TAKING
CHARGE OF
HEADACHE™

Taking Charge of Headache™
Episode 7: Migraine and Military Spouses

Diego Colón:
Welcome back to Taking Charge of Headache, a podcast by Operation Brainstorm, an initiative from the National Headache Foundation in partnership with Shero Coffee Club. Together, we're focused on empowering veterans, their families and their care teams with the tools, knowledge, and support to better navigate headache, migraine and other intersections of identity. My name is Diego Colón, and I'm joined by my co-host Melissa from Shero Coffee Club.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
Hey everyone. I'm so happy to be here. I'm so glad to be here. Today we're talking about something that doesn't always get enough space in this conversation. We're talking about parenting. We're talking about life stressors and migraine as a military spouse. Because managing migraine is one thing, managing migraine while raising kids, maintaining a household, navigating working around deployment schedules and systems like the VA, that's something else entirely.

Diego Colón:
And even if you're not a parent, all of this still applies. We're really talking about responsibility, pressure, and how people show up for others while managing a chronic condition. Today, we're looking at two different journeys of military spouses and how they've navigated. And to help us with that, we're joined by Trinity. Trinity, thank you so much for being here. Can you start by sharing your experience navigating migraine within military family life?

Trinity:
Yeah. So thank you for having me. I was diagnosed in 2019 with chronic migraine, and then right after that my spouse joined the military. And then going into 2020 we had the pandemic, so I just kind of felt like everything got hard all at once. And we were stationed at Buckley Air Force Base for the entirety of her enlistment. And even though she never had to deploy, there was always the constant like, what if of if she has to deploy or the constant what if of if we get a new duty station. So, like that uncertainty was just always there. And then she worked in security forces, so her schedule was super unpredictable. There were long hours and changing shifts, and I never really knew when she would be home.

So, on the days that I did have a migraine, I was still having to take care of our home and our son that has autism. So there really wasn't ever like a pause button. And I started treatment around 2021 through my doctor on base. And honestly, that was my main resource. I didn't really know about any other support systems for military spouses at the time. And I think a lot of that was just being in survival mode. You hear about things like spousal support systems, but when you're managing your health, you're managing your home and your child, a lot of that information tends to fall through the cracks.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
Trinity, thank you so much for just being vulnerable and open and sharing your story with us. That idea, there's no pause button, that really stands out. When you were in the middle of a migraine, what did those days actually feel like in your body?

Trinity:
So, for me, I can definitely speak for it, especially right now just because I'm overcoming one this morning. But for me it's just a constant. It's usually just a constant throbbing, like right above my right eye. And oftentimes it just feels like I can hear like my, it felt like my heartbeat is pounding like through my skull. I'm sensitive to loud noise, smells, heat. Heat is something else that I'm super sensitive to. And that throbbing in my head, it just feels like there's just like a pressure that's just building. And sometimes that pressure builds so much to the point where I end up having to throw up. And a lot of times that releases the pressure and sometimes it doesn't.

And the best way that I can describe it too is just like, it feels like, it's like a storm. It's kind of like a storm. You see the clouds rolling in. That's you recognizing like, okay, what I have, the migraine is coming on. And then you have like the actual storm, so that's you dealing with the migraine. And then the aftereffects of a storm, like you're left with the cleanup of it. For me, what I now know, it's called a migraine hangover. But it just feels like my whole head has been shattered, and it just feels like I just need a day to relax.

Diego Colón:
First of all, thank you for joining us today in the middle of your migraine, super powerful of you to be here. I feel like I have these conversations with veterans a lot, and they express a lot of the issues that you are expressing. And for a group of people who thrive on routine, there's a lot of sort of like what ifs that can't be accounted for. So, I guess my question to you is, how does that kind of uncertainty impact someone who's already living with migraine?

Trinity:
Oh, boy. That kind of uncertainty, it's hard. It's exceptionally hard for us, especially because our family strives on having routine. We have to have a schedule. I don't, but for my son, it's just everything to him. And so that kind of uncertainty, it just feels like you're never really able to like fully relax. You're always in that constant loop of just what if she gets orders or what if we get stationed somewhere else. It's just a constant stress. And so, it’s like the stress you're dealing with thinking about what if she goes or what if we go to a new duty station, so we're starting all over. But in the event that those things happen, what happens when I have that powerful migraine, how do I deal with it? So, in stressing about it, I'm potentially causing the migraine I'm super stressed about having. But yeah, it's stress.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
That's totally understandable, especially when there's so much unpredictability. And with your spouse working those long, unpredictable hours, you don't know when you may get orders and things like that. How does that shape your day-to-day life?

