



When soldiers come home

By David J. Giammona

It seemed as though the dam had burst wide open as he poured out his story of trauma and tragedy in combat.

“How are you eating and sleeping these days?” I asked a soldier just returning with the 101st Airborne (Air Assault) Division from Operation Iraqi Freedom.

It seemed as though the dam had burst wide open as he poured out his story of trauma and tragedy in combat. He was experiencing sleepless nights, nightmares and daytime flashbacks. Certain sights and sounds triggered his memory of awful moments in combat. He struggled to understand how God could allow such suffering and pain in his life and in the lives of those around him.

Almost every soldier experiences a time of adjustment. For weeks after coming home, soldiers can feel flashes of anger and depression and may struggle to sleep at night. This is a normal part of “homecoming.”

But when this becomes a persistent debilitating condition, it is described as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD often follows a terrifying physical or emotional event, causing the person who survived the event to have persistent, frightening thoughts and memo-

ries, or flashbacks, of the ordeal.

Persons with PTSD often feel chronically, emotionally numb. This emotional shut-down was once referred to as “shell shock” or “battle fatigue.” Some veterans have dealt with PTSD for years without understanding what is wrong with them. Many in the church also do not know what is happening to those who have experienced PTSD.

A Vietnam veteran wrote in his Web diary: “When I returned from Vietnam I was a troubled ‘man’ of 20 years of age. I wanted to talk to my pastor about the death and destruction I had seen and, more importantly, what I had caused while on duty. The minister was not receptive. Over the next three years, I moved further and further from the church that I had belonged to since birth and I developed a strong dislike for organized religion in general.”

“... I have now started to attend church again where I live, and during a recent sermon at the church our pastor covered this topic very well. Our minister really did understand what many PTSD victims live with every day.”

Signs and symptoms of PTSD

As the family life chaplain at Fort Campbell (Ky.) and the rear detachment chaplain for the 101st, I worked with many soldiers returning from war. I saw a similar pattern with these warriors including the following symptoms:

- Upsetting memories such as images or thoughts about the war
- Feeling as if the war is happening again (flashbacks)
- Bad dreams and nightmares
- Getting upset when reminded about the war (by something the soldier sees, hears, feels, smells or tastes)
- Anxiety or fear, feeling in danger again
- Anger or aggressive feelings
- Trouble controlling emotions because reminders lead to sudden anxiety, anger or upset
- Trouble concentrating or thinking clearly

Soldiers also had physical reactions to war reminders such as:

- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Feeling agitated and constantly on the lookout for danger
- Getting very startled by loud noises

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- Feeling shaky and sweaty
- Having their heart pound or having trouble breathing

How to help

Luke 4:18 says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised" (KJV).

There is great help through God's Word regarding restoration and deliverance for those who have been exposed to the brutality of war. God offers healing and forgiveness through the power of the blood of Jesus Christ.

Many in the church (including leaders) feel helpless when it comes to those who are experiencing symptoms of PTSD. Some church staff and members choose to ignore it. Some quote Scripture and offer up prayer as the only means of helping. While Scripture and prayer can be a very effective way of helping those struggling with PTSD, used in the wrong context and without proper training, they do not provide what is really needed.

Here are some proven ways church leadership and members can be of great support:

Provide sermons and Bible classes. Pastors who have taken time to understand PTSD can provide help to the whole congregation by making them aware of the problem.

Listen without judging. Most soldiers need an active listening ear. That means someone who will be there for them without using all the standard clichés. Avoid phrases such as, "I know what you mean," "Just have faith," and "It'll get better." Soldiers need to get their story out for the healing process to begin.

Provide counseling. Refer soldiers

to competent Christian licensed professional counselors. Get to know the counselors and support groups in your area.

Understand what resources are available. Helpful organizations include the Veterans Administration, Military One Source, National Center for PTSD (www.ncptsd.va.gov), Iraq War Veterans Organization (www.iraqwarveterans.org), and Emerge Ministries (www.emerge.org).

How soldiers can help themselves

I encourage returning soldiers to spend extra time with the people they love. As they are able, they need to talk about the recent events and about past losses or experiences that may be affecting them now.

They should also be able to talk about their fears and concerns with co-workers. Fears and concerns may interfere with work, and it's important to talk about them with friends and colleagues. However, I would encourage co-workers to respect the fact that some people may feel better not talking about terrorist acts or related events.

I remind soldiers they can expect their mood and feelings to be intense and constantly changing. Sleep or eating patterns may also be disturbed. It may be difficult to maintain a normal schedule if they are experiencing trauma, but it is important to try to keep to a regular pattern of eating and sleeping to build up the strength to cope with stress.

Our war heroes suffering from the effects of PTSD can be helped especially by the church. We, the body of Christ, have been designed by God to be His healing hand in times of crisis and hurt. **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

- 1 Psalms 62-68
- 2 Psalms 69-73
- 3 Psalms 74-78
- 4 Psalms 79-86
- 5 Psalms 87-92
- 6 Psalms 93-101
- 7 Psalms 102-105
- 8 Psalms 106-109
- 9 Psalms 110-118
- 10 Psalm 119
- 11 Psalms 120-135
- 12 Psalms 136-142
- 13 Psalms 143-150
- 14 Proverbs 1-4
- 15 Proverbs 5-8
- 16 Proverbs 9-12
- 17 Proverbs 13-16
- 18 Proverbs 17-20
- 19 Proverbs 21-24
- 20 Proverbs 25-28
- 21 Proverbs 29-31
- 22 Ecclesiastes 1-4
- 23 Ecclesiastes 5-7
- 24 Ecclesiastes 8-12
- 25 Song of Solomon 1-8
- 26 Isaiah 1-4
- 27 Isaiah 5-8
- 28 Isaiah 9-13
- 29 Isaiah 14-18
- 30 Isaiah 19-23
- 31 Isaiah 24-27

BIBLE READING

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L I V I N G I T

"You da best"

My daughter Allison and I drive the five minutes it takes to get to school, and in the process have developed a few routines. We can't leave the driveway without the seat belt buckled. She quotes the crash dummies as the belt clicks around her waist: "Always buckle up, no matter how short the trip. Most accidents happen within three miles of your house."

As I am dropping her off she slips her backpack over her shoulder, grabs her lunch, climbs out the door and slowly pushes it almost closed. She then peeks her head right up to the crack and says as quickly as she can, "You da best!"

The last one to say it wins. I usually pull off the upset when I simply crack the electric window and yell, "You da best," then push the close button, making me champion until tomorrow.

A few years ago I came down with pneumonia. On the first morning I couldn't make the drive, Allison kissed me good-bye in the family room, stepped outside the storm door, got it almost shut, peeked her nose inside the crack and shouted, "You da best!" Off she ran.

That's not fair! I'm dying! I couldn't stand it. I crawled off the sofa and dragged myself to the window. Just before she could flee through the big wooden gate, I screamed, "No, you da best!"

Now I know that not everyone will agree that my children are the best. But that doesn't change how I feel about them. In my eyes they are and will always be the best.

Jesus, to the chagrin of His disciples, brought the little ones unto himself and placed His hands on them and "blessed them." We can learn a lot from that brief Bible lesson. The spoken message has great effect. "You da best!"

Stephen Rhoades

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