

Returning Veterans, PTSD, and the Community – Speaking from Experience

Ted Sexauer

“A person who goes to war is not the same one who returns.” Our growing awareness that this is so is borne out by the dozens of laypersons’ books on combat trauma published in the past five years.*

Guess what: the society that receives that person back will never be the same either. Do we comprehend the changes that will take place in our communities with the return of our latest crop of veterans? There will be divorce, suicide, homelessness, pain, alienation and “attitude”... Also, we’ll get individuals with experience of life at extremes, experience at crisis management, at organization and teamwork; experience of discipline, vigilance, control of fear; used to working long hours, with physical strength and endurance; and with fresh eyes, ready to question norms and received truths. They will make trouble in many ways, for ill and for good.

Our attention and understanding of the issues faced by returning vets will have an enduring impact on them and on the community. For their sake and ours, we need to embrace their return with more than easy speeches about heroes and freedom. We need to reach out personally and communally.

I believe in a personal approach to peace work. As a combat medic in Viet Nam and peace activist then and now, I try to act as a bridge between peace activists and active duty military and veterans. In the following paragraphs, I want to describe PTSD from a seat-of-the-pants perspective, reflect on what returning veterans need, and make some suggestions about how we can help. Please excuse me, English teachers, for mixing first, second and third person; I’ve done it on purpose to move the personal tone.

What vets need / What we can do

New vets need to be regarded as individuals, maybe as “different” to some degree, but not as “other.” Be aware, more and more of them are women. They all need what young people need: jobs, education, relationships, a sense of belonging. The majority won’t have severe PTSD, but almost anyone leaving the service, especially from intense situations such as the war zones or Korea or sea duty, will have a case of culture shock.

The big enemy is isolation, which people naturally resort to when they can’t relate. If you have a relative or acquaintance back from the service, they need for **you** to reach out to **them**. Seriously, even if they don’t think so. We are all relatives; we can all be bridge persons. They need to be heard. If it’s awkward, just ask them for their favorite memory. You don’t have to grill them,

just show that you’re interested. Encourage them to write—writing, whether shared or not, does a great job of setting things in place, making order in the mind.



Section from Picasso's "Guernica"

The nature of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

We hear the term PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) frequently these days. What is this PTSD?

It’s surely an ungainly string of words, and it’s subject to a certain amount of controversy. (Is it really a disorder, or a normal reaction to a disordered situation? It can certainly be disabling. Some on the right claim PTSD wouldn’t be so prevalent in veterans if it weren’t compensable—may they be spared the experience!) You can look up the history and the official description in the DSM-IV(TR) online or at the library; I’m interested here in relating what it’s like in person—that is, in one person’s person. We are all individuals, we all experience our own version, according to our experience and background.

The best explanation I’ve heard of the mechanics of PTSD is that prolonged overstimulation of the fight-or-flight response in the lower brain, the reflex survival brain, burns pathways that literally compete with the reasoning brain for precedence, producing an overlapping dual interpretation of the world. That jives with my experience—I’m constantly aware of two realities: for instance, loud noises startle, even when you know they’re coming, and most of them, now, aren’t dangerous. I hate being startled. I don’t like fireworks; I really don’t like the Blue Angels. Most of the time, my best choice is to override the danger call; but it’s so uncomfortable being in crowds and in other loud places that bring it forward that I prefer to stay away. In a sense, it’s adrenaline addiction gone bad. This two-realities thing can be disorienting, but I always know where I am. Rarely, others report more severe dislocations.

Another duality problem is that of intrusive memories, combined with involuntary avoidance of reminders of the same memories. If you’re the kind of person, as many military people

Returning Veterans...see reverse side

Returning Veterans... continued

are, who is drawn to looking eye-to-eye at what you fear and challenging it, this combination leads to strange behaviors that are often difficult to explain.

Other features are persistent “arousal” (not the fun kind), that is, hypervigilance and irritability; and “anhedonia”, inability to enjoy life normally. You wonder whether you can love, whether you can trust yourself to feel, whether you can trust another person not to suddenly die.

Many people try to escape the memories by self-medicating and other kinds of addictive behaviors. This is called “dual issues,” signifying that the addictive behavior is secondary to the PTSD. This is an important but eventually meaningless distinction. I’ve watched three good friends slowly drink themselves to death before the age of sixty. I really, really really hate that.