Trinity:
I feel like day-to-day life, it just kind of feels like military life it takes precedence over your personal life. And then of course, like we mentioned, like your routines, they're interrupted. And for us, like I said, routine is everything. And I feel like the stress from that, it contributes to the migraines for sure. Day-to-day life, it also gets lonely. Like you have your kiddo, of course, that you're raising, but it’s just those unpredictable hours and change of shifts, it just makes it harder to care for your kiddo at home. And then when you toss a migraine in there, day-to-day life it's hard. For sure it's hard, and you're just adapting to unpredictability most days.

Diego Colón:
I really resonate with that. And I can feel the how hard it is in your voice, just kind of you reliving it, just kind of you re-experiencing it. And I'm really so grateful that you're sharing that here with us today. And I know that anyone else watching this, there's somebody out there that's feeling exactly what you feel. They also feel like they have had to enter like a survival mode in a way that you described earlier. Can you tell me a little bit about what that survival mode feels like, and how did it affect your ability to seek out the support?

Trinity:
I feel like being a special needs parent, you're just always in survival mode. And for me, being in survival mode, it's just like not so much that I shut down, but it's a feeling of like I have to be able to get it all done and by myself, like I have to be able to make it work some kind of way. And because you feel like that, obviously it just it makes asking for help a lot harder.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
I know that just being human in of itself is a challenge. So now we're talking about a military spouse that comes with its own set of challenges, and now we're talking about having children, which also has its own challenges. But then especially for having a child that has additional needs, what does support look like for you? What does that actual support look like? What do you need?

Trinity:
I feel like support for us, like especially in the beginning because we did arrive at this duty station right in the middle of everyone trying to figure out everything going on with Covid. And with that, we also didn't live on base, and so the support piece was definitely missing. And of course being in a new place you don't have your family. We were enrolled in what's called the Exceptional Family Members Program (EFMP). I bring that up just because it kind of helps with the idea of like going to a new duty station. And I say that because going to the new duty station, you worry about having the right supports in place in the event that, well, it's not in the event, we do need therapies and certain doctors and things like that. So being in EFMP, it helps with not going to a duty station without those resources.

And then we're also told that we have access to respite care. So that's exciting, but the problem is when you call to get respite care, you're told that there are no caregivers in your in your area or that you have a wait list. So that's something we experienced. In that, you just go on with life. You continue to handle things on your own. But the support piece, it just so oftentimes, it feels like it's missing what we need. What we need is real actual support.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
Trinity, as a parent, especially a parent caring for a child with special needs or additional needs, what does a good support environment look like for you?

Trinity:
A good support environment for us would be having people that we trust to be able to come into our home to give us the break that we need. Oftentimes, we're so long overdue for having other people in our community that are able to just lend a hand or lend an ear. Because a lot of times that's something that parents need as well as just someone to listen to the struggles or the successes in your life. You just need someone to listen to you. And definitely, again, just having resources where you are.

Diego Colón:
I deeply hear what you're saying about needing a great support system. I think building a family is exactly what you're doing. You're building your support system, you're building your team, you're building your crew. And I think we were lucky enough to be connected with you through one of our wonderful military spouses who actually provided their story in full on operationbrainstorm.org. JP shared her story and I wanted to share that with everyone. And then just kind of ask you some questions about your cousin.

Trinity:
For sure.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
All right, so here's JP's story. JP was diagnosed with migraine as a child, but her condition became severe in adulthood leading to chronic migraine, repeated E.R. visits, and debilitating symptoms like vision loss. While raising children during military deployments, she adapted to survive daily life, even navigating her home without sight. Alongside losing her career and navigating her child's migraine diagnosis, she faced ongoing challenges that required constant advocacy and resilience. Her family grew stronger together, building empathy, flexibility, and support for one another. Her journey reflects both the weight of living with migraine and the strength that it takes to keep showing up for yourself and your family. And that's JP's story.

Diego Colón:
Trinity. Hearing JP's story, what elements of that story resonate to you specifically?

Trinity:
Oh my gosh, so much of it. I think the part starting at a young age, starting at a young age and just like navigating like childhood, like going into adulthood with back then, I mean, I thought, oh, it's a headache. But now I know, like the severity of it, it was actually a migraine. That part. And then just the E.R. visits, oh, my gosh, the E.R. visits. E.R. visits and just, gosh, just having to go through, like those worst-case scenarios, just dealing with them the best way you can.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
JP also talked about feeling like she was failing as a parent. Now that is just really, that's such a heavy weight to carry. How do your struggles affect your perception of yourself as a parent or a family member?

