“8 STEPS TO CAREGIVER EMPOWERMENT, GROWTH & WELL-BEING”

Please Note: Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) or captioning are provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility and may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings.

***

>> Good afternoon. My name is Kelly. I will be your conference operator today. At this time I would like to welcome everyone to the Eight Steps to Caregiver Empowerment, Growth & Well-Being conference call. All lines have been placed on mute to prevent any background noise. If you should need assistance during the call please press * and then zero and a operator will come back on the line to assist you. Mr. Vidal, you may begin your conference.

>> BRYAN VIDAL: Thank you and welcome. Greetings on behalf of the Easter Seals Dixon center as we have our latest series entitled Eight Steps to Caregiver Empowerment, Growth & Well-Being. We are pleased to partner in this effort as a proud member of the Elizabeth Dole Foundation National Coalition for Military caregivers. Let me begin by thanking our operator, Kelly, for her support. Thank you so much, Kelly.

Now some specific details related to today's webinar. The phone lines will be muted throughout today's webinar. Should you have any questions or concerns, please use the online chat feature of our webinar software on the left-hand side of your screen or send an email to militarycaregiver@Easter Seals.com.

If you experience any issues accessing the blackboard webinar platform please send an email to that same email address, once again militarycaregiver@Easter Seals.com. Our staff will send you a copy of today's slides so that you can continue to listen in and follow along.
We will address questions once our speakers conclude the presentation. Please note that the session is being recorded. Transcripts and the recording along with copies of handouts and other valuable resources will be posted to EasterSeals.com/carewebinar.

Also available on that page are the archived recordings of all of our previous webinars. We are pleased to provide live captioning for today's webinar. To access that feature, type in control F8 into your keyboard.

Now I would like to review our agenda for today. I will begin by introducing Precious Goodson, an Elizabeth Dole Fellow from Georgia. Then Debbie Sprague who will share with us Eight Steps to Caregiver Empowerment, Growth & Well-Being.

Immediately following the presentation, we have reserved time for all of our speakers to respond to online or email questions. We are also fortunate to have Dr. Michelle Stefanelli representing the caregiver support group joining us as an additional resource expert.

Today's webinar is supported by an incredible group of organizations including Atlas Research, the Caregiver Action Network, the Family Caregiver Alliance, the National Alliance for Caregivers, the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving, the USO and the Elizabeth Dole Foundation.

I would like to now introduce and turn things over to Precious Goodson. In 2010 Precious Goodson's life was dramatically changed after her husband returned from military service in Afghanistan. With severe mental and physical injuries, Precious was suddenly faced with having to resign from her teaching position to care for her husband on a full-time basis. The extraordinary upheaval in their lives meant that both Precious and her husband would have to capture a new sense of identity, inner strength and balance and create a new life for themselves. Precious has continued to strive for these through passionately helping others and giving back to the military caregiver community, advocacy on their behalf has become a way of life for her. As a Dole fellow Precious shared the stage with first lady Obama, Senator Dole and others at the Hidden Heroes Coalition Summit in Washington, D.C. She met with Congressional leaders in her state an district and helped other caregivers with her work with the Military Veteran Caregiver Network. She was selected by President Obama as part of the Presidential delegation to the Invictus Games in Orlando, Florida. Her blog, War Changes Lives, serve as a way to share with other caregivers resources that have been helpful to her and her husband during this journey. A doctoral candidate in distance education, she believes that
distance education will play an increasingly vital role in educating and training military caregivers.

Precious presently serves as an advisory board member of the military veteran caregiver research advisory group and of the University of Texas health and sciences center. She and her husband find great inspiration in helping military families find solace through mentorship and other activities. Precious, please take it away.

>> PRECIOUS GOODSON: Hi, everyone. I'm Precious Goodson, Dole fellow alumna out of the state of Georgia. I'm delighted to have this opportunity to share my story. It is indeed an honor to support Easter Seals military caregiver webinar series. As one of five and a half million other military caregivers that serve and offer sacrifices to their loved ones every day from across the nation, I'm hopeful that what I share today will be helpful to you.

Life before injury was not just about me. However, life was not just about my loved one either. There was a balance. My husband is now medically retired with 17 years of service. He served in the United States Army and the Army National Guard with two tours as a combat medicine I can, both in Desert Storm and Afghanistan.

His injuries are both physical and mental, which includes severe post-traumatic stress and mild traumatic brain injury. Before my husband was injured in Afghanistan, my life was predictable. I was a full-time educator, worked in elementary schools as a classroom teacher, school website designer, trained colleagues on integrating technology into their lessons.

