

## **Saving the Lives of Those Who Save Yours**

Doctors in the VA are under pressure NOT to diagnose PTSD, because a diagnosis of PTSD leads to increased benefits and disqualifies the soldier from re-deployment. Bodies are at a premium here, folks, with many soldiers being deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan numerous times. Hardball on msnbc.com reports that the VA docs are giving out the diagnosis of Adjustment Disorder instead. That's like saying the soldier who shot up his comrades at an Iraqi mental health clinic was just having a bad day.

A 2006 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association reports that nearly 74,000 former soldiers who returned from Iraq and Afghanistan between 2003 and 2004 sought VA treatment for mental disorders in the year after they came home. Many of those same men and women were sent back to the combat zone. The current figures must be staggering. Keep in mind that 30% of the army has PTSD or TBI (traumatic brain injury). According to Mark Benjamin who was being interviewed by Chris Mathers on Hardball, that means 30% of the army has no business carrying a gun. If we were to admit the truth of this, how would our military survive? But if we don't, how will our military survive once they are "safe" at home?

Paul Rieckhoff, a U.S. Army veteran, who led an infantry platoon on more than 1,000 combat patrols in Baghdad, founder of the nonprofit Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) says "The reality is that mental health issues are probably one of the greatest threats facing Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. But our country is not ready to care for them. Contrary to what our president keeps telling us, we're not a country at war. Less than 1 percent of this country is at war. Our military is at war. Our military families are at war. *Everyone else is shopping or watching American Idol.*"

I couldn't agree with Paul more. What are YOU doing to show our military personnel that you support them? Are you making sacrifices so that our freedom can be protected? Even if you don't agree with the war, you can still support the sacrifices made by these men and women. As a citizen you need to ask how you can be involved. If you don't have money, volunteer your time. If you don't have time, then donate money, goods, or services. If you don't have any resources whatsoever, write a letter to congress supporting more programs specifically designed to increase benefits to those combat vets who need them, be they mental health or otherwise.

You see the problem is that we don't treat our military personnel as the Warrior class they are. We treat them as expendable soldiers, and once we are done with them, they are of no use to us. You need only to look at the statistics of alcohol and drug abuse, homelessness, spousal and child abuse, depression, anxiety, divorce and suicide among veterans to see the truth.

Edward Tick, author of War and the Soul, reminds us that every soldier's inner warrior needs to be "called forth and honored by the tribe (our society). A need does not disappear because the culture does not evoke it." "The final step in the long road home for the veteran is completing this initiation as warrior. A veteran does not become a warrior merely for having gone to war. A veteran becomes a warrior when he (she) learns to carry his war skills and his vision in mature ways. He becomes a warrior when he has been set right with life again. A warrior's first priority is to protect life rather than destroy it. He serves his nation in peace as well as in war making and dissuades his people from suffering the scourges of war unless absolutely necessary. He uses the fearlessness he has developed to help keep sanity, generosity, and order alive in his culture. A warrior disciplines the violence within himself."

But the warrior should not be expected to do this alone, or in isolation. Disciplining the violence within oneself requires the support of the community to which they belong. That's the whole point, how do we help our veterans integrate back into their communities?

Rieckhoff makes the point that the system needs to be more proactive. He says, "The biggest problem I have is that at its core, it's a passive system. Say you have PTSD. First of all, you have to self-diagnose. And then your wife or girlfriend, if you have one, needs to ride your ass. 'Go to the VA, go to the VA, go to the VA.' If you're on a wait list, you have to keep going back. But maybe you can't go during work hours. And maybe the VA medical center near you is one of the 50 percent without a PTSD clinic. It's a system you've got to push and push and push through just to get in the door."

So, if I've done my job, you see the hurdles these brave men and women face in healing their battle-wounded psyches. Anything anyone of us can do to help integrate these brave men and women back into society is helping to restore the dignity of the warrior.

To read more of Colleen's blogs about mental health in the military go to:

"The Way I See It: Combat Vets and the Problem of Coming Home"

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"The Way I See It: Let's Make PTSD a Household Name"

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