

The Way I See It- Let's Make PTSD a Household Name.

PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may not be a “household name” yet, but it soon will be. As our combat veterans return from Afghanistan and Iraq, we will be inundated, as a country, with cases of PTSD and TBI, traumatic brain injury. <http://brainline.org/content/content.php?name=ptsd-fact-sheet-frequently-asked-questions&gclid=CleBoo7FrJcCFRlcawodRRlijA>. Are we equipped as a nation to meet the mental health needs of our veterans? It doesn't look good.

Our new president must prioritize the development of programs that address the concerns of this population which are unique to this era. As reported in *The Therapist* by Terry Nash MFT and Sharon Crane MFT, “Extended military action and the constant redeployment of troops, creating a schedule of limited visits home and continual return to the war zone, disrupts family life in a way not required in previous wartimes...perhaps the most traumatizing aspect for soldiers and their families was when their military contract was due to be complete and an honorable discharge was eminent. Stop-loss was often implemented by the Pentagon and soldiers were required to remain in the war zone.”

I can tell you from personal experience that the symptoms of PTSD affect not only the soldier, but their entire family, their friends and often, their employers. Some of you may remember when the U.S. invaded Panama in the early 1990's. Most of you have probably forgotten that little skirmish, but select special forces troops like the Army Rangers were sent in. My brother, Jamie, was among them. He and others parachuted under the cover of darkness into the jungle. After his return, my brother was never the same. He experiences bouts of uncontrollable anger which have contributed to the dissolution of most of his personal relationships, including ours. In addition, he suffered some profound changes to his personality, as though his moral compass went missing. After being lied to and stolen from by him on many occasions, I made the heartbreaking decision to eliminate contact with my brother. My father and the three mothers of his three children have made the same choice. My mother continues to believe in him and tries to help

him whenever he is in trouble, which is often. This in and of itself has caused a tremendous strain on my relationship with her. As you can see, there isn't a member of his family that hasn't been impacted by his untreated PTSD, including his children. I truly wish that love alone were enough to heal his pain.

Of the concerns relating to veterans and their families, here's what Nash and Crane report: "One is the emotional impact of regaining family traction and a new homeostasis after the initial joy of reunion. Problems of displacement, unrealistic expectations, children feeling disengaged from their long-absent parent, PTSD symptoms from the stress of combat left untreated, and brain trauma or loss of limbs are some of the immediate distresses. Exacerbating these disturbances is the common trend of returning troops to deny mental and emotional difficulties when processed through re-entry prior to discharge for fear they will be detained. All they want at that point is to go home to be with loved ones...there is a frequent myth in the military that only weak soldiers have mental health issues after combat." It seems clear to me that in order to effectively evaluate the need for treatment, we need to start right here, the point of de-briefing. Let's bring in skilled counselors and therapists for this job, working alongside military personnel.

Let us not forget that trauma occurs not only from combat itself, but from sexual assault and sexual harassment while in the military. Current statistics show 23% of women report having been sexually assaulted while in the military, and 55% of women and 38% of men have experienced sexual harassment while in the military. The VA hospitals are overwhelmed and underfunded. Otherwise, I don't know of any effective government programs that are currently addressing this urgent concern. In the private sector there are wonderful organizations bringing their skills and talents to helping our combat veterans. One of them here in California is called The Soldiers Project of which I am a part. We are therapists, psychologists and social workers specially trained in treating PTSD who volunteer our time to seeing combat veterans in our offices. I am very new to this

organization, and there have been many giving freely of their time for years now. But this is not enough.

We need a national commitment with money behind it to develop comprehensive treatment programs and education aimed at erasing the stigma of seeking therapy and treatment upon their return home. In our current state of economic crisis I fear these types of programs will be put on the back burner, but ***the way I see it*** is the cost of turning our backs on the needs of our military men and women, we are setting ourselves up for the same fallout that occurred after Vietnam, affecting millions of families and our society as a whole for generations to come. President-elect Obama, are you listening?

In a future blog, we will look at the ways in which life in combat and life at home are totally at odds with one another in order to give you a better understanding of the challenges these men and women face.

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