I was also very devoted to my husband and supportive of his service in the military. At this time he was in the Army National Guard and was to be a required to be away from me one weekend a month and two weeks per year.

It was very, a very routine time going on in my life at that time. But my life has changed. As a caregiver I'm learning to accept the way that my life has changed. And I'm learning to embrace differences. I had no idea during my husband's deployment that he was injured at all. I found out after he returned from Afghanistan from a demobile officer after he was assigned to the wounded transition unit.

I was disheartened. Scared. I didn't know what to expect. I took a leave of absence from work and remained at his side during his time in fort Stewart's wounded transition unit.
Duncan, who is also the service therapy dog pictured here at the top of the photo, he has been with us since 2010 and he has helped me and my husband tremendously as a service and a therapy dog during my husband's time of recovery.

My caregiving duties had me feeling completely overwhelmed. My husband was assigned to fourth Stewart's wounded transition unit in April of 2010. The administrative work was handled by the wounded transition unit. My husband would receive a schedule, a print out of his appointments weekly. My primarily goal as his caregiver at that time was to make sure he received the care that he needed and that he was not returned to his unit without receiving the proper treatment. During this very demanding time after much prayer, advocacy, meetings with his case manager, meetings with his ombudsman, at fort Stewart and after writing many Congressional letters, my husband received proper treatment.

In August of 2010, my husband was reas Steined to the community-based wounded transition unit in order to heal in his community. I resigned from my full-time teaching job to care for my husband full-time. We moved from fort Stewart to our home right outside of Atlanta, Georgia. I became responsible for scheduling, managing his calendars, communicating with doctors, following up with medications. And not long after we left the wounded transition unit, I felt lost, overwhelmed and confused. It was very difficult financially.

But my husband needed me. I didn't know what to expect and I was really scared about the future. At the same time symptoms of post-traumatic stress had begun to manifest. Up to this point my husband had been treated for physical injuries. He began receiving treatment for post-traumatic stress once we returned to our community. My husband remained in a med hold status for two additional years, with his entire med hold and recovery time after his return from Afghanistan being almost four years. He was medically retired September of 2013.

I have had challenges, though, as a caregiver. As a caregiver, I have endured my husband being hospitalized five times in a three-year time period, both involuntarily and voluntarily. And I tried to handle it by myself without support from family and friends.

As a caregiver, I am learning how important it is to communicate with my husband's medical team and learn from his team how to care for him. I am learning how crucial it is to connect with other caregivers. As his caregiver, I am learning how vital it is to talk and network with other caregivers who are in the same boat as I am. Most importantly, I am still
learning to not be an island or isolate myself from community. I have been a caregiver to my husband for almost ten years, and I am still learning through trial and error what works best for my situation and for my husband.

As a caregiver, learning to accept the fact that my life has changed and embrace the differences has been hard. It is a challenge for me to accept the things the way they are. However, staying in denial or fighting against reality doesn't help either.

I find myself often times hoping that my husband will perform this way or that way, like how he did before he was injured. But I have to be careful to keep my expectations realistic. It helps me and keeps me from getting disappointed. I think one of the main challenges that I faced is not being understood by family and friends. It is so hard to explain somethings that are part of my everyday life. I cannot say that I have stopped trying to explain things. There have been times when I have isolated myself from family and friends, and I need community. We as caregivers need community. When I shut myself out from people who love me, I hurt myself. So I must find a way to overcome this need to isolate myself.

So I have experienced a sense of loss. One area that I feel a sense of loss in is my identity. Since becoming a caregiver to my husband, I have had to fight hard to maintain who I am as a person. I was no longer experiencing life as I had known it. The things I had known as my life were not realistic for me anymore. For example, working a full-time job outside the home, leaving the house to go to a job every day from 8 to 5 was no longer my reality.

So now working to find that new me, that's something that gives me a sense of fulfillment and purpose, is necessary. To gain a sense of self as a caregiver would negate the mounting mental health issues about caregivers, I believe. It is unfortunate that a caregiver's sense of self is lost in the selfless work that we do as caregivers.