My own form of avoidance was workaholism—I say I’m “recovering”, but my sweetheart says I still become distant behind these darned writing gigs. At least it’s not as harmful to my health.

One thing you should know is that new wars can—do—drive old veterans crazy. Another thing to know is that PTSD symptoms can be passed down through families—just imagine spending your growing years always being watchful not to let things happen that will set off your twitchy mom or dad.

To young vets, and anyone who’s had trauma to deal with

If you feel what I’m talking about, here are some pointers on how I got from there to here—not cured, but less fractured.

I think it would have been easier if it hadn’t been so long—twelve years—between leaving Viet Nam and understanding the PTSD. As it was it took a huge crisis, and hitting the proverbial bottom, to get me to realize there was a way up and to look for it despite the major disruption that looking would cause in my life. I had to face the fact that it would hurt more before it got better.

I entered a rap group at the old Flower of the Dragon (which later became Vietnam Veterans of California, now North Bay Veterans Resource Center, still an excellent resource for vets). Being able to talk about the war deeply with other vets in a semi-formal structure was key. (Before that I hung out with other vets, but we didn’t talk about the past—the reason we gravitated together was that because in that company, you weren’t the odd one.)

Four years later, after more misadventures, I got myself to the inpatient PTSD program at Menlo Park, and stayed there seven months. That program still exists, but the limit now is three months. See the Veterans Service Office for details. Now this is important—it took me four months of trying very hard in that concentrated atmosphere before I felt the first ray of hope that I would be able to feel again, like a normal person. That day, a day like any other, was the turning point in my life. I can’t tell you

what happened, it was just a spark of vision born out of trying. In those first twelve years after ’Nam I’d been through major times of suicide-thinking and had developed a mental toughness about that, a stubbornness that carried me through. **Important**—I saw a lot of guys fall through the cracks in the VA system because for one reason or another they didn’t have the luck or the resolve to hang in. I learned from others’ mistakes, just as I had in the war. **I learned to always look for the best outcome and aim for that outcome.** If you get to feeling suicidal, talk to someone—the VA has a confidential hotline now. Promise yourself one more day.

Since Menlo Park, three main activities have helped me regain my feelings and myself: a whole lot of psychotherapy; Buddhist practice (I believe that spirituality, no matter what the flavor, is essential for the soul); and writing down my experiences (poems in my case), and then—important—reading them to appropriate audiences of civilians. In the case of the Vietnam war, it was a long time before anyone was willing to listen. I think you guys have an audience already. People do care.

Resources:

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline - 800.273.8255
- Sonoma County Veterans Service Office (VSO) - 565.5960
- *info, initiate benefits claims, apply for PTSD programs*
- North Bay Vet Center - 586.3296
- *VA counseling - combat, family, sexual trauma:*
- **records are completely separate from the regular VA**
- North Bay Veterans Resource Center - 578.2785
- *job-seeking skills, housing and advocacy*
- Veterans Village - veteransvillage.org
- *transition program/ link to farm training and employment*
- Coming Home Project - cominghomeproject.net
- *free workshops; psych counseling; training for care providers*
- Veteran Writers Group - 996.8665 (that’s me)
- *a new group will be starting soon*
- Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN) - servicewomen.org
- *great resource for women; comprehensive web reference for all*

* Bibliography, web links, and more complete listing of resources will be found at veteransforpeaceonoma.org and peaceandjusticesonomaco.org.

Disclaimer:

I wear two hats in this work, and fully disclose both so that no one who hears me from one side will be surprised to learn of the other. **I believe that “anti-war” and “pro-peace” are two distinct things that need to be balanced.**

As a member of Veterans For Peace, I’m intent on changing U.S. foreign policy, because I believe the domination model we’re running on is bad for our moral health. As a former medic, I’m dedicated to the welfare of returning veterans, especially because the memories of my so-called homecoming are so hard that I can’t stand to see it happen again. That means all veterans, and that requires a completely apolitical approach.

My bonafides: two tours in Viet Nam, as a helicopter ambulance medic and as an infantry medic. The VA has rated me 100% disabled with PTSD. I serve as co-president of Veterans For Peace chapter 71 here in Sonoma County.