Trinity:
Gosh, it affects it quite a bit just because there's so many times where you, oh gosh, where you end up with these migraines that put you in bed practically all day. You're in a cold, dark space and you have a child that doesn't understand, like, why do I have to be quiet or why can't I go jump on mama. You feel like you miss out on life. You miss out on an entire day's worth of activity or memories with your kids. And a lot of times you feel like, for me, I'm just left feeling like I feel like I should be able to handle this better, or I feel like I should be able to just power through, get through it. So, for me, I mean, a lot of times it does make me feel like I'm failing. But the truth is I'm truly just doing the best that I can. And that's all any of us can do is the best we can, dealing with migraine.

Diego Colón:
I think that's absolutely right. Most everyone is just trying their best to deal with their version of their headache, their version of their migraine. And JP had so many experiences that she had to deal with, including like preparing for like a worst-case scenario, hers being having to navigate her home without the ability to see. Have you ever had to adapt to your worst-case scenarios managing life as a military spouse with migraine?

Trinity:
Oh, for sure. Just because the schedules, they're as crazy as they are, so a lot of times you're left to deal with the things going on in the home front and with your kiddo. And for us that's hard because Callum, that's our son, but between school therapies and doctor's appointments, there's been a time where I had one of the worst, worst of the worst migraines. And my worst-case scenario is just my medication not kicking in and just trying to figure out, like, okay, how do I pick up my son from therapy. How do I get us home. But I mean, it's just one of those things as parents, especially in this particular role where you're in the military, you don't have the family to call on. And your spouse, they're dealing with the mission, so it's left to you to figure out how you're going to get home. Am I going to call the ambulance or am I just going to power through it? And a lot of times we're just powering, I just power through it.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
Thank you for that. In JP’s story, her children developed empathy through watching her. Now, how did your family adjust to make it work for you?

Trinity:
Oh gosh, I think they've adjusted the best way that they can, especially while we were a military family. But the days that we did have together, my spouse was just such a huge help to me. And in the ways that we would deal with it just because our son doesn't quite understand, again, like why do I have to be quiet or why can't I go and just squeeze mama's face like I'm used to doing? Why is today any different? So, in those times, my spouse is just super supportive and gets our son out for the day. That's what it looks like a lot of the time, and they've just adjusted the best way they can. They give mama her time. They give momma her quiet time. And they've just been so, oh gosh, they've just been so amazing. And of course, our son, I think he gets as he's as he continues with certain therapies there’s things that he starts to understand a little bit more. So, these days it seems like it's getting a little easier to explain to him what's going on with mama, but personal space, what is that? No.

Diego Colón:
I hear what you're saying about the desire for connection, especially when it comes to the physical connection. The why can't I squeeze her face is such a very clear image, you know what I mean? I feel like I would want to do the same with my mom, that kind of closeness. And I know that there are other military spouses out there kind of experiencing, maybe for the first time, what you've experienced. And I guess other than watching this incredible podcast, what is some information, advice, words of encouragement you might share with them?

Trinity:
I feel like I would just want other military spouses to know you are not alone, you are not failing, and that it is more than okay to ask for help because you need it. You're human. And in the days that you feel like you really just can't get through it, just remember, there really is someone out there that's going through those same things as you. And just to really utilize the resources that are there. Because like I said, I think coming into being a military spouse and coming in while Covid is happening, it kind of set the tone for the way that I didn't go about getting help just because it was hard to get help during that time. But really utilize the resources that are there for you.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
Trinity, thank you so much for sharing your story with us today. Your honesty and strength in navigating your journey is incredibly powerful. And we're truly grateful for the courage it took to you for you to speak to us openly about it today.

Trinity:
Thank you so much for having me.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
Just remember, migraine doesn't just affect one person. It affects families, relationships, and everyday life.

Diego Colón:
And stories like Trinity's and JP's remind us that it's about more than the symptoms. It's about how people adapt, support each other, and how they keep going.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
Support doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to be real. There are systems in place, but you have to advocate to access them. Through the US Department of Veterans Affairs, you can look into caregiver support programs, Whole Health programs, VA mental health services, Vet Centers for counseling outside the traditional hospital setting.

Diego Colón:
And through the National Headache Foundation. Programs like Operation Brainstorm are built specifically to help veterans better understand and navigate their headache and migraine care.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
To read JP's full story and those of other veterans living with headache and migraine, visit operationbrainstorm.org and don't forget to visit the Shero Coffee Club and use code OPB2026 for 10% off your next coffee order.

Diego Colón:
Taking charge of headache starts with treating your health with the same commitment that you've given others and recognizing that you deserve the same care.

Melissa Farmer-Hill:
Because taking care of yourself is part of the mission.

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