Now, my future hope is that I have grown personally and professionally and I expect to continue along this path of professional and personal growth. Staying connected to caregiver peers, networking through social media, caregiver events, support groups, and most importantly not being an island are some ways that I encourage all caregivers to strive for as well. I personally see how becoming a caregiver has helped me to discover a passion which is to help to raise awareness of what we need as military caregivers. Our needs of the loved ones, wounded from war are critical and now are evidence based. This is one
reason I'm so thankful for the Elizabeth Dole Foundation for commissioning the Rand studies that resulted in findings to support our needs as military caregivers. I am so very thankful for the other nonprofit organizations that have stepped up to also provide support to the caregiver community. However, I think that growth as a caregiver is based on more than accomplishments. I believe that growth as a caregiver is based on learning lessons every day. New lessons based on what happened the previous day. I think that learning from other caregivers and connecting through community support, retreats, or any other way in which we can communicate and share is vitally important.

I have been blessed, honored and allowed chances to grow professionally and personally since my husband's injuries. Albeit life as I knew it has changed, it didn't all change to cause things to be worse in our lives. But it did cause such a difference in our life so that now I need to learn and embrace a different way of life as a caregiver and as a wife.

I am very grateful for the community of support, the awesome organizations that provide support too. As my husband and I continue on this road to recovery and as we continue to rebuild our lives.
Thank you.

>> BRYAN VIDAL: Thank you, Precious, for your deep and very inspiring story. Now it is my pleasure to introduce today's host speaker, Debbie Sprague. She is the author of a stranger in my bed, eight steps to taking back your life from the contagious effect of your veteran's post-traumatic stress disorder. She is alumnus and training manager from the Military Veteran Caregiver Network, advocate for military veteran caregivers, speaking and providing training and education to those who care for and about our ill, injured and wounded veterans. She has a degree in therapeutic recreation with minor in psychology from the California state university in Chico and works in health and physical care services, board certified life coach specializing in wellness and life solutions for military veteran caregivers. She has experienced the challenges of caregiving during her son and mother's cases of cancer, while caring for her late father, and continues to care for her elderly mother suffering from dementia. In 2004 Debbie began caring for her husband Randy, a Vietnam veteran when he was will suffering the effects s from Agent Orange and post-traumatic stress disorder from two tours in Vietnam. And in 2006 she was diagnosed with PTSD herself. Her solutions after becoming overwhelmed and lost in the world of caregiving and on her desire to help other caregivers has led her to the work she does today. Debbie, welcome.
DEBBIE SPRAGUE: Thank you, Bryan. And it is my honor to be here today and to share Eight Steps to Caregiver Empowerment, Growth & Well-Being.

It is really hard to believe that it was just last week that we celebrated the 17th anniversary of the day we met. And our love story began. I will never forget it was arraigny morning, standing in a muddy parking lot and being introduced to a new employee, Randy. As I reached out to shake his hand and our eyes metaphor the first time, it was love at first sight and even my 13-year-old daughter approved. And she hadn't liked anyone that I dated in the nine years that I had been single. Eight months later we were married.

This love brought new hope to my life after a failed marriage and losing my 11-year-old son to cancer. Randy had enjoyed a 14-year honorable career in the U.S. Navy, two tours of duty in Vietnam and achieving the rank a chief petty officer, and worked in the pentagon with the chief of operations. He continued in aerospace industry and pursued his dream of joining the PGA pro tour. That dream was cut short due to an eye injury. With his dreams crushed and three failed marriages he returned home to the place of his childhood memories in northern California. To begin anew.

And just a month after he moved we met. We had dreams of a wonderful life together and in the beginning it was everything that I could ever hope for. But three short years into our marriage those dreams turned into nightmares. Nightmares that would wake me up with a fist in my face. My husband screaming in Vietnamese, relentlessly roaming the house all hours of the night, angry outbursts for no reason. That left my daughter and I were walking on egg shells. He managed to ruin every occasion in my young daughter's life. He was out of control and hurting everyone close to him. He began to have physical a pain along with mental anguish. He began to self medicate with alcohol and morphine. His life was headed down a path to sure destruction and I had no idea how to stop it.

We were blessed that someone stepped in to help him, a fellow Vietnam met who Randy met in a parking lot saved his life. He recognized Randy's symptoms and his need for help. He virtually took him which the hand to the V.A. where he began getting the help that he so desperately needed. Repercussions from his two tours in Vietnam 30 years prior had risen out of nowhere and were threatening to ruin our life. Not only has he been diagnosed with health complications from exposure to Agent Orange but also the invisible wounds of PTSD.
No one told me that once this treatment started he would get worse before he would get better. Just imagine, 30 years of repressed memories began rising up like an angry volcano.

He would go days without speaking to me. It was like he was engulfed in a dark cloud. He became numb and withdrawn. He avoided social activities and anyplace that involved crowds and noise.

I was left to go alone or not at all. He had lost total interest in every aspect of our relationship.

