll see if he’s up to it,” Mom said with a smile. Riley hoped he would be.



Early Saturday morning, Jess put on the new boots Mama had bought for her earlier that week and came downstairs. “Well, you look like you’re ready to ride the range!” Mama exclaimed. When they arrived at the stable, Jess was happily surprised to see lots of families there that she knew. It didn’t take her long to spot Riley. “Hi Jess,” Riley said as Jess

approached him. Noticing that Riley didn't seem very happy, Jess had a feeling about what the problem might be. "Your dad didn't come, did he?" she asked. Riley shook his head. "He said he wasn't ready to be around a bunch of people yet. In Afghanistan, it can be hard to tell who's a good person and who's not when you don't know them. So, being in a big crowd of strangers can be really dangerous. Even though he's not in Afghanistan anymore, he said it's hard to tell his mind that he's not." "What do you mean, 'tell his mind?'" Jess asked. Riley continued: "He said it's like having a nightmare and then waking up. You know the dream wasn't real but you still feel scared. So, I think that even though he knows he's not really in Afghanistan, he still feels like he is sometimes." "Oh I get it, that makes sense," Jess said. "Yeah," Riley agreed, "but I still wish he could be here."







Soon, the day at the stable kicked off with a slew of activities. To her great delight, Jess got to feed an apple to a horse named Rocky, and Riley learned how to rope. After a big barbeque lunch, everyone gathered in the arena to hear a special speaker. She was a woman named Anna that Jess and Riley recognized as a counselor from the VA hospital. Anna was really nice and had been doing therapeutic riding at the stable ever since an explosion left her with one leg a few years ago. As she spoke, Riley felt

like she was talking directly to him. “It’s hard when someone you love isn’t the same as they used to be,” she said. “You feel like it’s your fault that they’re mad or sad, and it seems like no matter what you do, you can’t make things better. But you have to know this: it’s not your fault. Even though they may act differently, their love for you hasn’t changed. And even if things seem hard right now, they will get better. In the meantime, you can love them and know that, no matter how different things may be, they love you too.”



All of a sudden, Riley knew deep down that Dad loved him. Dad might get angry or spend less time with him, but it wasn't because Riley had done anything wrong. Instead, Dad was still hurting from the scary things he had gone through, and it was going to take some time for him to heal. It was wrong



for Dad to behave angrily towards Riley, but Riley knew that Dad still loved him. Riley decided right then that he was going to focus on the good things about his relationship with Dad and not worry so much about the challenges. His dad was alive, home, and loved him, and Riley knew that was the greatest gift he could ask for.



On the way home, Jess talked all about how much she loved Rocky and how Miss Anna was her hero (but Mama was still her biggest hero). “What do you think about going there once a week to ride together?” Mama asked, and Jess could not say yes

fast enough. Riley also told Mom about how he liked being at the stable and how Miss Anna's words had helped him feel better. "Sweetie, I am so glad. You know, I found out today that Miss Anna teaches classes at the stable. In the classes, you get to work with a horse and learn more of the kinds of things she talked about today. Is that something you'd be interested in doing?" Mom asked. "Thanks Mom, that sounds really fun!" Riley replied.







And so, every week Jess and Riley started going to the stable. Jess and Mama rode together on the trails and Jess became a real cowgirl. The calm, steady horse that Mama rode helped her be calm too, and over time she learned how to overcome a lot of her fear. Riley loved Miss Anna's classes and met some other kids his age that also had dads like his. He had long talks with Miss Anna about what life was like with his dad back home, and Miss Anna always helped him understand how to handle it. Mom helped too, and after awhile Riley grew to fully

understand that his dad loved him no matter what. Whenever Dad got angry, Riley didn't try to handle it alone. Instead, he went straight to Mom or Miss Anna and they talked to Dad about his anger. When Dad calmed down and saw his mistake, he always apologized to Riley right away. Riley and Dad didn't play the way they used to, but they created new hobbies like playing wild games of chess. Eventually, Dad started going to weekly visits with a special counselor who helped him understand why he felt differently. Then Dad would talk with Mom and Riley about what he was feeling, and together they helped Dad work through his challenges.





One day, Riley went to the stable for his usual horse time. He had just started brushing down his favorite gelding when he heard a voice behind him say, “Could you teach me how to do that?” Riley knew who it was in an instant. “Dad!” Riley exclaimed as Dad wrapped him in a bear hug. “Son, do you think we could start doing this together?” Dad asked hopefully. Those were the happiest words Riley had ever heard. Smiling, he replied, “Why don’t I show you how to brush him down?”



The End...  
is just the beginning

## Let's talk about it!

1. How did Mom help prepare Riley for Dad's homecoming?
2. Why couldn't Mama catch fireflies with Jess?
3. Even though Mama and Jess couldn't catch fireflies together, did that stop them from spending time with each other? Why or why not?
4. How did Riley feel after Dad got angry?
5. What did Dad do afterwards that made Riley feel better?
6. How do you think Riley felt when Dad couldn't go to the family day at the stables?
7. How did Riley feel after he listened to the speaker, Miss Anna? What did he realize about Dad?
8. What did Riley do at the stables to overcome some of the challenges he experienced with Dad?
9. Have you ever been in situations similar to Riley's? What did you do?

# Facts for Grown-ups

- The VA reports that 21.5% of men and 24.3% of women have a service connected disability.
- There are about 6,386,836 veteran households with children.
- Although many veterans successfully navigate the transition to civilian life, some veterans may find it difficult to secure financially rewarding and personally satisfying jobs. Others may experience strained personal relationships as they and their families negotiate the many changes that come with the transition and reintegration process.
- 43% of active duty service members have children. These children face the challenges inherent in having a parent deployed. Many of them must also cope with living with a parent who returns profoundly changed by war. Most families will be able to overcome these adversities through the support of family, friends, and community.
- While families experiencing the effects of PTSD may face many challenges, they can also find tremendous hope in the potential for healing to take place through a countless number of resources. In a recent study of Veterans receiving treatment for PTSD, nearly 80% were interested in greater family involvement in their care.
- Over the past several years, there has been substantial growth in the number of services offered to support military families.

\*Sources: va.gov; Vogt et al 2016; Esposito-Smythers et al 2011



# Family Resources

U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs

Phone: 1-800-273-8255, press 1 (text 838255)

Email: [ncptsd@va.gov](mailto:ncptsd@va.gov)

Website: [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)

FOCUS Project

Phone: 310-794-2482

Email: [Info@focusproject.org](mailto:Info@focusproject.org)

Website: [www.focusproject.org](http://www.focusproject.org)

Veterans Families United

Website: [www.veteransfamiliesunited.org](http://www.veteransfamiliesunited.org)

Military OneSource

Phone: 800-342-9647

Website: [www.militaryonesource.mil/](http://www.militaryonesource.mil/)

PTSD United

Website: [www.ptsdunited.org/](http://www.ptsdunited.org/)

