

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

"In the urban terrain, the enemy is everywhere, across the street, in that window, up that alley," said Paul Rieckhoff, platoon leader with the Florida Army National Guard in Iraq and founder of Operation Truth. "It's a fishbowl. You never feel safe. You never relax. Too many guys are drinking. A lot have a hard time finding a job. I think the system is vastly under-prepared for the flood of mental health problems." In his platoon of 38 people, 8 were divorced while in Iraq or since they returned in February. One man in his 120-person company killed himself after coming home. (*culled from NYT Dec 16, 2004*)

The Army's own study shows that about **one in six soldiers in Iraq** report symptoms of major depression, serious anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, a proportion that some experts believe could eventually climb to one in three, the rate ultimately found in Vietnam veterans. Because **about one million American troops have served so far in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to Pentagon figures, some experts predict that the number eventually requiring mental health treatment could exceed 100,000.** (*NYT Dec 16, 2004*)

- A **trauma** is an event which involves **actual or threatened death or serious injury to oneself or others** and that when experienced or witnessed creates **intense fear, horror, and helplessness.**
- **PTSD** is a condition which can develop in individuals experiencing such trauma. It **impairs the ability to function normally.** It can become chronic. It **may cause permanent changes in the central nervous system.**
- Study findings reported in the **New England Journal of Medicine** in 2003, indicate that among the study groups there was a significant risk of mental health problems and that the subjects reported important barriers to receiving mental health services, particularly the perception of stigma among those most in need of such care. The report stated that about **1 in 6 soldiers returning from Iraq** suffered from **PTSD.** Interviews with those at risk showed that **only 23 percent to 40 percent sought professional help, most typically because they feared it would hurt their military careers.** (*New England Jnl of Medicine July 2004*)
- A Defense Department study of combat troops returning from Iraq found **1 in 6 soldiers and Marines acknowledged symptoms of severe depression and PTSD,** and 6 in 10 of these same veterans were unlikely to seek help out of **fear their commanders and fellow troops would treat them differently.**
- A recent study showed that **18 percent** of 45,880 veterans of the **war in Afghanistan** were diagnosed with psychological disorders, including 183 with **PTSD.** -- According to a **2005 VA study** of 168,528 **Iraqi veterans,** **20 percent** were diagnosed with psychological disorders, including 1,641 with **PTSD.**

What are the **conditions** and actions in a **combat zone** which contribute to trauma and to the **development of PTSD**?

- sustained close-quarters combat
- urban settings with unlimited hiding places;
- the impossibility of telling friend from foe;
- the knowledge that every stretch of road may conceal an explosive device -
- In no recent conflict have so many soldiers faced such uncertainty about how long they will be deployed.
- Veterans say the repeated extensions of duty in Iraq are emotionally battering, even for the most stoical of warriors.
- Being attacked or ambushed
- Being shot at or receiving small-arms fire
- Shooting or directing fire at the enemy
- Being responsible for the death of an enemy combatant
- Being responsible for the death of a noncombatant
- Seeing dead bodies or human remains
- Handling or uncovering human remains
- Knowing someone seriously injured or killed
- Seeing dead or seriously injured persons
- Seeing ill or injured women or children whom you were unable to help
- Being wounded or injured
- Had a close call, was shot or hit, but protective gear saved you
- Had a buddy shot or hit who was near you
- Engaging in hand-to-hand combat
- Saved the life of a soldier or civilian
- Receiving incoming artillery, rocket, or mortar
- Participating in de-mining operations
- Clearing or searching homes or buildings

Women as well as men serving in the combat zones can experience **combat-related trauma** and develop PTSD.

- 15 percent of active-duty troops and 17 percent of National Guard and reserve forces are women.
- the conflict in Iraq, like other modern wars, has blurred the line between combat and non-combat units.
- Women soldiers have been involved in fighting with Iraqi insurgents.
- Women serve in supply convoys and troop transports which have been the targets of attacks
- Women are captured as prisoners of war, maimed and killed by enemy fire.
- For example: Army Pvt. Teresa Broadwell, 20, won a Bronze Star for valor for laying down machine-gun fire while her military police unit was under attack in Karbala in mid-October. Ms. Bosveld, 19 years old, was

killed days later in a mortar attack on the police station in a Baghdad suburb.

What the **symptoms of PTSD**?

- Repeated, disturbing *memories, thoughts, or images* of a stressful experience from the past
- Repeated, disturbing *dreams* of a stressful experience from the past
- Suddenly *acting or feeling* as if a stressful experience *were happening again* (as if you were reliving it)
- Feeling *very upset* when *something reminded* you of a stressful experience from the past
- Having *physical reactions* (e.g., heart pounding, trouble breathing, or sweating) when *something reminded* you of a stressful experience from the past
- Avoid *thinking about* or *talking about* a stressful experience from the past or avoid *having feelings* related to it
- Avoid *activities or situations* because *they remind you* of a stressful experience from the past
- Trouble *remembering important parts* of a stressful experience from the past
- Loss of *interest in things that you used to enjoy*
- Feeling *distant* or *cut off* from other people. Feeling *emotionally numb* or being unable to have loving feelings for those close to you
- Feeling as if your *future* will somehow be *cut short*
- Being “*super alert*” or watchful on guard. Feeling *jumpy* or easily startled, *difficulty concentrating*
- Feeling *irritable* or having *angry outbursts*. Trouble sleeping normally.

Recovering from the trauma of war:

- **A critical factor in helping that person recover is SOCIAL SUPPORT. Bring that person back into the community; don't forget or overlook them. If you need to, bring them yourself to a professional for help.**

The returnee silently protects family and friends from knowing how broken inside he or she feels; how altered; how no longer like him or herself. It is a bizarre and frightening experience, these feelings; to feel so out of control, to feel so out of touch, as if you no longer belong here or there or anywhere. The rage, the fear, the nightmarish nights trying not to fall asleep so as to escape the terror that sleep relives. Trying so hard to recapture that once innocent belief that people are essentially good, that it is possible to go through life safe and secure. And trying hard to dump the guilt...the gut-searing guilt of surviving when the others didn't; the mind-punishing guilt that accuses and blames. Longing for someone who could understand but not believing that anyone really can and so why try? How could these things be talked of anyway? How could the memories be shared without detonating that landmine in the pocket? Better to shy away from friends and family. Better to keep the anguish hidden so no one will shout, “Crazy! You are

crazy!” Better to hide out alone, isolated and afraid. Afraid of what is happening inside; afraid of being sent back to that hell.

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