My resentment began to grow and with it, anger. A level of anger I had never experienced before. I was depressed, and grieving the loss of my husband. My self-esteem was shattered. I lost my sense of self and was experiencing health problems and insomnia.

I also felt guilty because this all must be my fault and I should be able to fix it, if I could just be better or just try a little bit harder.

We struggled. I struggled in silence because no one around me understood PTSD or what we were going through. Never in my life had I felt this lost and alone. Finally when I was at the lowest of lows I sought professional help. I was given the same answer from two different therapists. You're still young. Get a divorce and move on with your life. They both told me I had PTSD as well.

But divorce was not the answer that I was looking for. So I walked away from the therapists. And I started researching reading everything I could find to try to help my husband and myself. What I found was that there are so many other caregivers out there just like me, but with much worse struggles than what we were facing. It has taken me many years to find a place of peace and love again. Along the way I've learned many lessons which I shared in my book in helps that others can get there much more quickly than I had.

I would like to share with you some of those lessoned that helped me regain my power and ability to grow and cherish my wellbeing while honoring my husband.

The first step to empowerment is expanding knowledge, understanding, and acceptance about your veteran's illness, wound, or injury. And it also provides you the power to better control your reactions to the situation. Doing all you can to get the facts about all the problems that your veteran is dealing with will make you better equipped to help him
or her. Having a thorough knowledge of what to expect in the future will allow you to take a proactive role in your future and also take control of the things that are within your power.

But learning all of this can also put you in a state of confusion. You may be experiencing a roller coaster of emotions. You may feel as though you have lost control and have no choices as to the direction of your life. So if you are going to get through this it is crucial that you fully understand your veteran's problems and have realistic expectations about today and the future.

This will help direct the course of your life.

Taking action to gain control of your situation. That's our action step. What do you need to learn more about? What resources are available to help you? And who can help you to understand what this all means? Along with becoming educated and applying your new knowledge to your veteran's problem, it is also essential that you are able to come to a place of acceptance. For many of us this can be the most difficult step. Acceptance does not always come easily because it involves change, and change brings up all kinds of emotions and reactions, including fear. The unknown makes us uncomfortable. Even thinking about change can be uncomfortable because we are creatures of habit. Change feels difficult and unwanted. So we try to resist it even when we don't want to. That's why it is important that we have complete knowledge of the changes happening to our veterans and understand why these changes are happening.

Change also involves loss. Aspects of our relationship and our dreams can disappear. We are not ready for these changes, and we don't want them. We want our veteran the way he or she was. We liked our life the way it was. We try to stay comfortable by pretending things were just the way they were. Again, resisting the changes with all our might.

Helpful tools to acceptance. Having confidence in your ability to get through these changes will help you with acceptance. Look back at a previous experience in your life when you were forced to make a change. Perhaps it was the loss of a job, a relationship, a health problem, or a loved one. Think about the tools and the ability that you had to get through what at that time seemed to be the worst experience of your life. Remember that if you did it once, you are capable of doing it again. Try to relax and be flexible. Understand that your veteran has changed, and no matter how much you resist you have no control over what has happened. It is normal to have difficulty facing change. We often want to ignore it, hoping
it will go away. Try to honestly face your feelings about your veteran's problems.

The first step towards any change is always the hardest. You may not yet be at a point of acceptance, but don't worry, that's perfectly normal. Learning and having a complete understanding of what to expect both today and in the future is an important beginning.

Caregiving can cause us to lose our identity, our confidence, ourself esteem, our dreams, and ourselves. Leaving us feeling out of alignment with the essence of who we are, powerless to change. Finding the power within us gives us the strength to reclaim our lives.

This is our second step towards empowerment. Uncovering your essence. In order to build yourself esteem and become empowered, it is important to uncover and embrace your true essence. Essence is the purest sense of who you are at your very deepest level. It is your authentic, genuine self. It makes you uniquely you. Think about your essence like a forest after a wildfire. It looks as if it has been completely devastated and will never return to the lush, green forest it once was. But come spring if you revisited the forest you will find that new life is beginning to return. Bride green seedlings are sprouting up through the ground. Our essence is like our seeds buried on the forest floor. It is always there inside of us even though at the time it seemed to be destroyed. Values make up the essence of who we are. The failure to honor our values adds up to loss of self-esteem and loss of identity. Key values exist at the center of our being. When values are violated we struggle. We feel angry, resentful and negative about ourself.

