Wounded Warriors: Their Last Battle

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VA Mission: “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan.”

Abraham Lincoln
Do Veterans Have a Different Experience of Death than Non-veterans?
What Agency Provides Hospice Care to Most Veterans?
INFLUENCES

*Branch of Service
*Officer
*Enlisted
*Drafted
*Age
Influence: Military Culture

* Big Boys don’t Cry
* No Pain. No Gain
* The more it hurts, the better.
* Fear/Pain is a sign of weakness
* Few Good Men (Marines)
* Once a Marine, always a Marine
* Stoicism

Male Culture in America?
Military males get a double dose of macho!
Biggest Influence? Combat!!

WWII: Heroes
Korea: Ignored
Vietnam: Shamed
PTSD: Diagnostic Criteria (DSM-IV)
* Exposure to a traumatic event
  • Traumatic is persistently re-experienced (1 or more):
    - Recollections
    - Dreams
    - Acting as if trauma is recurring
    - Distress at cues that symbolize the trauma
  * Avoidance of associated trauma (3 or more):
    - Avoidance of thoughts, feelings, conversations r/t trauma
    - Avoidance of activities, places, or people that arouse recollection
    - Inability to recall some aspects of the trauma
    - Lack of interest in significant activities
    - Feelings of detachment/estrangement from others
    - Restricted range of affect
    - Sense of a foreshortened future
  • Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (2 more):
    - Difficult sleep patterns
    - Irritability or outbursts of anger
    - Difficulty concentrating
    - Hypervigilance
    - Exaggerated startle response
Surveying the Damage

*Symptoms persist at least 1 year
*Symptoms cause significant functional impairment

PTSD Specifiers
• Acute
• Chronic
• Delayed Onset (children qualifiers; no dying qualifier)

Stressor factors increasing risk for PTSD:
- Severity
- Duration
- Proximity (Role in war)
- Intentionality (POW)

Premature Aging

1/3 of Vietnam Vets suffer PTSD (www.ncptsd.org)
Combat Response Trajectories

- War TRAUMA
  - #1: Integration Healing
  - #2: APPARENT Integration (Delayed Onset PTSD) (Subclinical PTSD)
  - #3: No Integration PTSD
Trajectory #1:
Combat Trauma Successfully Integrated

“I’ve faced death before in the war. I’m not afraid of death any more.”

“I must have been spared for a purpose”

“I faced death before and every day since has been a gift.”

“But for the grace of God, it would have been me who died in that war. I’m aware of the gift of grace that is with me now.”

Do these vets live life differently?

These are our role models for death!!
Trajectory #3: Combat Trauma NOT Integrated (PTSD)

Suspicion and lack of Trust
Alcohol usage common
Anxiety
Agitation (Acting out trauma)
Estranged relationships
Unfulfilled longing for the life not lived (guilt)

Do these veterans have different life experiences?
Do they have different death experiences?
Trajectory #2: Combat Trauma APPARENTLY Integrated: (Subclinical PTSD)
Interventions: All VETERANS

-Intake Assessment:
  Veteran?
  If so, Combat veteran?
  If so, encourage war stories...

• Affirm the FEELING aspect of the death experience, especially the tears and fears (which the military culture taught them to disdain).

• Anticipate that they might UNDERREPORT physical and emotional pain.
  Anticipate that they might UNDERREPORT fear.

Thank them for serving your country and giving you your freedom.
Post a certificate of appreciation.
Pin an American flag on them with a personal message.
INTERVENTIONS: Combat Vets

Behold and feel Beholden!

(Title: “Loss of Innocence: Artist: Tommy Bills)
Interventions: Trajectory #1
(Successfully Integrated Trauma)
Interventions: Combat Vets
(Trajectories #2 and #3)

Listen and provide witness to their stories:

“Most of my brother remained in Vietnam”.

“I didn’t know the person who came back”.

“I’ve been fighting that war every day since I returned.”

“We’ve been fighting that war every day since.”

“90% of me died in that war.”

“I lost my soul in Vietnam”.

“If only I would have ______, he’d still be here today. If only…. If only…. If only……”

“Why him and not me????” (survival guilt)
Interventions (Continued)

Emotional Pain Scale (0=Serenity/10=Turmoil)
Understand and accept their pain, anger, shame, fear, helplessness.
(Boundaries still important. Appeal to their nobleness buried deep within. Nearing death, it sometimes becomes more available).
In our Hospice hands lie the last chance for healing that they are going to have on Earth.
Interventions (Con’t)
Recognize confusion/agitation for the PTSD that it might be (not terminal restlessness).

Be aware of possible paradoxical reactions with benzodiazepines.

Enter metaphor with them. (Battle metaphors are common)

Put mattress on floor if enemy soldiers are under bed.

No restraints (especially POWs).
Interventions (Con’t)

Be aware that *Asian Ancestry* in the healthcare provider may be a trigger for WWII (Pacific theatre), Korean, and Vietnam vets. Don’t take this personally.

If Vietnam or Korean vet speaks about how Americans treated them, apologize. If Vietnam vet speaks about never being welcomed home, welcome him.

Qualifiers:
No substitute for good nursing/medical care.
WOMEN are Veterans Too!

-Sexual Assault
-Combat
HEALING

- FORGIVENESS! FORGIVENESS! FORGIVENESS!

Much to be forgiven for:
* Self (killing, etc.)
* Self (not killing, not dying)
* **ENEMY****
  * Government (using/betraying them in Vietnam)
  * The World (for being like it is)
  * God (for allowing the world to be like it is)

- Assess guilt. DON’T dismiss it with platitudes.
- What is needed is healing of the heart.
30 Years Later: John & Kim
Pete
"I looked in the eyes of the dead man, and I saw peace. I looked into the eyes of the living, and I saw fear."
Edward M.
(Vietnam Vet)
“Atoning”

“Hoping and wishing that you can settle this whole thing that’s in your mind about this war, resolving it with yourself before the time of atonement comes – weeping and crying at the end of your life”.

-Ron Mann
Vietnam Vet
National Vietnam Museum of Art, Chicago
It is not too late to Heal our Nation!

(and we do it one dying soldier at a time).

VA Mission: “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan.”

Abraham Lincoln
Let’s not allow the soldier dying in our midst be unknown any longer…

Let us BEHOLD and FEEL BEHOLDEN!
The wars between us stand so TALL. In our Hospice hands may be the LAST CHANCE for healing that a WOUNDED WARRIOR has. May each of us here have the GRIT the GRACE the HUMILITY the LOVE To heal our war-ravaged soldiers and our broken nation. Be the link that connects the circle so they feel connected to HUMANITY once again. Don’t miss the opportunity to help these young soldiers dying in old mens’ bodies recover their souls from Vietnam Korea Normandy Help them know they are not traveling through this universe alone. Help them know that the circle goes on, joining them to you and me. Our people, our nation, our God would be ever so grateful.

—Deborah Grassman