Life is meaningful and we are the most happy when we can honor our values. To make sure we are honoring our values, it is a good idea to do a values checkup every once in awhile. There are some questions you can ask yourself to see if you are living in alignment with your values. What key values are essential to you? Some common values are love, safety, security, happiness, peace, integrity, respect, and belonging.

Which of your values are you not living fully or living without? How is this affecting you? What action can you take today to begin honoring your values?

Step 3 is unveiling your support system. In this step we will learn new ways to look at those people who are already surrounding you, realizing the power of your support. Seeking support is an essential step towards empowerment. Asking for support can be difficult when you do not
feel deserving and allowing your situation to control you. But part of taking control of your life is to recognize and ask for the help that you need.

The problems facing military veteran caregivers are difficult to understand and it’s not impossible to find individuals with passion to help you. At times it can feel like you’re all alone and no one understands what you are going through. That’s how I felt until I learned there are millions of caregivers just like us that do understand, as well as many people who may not fully understand the situation but are willing to learn how to support you.

It is common to expect that when something happens in your life and you need support that it will be your family and your closest friends who will be the very first ones to provide exactly what you need. It can be very hurtful when those closest to you are unable to provide the type of support that you expect and desperately need.

Often this can result in anger, resentment, and sometimes broken relationships. I know how hurtful it was when this happened to me. Eventually I realized that they were just as lost as I was. And when I was able to recognize that many people, not just my family, are just not comfortable dealing with illness, injury, and especially the mental and emotional challenges that come with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries.

Everything changed when I was able to recognize this and changed my perspective. I would ask you to open up your heart and consider that there are people in your life that truly love and care about you. But just like you are lost, uncomfortable in dealing with the changes and don’t know how to provide the support that you are seeking.

Your action step is strengthening your current support system. Trust that you do have those who want to help. They are there waiting, and just need to be given something to do in order to determine what help is comfortable for each member of your support team. Learn to ask them for the support you need. Remember, we each possess unique strengths, talents and gifts. Let them support you coming from their strength and appreciate each gift that someone in your support system is able to give. And accept it as a gift.

Peer support, giving and receiving. When I could not find the support that I needed for my family, friends or professionals, I continued to search for the help that I needed. My life changed when I found family vets online and finally knew that I was not alone. The peer support I found through them in 2010 and all of those caregivers I have met since that time have
changed my life. Being able to return that support to my fellow caregivers, such as you, has been an enormous lesson to me. Today there are many opportunities for giving and receiving peer support. I am honored to be part of the Elizabeth Dole Foundation's Hidden Heroes and the Military Veteran Caregiver Network where you can find structured peer support. Receiving support can change your view of your circumstances. I'm confident if you open your heart and mind to the endless possibilities available all around you you will not only find the support that you need but also return that gift to others.

Growth. Letting go of fear, anger and resentment and finding love and compassion. In step 2 we discussed the importance of reclaiming your true self. If you are still feeling anger, resentment and fear it is difficult to reclaim your true, loving compassionate self with anger, fear and resentment. It is hard to admit these are all common feelings that can come with military veteran caregiving. I know they were holding me back from moving forward in a positive direction.

It is normal to become fearful when your life changes because of caregiving. You find yourself in a new and strange situation. There's fear of the unknown, fear about the wellbeing of your veteran, fear about your own life and what the future will hold. Fear about the uncertainty and the extent of your loved one's illness. Fear of the loss of your loved one or, worse yet, fear of the impact that his or her illness will have on you and your ability to care for them.

And if you are caring for someone with PTSD and or traumatic brain injury, that fear can go to a whole new level as it threatens your relationship, your friendships, love, intimacy and the caring that once existed.

Fear and love cannot coexist. Fear closes your mind to the opportunities to have a better life. It blinds you to the good things that are around you. If you are not able to calm those fierce, that fear can turn to anger. Deep, dark anger and resentment.

Anger is a harmful emotion to hold on to. Just think about the physical things that can happen to you when you are angry. Tightness or tension in your chest, healthcare, upset stomach and digestive system, clenched fists and a fast heart beat.

Anger also causes mental problems such as difficulty concentrating, confusion and problems with your memory.
Buddha says holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else. You are the one who gets burned. It is time to put that burning coal out.

One of the most difficult and powerful things that I have done is to ask for and give forgiveness to my husband. At a time when I believed that he did not deserve it and he had made no action towards changing or even acknowledging his hurtful behavior. I am at that point in time, he was not willing or able to say those words. Continuing to carry that anger was only hurting me. These simple words set me free from that burning coal.

I'm sorry for anything I have done to hurt you. Please forgive me. I forgive you for all the things that you have done to hurt me. I love you. After speaking those words to my husband, I felt a huge relief of the anger inside me. The burning coal was no longer present. In its place was a feeling of peace and calm. My husband told me that my words were the greatest gift he had ever received. Even when we have released those feelings of fear, anger and resentment our hearts can be shut down. We feel no love. We feel flat and empty. I remember that feeling so well. I couldn't taste a great cup of coffee. Or smell the fragrance of flowers. I felt numb and disconnected. The feeling of joy had left me.

What I learned was that when we are relying on sources outside of ourselves such as our veteran, family or friends we often are not getting the love that we want and or need. Our veteran may not be able to give us that love in the way that we want it because of their injury, wound, PTSD or TBI. We need to develop the inner state of love that doesn't depend on a person, a situation or a romantic partner. We need to have self compassion and love and treat ourselves like we would treat a beloved friend.

Plant your own garden and decorate your own soul you instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers.

I would like you to sit with that thought for a moment and visualize what those words bring up for you. What can you do to celebrate you?

Wellbeing, step number 5, is managing stress and overwhelm. Wellbeing is defined as a state of happiness and contentment. Overwhelm and stress are common problems for caregivers. And harmful effects of stress are well documented with numerous studies and reports showing the effects of stress on our bodies. Experts report that stress is the underlying cause of 60 to 90 percent of all stress.
Tips for on the spot stress relief. We can help you maintain a healthy state of being. Stress does not debilitate you or compromise your health over the long run. Here are four ideas on how you can minimize the negative effects of stress.

Consider these the best of the best stress management techniques. Each of these tips is a powerful tool that will, if consciously practiced on a regular basis, reduce the impact of stress on your body give you more energy and help you experience more control over your life.

Breathing techniques. Try engaging in slow, deep breathing to produce a calming effect on your nervous system, your hormones dissipate and your energy is restored. Mind fullness is paying attention to your feelings, thoughts, sensations and experiences in the moment. It is a method of focusing only on the moment. What is going on around you and it engages your senses. For example, put a mint in your mouth and take the time to smell, taste and to feel it.

Self talk. Shift your negative self talk to this question: What can I do to make this a good experience? Be aware of what you are saying to yourself and change any negative language into positive language.

Control versus no control. Ask yourself: Can I control this? Even though you may not be able to control the situation, what you can control is your reaction. Make it a priority to set aside time on a regular basis to engage in stress management techniques. Fill your tool box with a variety of tools that work for you in various stressful situations that you encounter.

Step number 6, cherishing you with health and wellness. My goal today is to open your minds up to the importance of paying attention to your needs for nourishment, exercise and sleep so you can begin to maximize and make small shifts to what you are currently doing to increase your wellness.

Think of wellness as preventive maintenance. We all want our cars running at peak performance, ready to take us anywhere we want to go at a moment's notice.

What happens when your fuel light comes on and you simply ignore it? You're going to run out of gas, right? What happens when you run out of gas? It's inconvenient, stressful and possibly scary depending on where you are. It can also damage your engine when you allow your fuel tank to become completely empty.

What happens if you put the wrong type of fuel into your car? Have you ever heard stories about vandals putting sugar in people's gas tanks?
It destroys the fuel system. So it is important to use the right type of fuel for maximum performance. When the warning lights tell you that your car is overheating, do you keep going until the engine blows up or do you stop at the first opportunity to check the water level and let the engine cool?

Ask yourself: Are you paying attention to the warning signs that your body is sending out when it needs fuel and rest? Our bodies are like cars. They need proper maintenance to run. We normally don't ignore those warning lights on those vehicles for very long. Why is it so easy to let our own bodies go until we are totally depleted? It is important to take the action of asking for what you need. Many times as a caregiver you may feel guilty when you say: What about me? It is difficult to find your voice and ask for what you need. It is important to tune in to what your body is telling you and recognize that it's okay to eat when you are hungry and to sleep when you are tired. Also it is okay to share your needs with your veteran and ask for their support in yourself care.

It is, after all, in their best interests that your engine is running strong and healthy. However, if we do not communicate our needs, in many cases no one else will know it. It is important to ask for what you really need and express what is really important to you. If no one knows you will begin feeling frustrated and uncared for. There are hundreds of tools and tips available for healthy eating, exercising and better sleep. Find what works for you and begin making shifts towards a healthier life. Remember, we only have one body and if we don't care for it, the neglect will soon take its toll not just on us but also on those we are caring for.

Step 7, embracing joy and happiness. Living a life full of fun, happiness and passion are essential to the quality of your life. Many say these elements are also essential to your health and wellbeing. Yet it is so easy to lose sight of the importance of these while living in the world of caregiving. When these essentials are over shadowed, life's sparkle is stripped away leaving behind only the essentials of surviving. This does not have to be the case. Joy and happiness are free and available to everyone who wishes to pursue them. Happiness, not in another place but in this place. Not for another hour, but for this hour. Are you taking in and embracing each moment of happiness as it happens? Or is fear holding you back? Fear that this feeling of joy is not going to last? That in a minute, an hour or a day it will be gone? Are you afraid to enjoy the moment because you don't want to be disappointed when they don't last? You don't want the highs and lows of joy, so you stay in that low place refusing to take in the good, thinking that you are protecting yourself from the disappointment that is sure to come?
That is what I did. And today I realize how much I missed out on by not taking it in and enjoying and appreciating each tiny moment of joy. Are you putting off your own happiness until ... fill in the blank. What have you gained by putting off your happiness? What are you losing out on? I challenge each of you to fully embrace those next moments of happiness in your life.

Step 8 is putting it all together. Today is your opportunity to set into motion the shifts and changes necessary to take your life back. It is a step you can learn today. Understand and accept the reality of your life and your future. Uncover your power and your ability to take control rather than letting the situation control you.

Trust that you have people who care for you, and ask them to help in ways that honor their strengths and appreciate the gifts they bring to your life.

Realize the power of peer support and the power of giving. Learn to use the power full act of forgiveness to release anger, fear and guilt. And fill yourself with love and self compassion. Practice exercising on a regular basis to combat caregiver stress.

Pay attention to the warning signs that your body is sending out when it needs fuel and rest. And ask for what you need. Embrace each opportunity and moment of joy and happiness.

The final pieces of step 8 is putting the steps into action by making a decision to take back control of your life. Trust yourself and your ability to create a live that works for you. Remember that those around you may not understand your life. It may not look normal to them.

But keep confident in your ability to know what is best for you, your family, and your veteran.

You have to look at everything that happened to you up to this point in your life. There is pain, anger, fear. There are days when you thought you could not possibly endure another moment, but you did. Now you are here looking for a better, easier way in which you can love, honor and care for your veteran while cherishing what you need. You are now ready to go to the next chapter of your life but I congratulate each of you for taking this next step in your life. It is not an easy journey. Thank you for the will courage to keep moving forward towards a better life.
It has been my honor to share this time with you today. In closing, I give you the final action step that leads to empowerment, growth, and wellbeing. That is to simply begin. I understand that this often can be the most difficult step at all, but it is not necessary to make a giant leap. Just taking that first tiny step is a beginning.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today. Here is my contact information should you want to learn more, or if I can be of support to you.

And Bryan, back to you.

>> BRYAN VIDAL: Thank you so much, Precious and Debbie, for your very inspiring and amazing stories. We are really grateful for having you here today. We will now take some questions that have been submitted via the chat feature and via email. If you have any questions at the moment you can send them to militarycaregiver@Easter Seals.com. For some reason we are not able to take them, still send them and we will pass them to the speakers.

The first question, this question can be for both of you guys. It says: What strategy or technique works best on the spot whenever my veteran lashes out?

>> DEBBIE SPRAGUE: I can take that one first if you like. There is, to me there is no better tool than silence. When we lash out in anger or try to confront that in the moment of anger, it is only going to escalate things. So to just do your best to calm yourself and just be silent and not react. I know it's very difficult, but everyone needs time to calm down. So if you can try to calm yourself and keep from saying anything, just silence. Silence and quiet.

>> PRECIOUS GOODSON: That's great, Debbie. I would like to actually take you back a bit on that and say for me, it helps to just walk away. I mean, there have been times when I was just, put my hand up and just say I'm not going to do this with you today. And we'll just turn around and walk away. Duncan is helpful because sometimes I'll just take him and go for a walk, just leave the house. Or I will just go upstairs or to a different area in the house away from him. Sometimes even closing the door to give him the message that I'm not going to participate in that today.

>> DEBBIE SPRAGUE: That's a great addition, Precious. Just to add on to that as well, when you do have those calm and good times it's good to be able to talk about that and say, you know, when things get escalated, and I need to step away, I will come back and we will have a talk about whatever it is that we need to talk about, but I just need you to know that in the heat
of the moment I am not going to interact. I will need to step away, but I will come back and we will talk about it. You can have those conversations in calm times so that your veteran knows that you are going to come back. It is not over. But you both need to be in a calm place before you can talk things over.

>> PRECIOUS GOODSON: Yeah, yes.

>> BRYAN VIDAL: Thank you. So the other question, it looks like it came through for Precious, but Debbie feel free to chime in as well. The question says: What sort of suggestions would you have on meeting other caregivers who can understand our situation?

>> PRECIOUS GOODSON: There are several ways that I would suggest to do that. And it really kind of also depends on the type of person you are as far as whether or not it is best, or works better for you to meet face-to-face with someone. If you have a problem with -- if you have a problem with actually interacting through technology and not necessarily needing to see someone face-to-face in order to feel comfortable relating with them.

With that said, there are several platforms and ways that I would suggest to begin to actually connect with caregivers. The first thing I would suggest, there is an awesome platform that is available to caregivers. It is password protected. And it is called the Military Veteran Caregiver Network. I'm not sure if you are already a member or not, but there are things within the network and in the online community there is an online community that pretty much embraces the differences of all caregivers. We are all unique. We all have different things that we are dealing with. With me personally, my husband's primary disabilities are mental. Even though there are physical. But then there are some caregivers that deal with different injuries and the physical are more prevalent. With this particular platform caregivers of all different things that they are trying to deal with can come together and communicate. I think Facebook is also a great place to go. There are social groups that are also requiring vetting so that you have to prove you are a caregiver status to even become a member of those groups and they are places that you could also feel safe.

I think reaching out to the community to actually connect through attending retreats which a lot of times require, of course, applications and approval and acceptance to attend them and then those are great ways also, I would suggest, to get out, to meet other caregivers and network and receive support by attending retreats as well.

I hope that answers your question.

Debbie, do you have more to add to that?
DEBBIE SPRAGUE: Just that many communities also have support groups. So if you are interested in doing an in-person situation, you can check with your local V.A. agency. They typically have information about it. If they have support groups through a vet center, that's one possibility.

Then as Precious mentioned with Military Veteran Caregiver Network you can actually sign up and have a one-on-one peer support situation with another caregiver who has similar experiences that you have had, but further down the road, the more lived experience than you might have early in your caregiving experience.

PRECIOUS GOODSON: I would also like to add the V.A. caregiver support program. The different V.A. caregiver support programs in the geographical areas where I have been, they have also provided and offered support groups for caregivers, support calls for caregivers to get on as well. So that may also be a great way to reach out to connect. And if you just visit their website at V.A..caregiver.gov, there is a 1-800 number. I think it's a 1-855 number. Anyway, you can call that number and express to them also what you your interests are so that they could connect you with the appropriate CGC or caregiver support coordinator so you can get some support in your area.

BRYAN VIDAL: Thank you so much. And so the last question because we are running short on time, and this one is directed towards Debbie. It says Debbie, what types of symptoms did you first notice in yourself, if any, around the time that you were diagnosed with PTSD?

DEBBIE SPRAGUE: That's a great question. I began just totally being different from how I was. I would pretty much say that most of my husband's symptoms I was mirroring. I had insomnia. I never had trouble sleeping. I was unable to sleep. I began not being comfortable being out in crowds and loud noises started bothering me. I began having nightmares.

After my son passed away, within about nine years earlier I had never had any nightmares or dreams about that. I started having nightmares about my son and the experiences I had with my son's illness. So pretty much everything that I told you about my husband and the symptoms he was experiencing I was experiencing almost every one of them. I just got to -- I felt like I went down into that deep dark hole right along with him. His depression. I just felt flat. I just felt no joy. I was just totally different from what I had ever experienced in my life.
>> BRYAN VIDAL: All right. Well, thank you very much. It looks like we are out of time for questions today. Like I said, if you do have any questions and we weren't able to answer, please send us an email to militarycaregiver@Easter Seals.com. And we will be sure to get back to you with those.

All of those who registered for this webinar today will receive a very brief online satisfaction survey. We hope you will take a few moments to share your feedback with us as it is greatly appreciated.

Lastly I would like to let everyone know in two weeks you can find the record pg and transcription of today's webinar at Easter Seals.com/carewebinar, along with many of our valuable resources. We would like to invite you all to join us for our upcoming webinar on March 30, presented by the operations family caregiver. It will be held in Spanish. Stay tuned for registration details.

Thank you again to our presenters, our partners and the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and especially to the many caregivers who participated in today's forum. Have a great afternoon, everyone!

>> OPERATOR: This concludes today's conference call. You may now disconnect. Speakers, please hold for the post conference.

***
This text is being provided in a realtime format. Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) or captioning are provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility and may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings.