

Educating Parents & Loved Ones About Returning War Veterans

By Sargeant Clyde R. Horn



Almost no parent or loved one is able to be prepared for their veteran returning home from a war or war zone. Often the returning veteran is a shell of the person he or she used to be. The stress of being under the constant anxiety of not knowing if you will live or die is tremendous. The trauma of seeing fellow soldiers die or be maimed is hellacious. If the veteran has been in firefights there is no words that can describe the violence and terror. In addition, if the veteran has been wounded or lost limbs it enhances their trauma. Finally, even if the veteran was in a “safe place” or a noncombatant it doesn’t mean they were not affected by the fact they were still under constant danger of being bombed, attacked or even witnessing the carnage that happens in war zones.

I’m one of the above veterans. I came back from war with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that I failed to address for decades. I’ve been in recovery for a number of years, but it has taken tremendous efforts to get the help I desperately needed. It took me two years learning and navigating the VA disability system to reach the 100% disabled veteran status in spite of being a combat veteran and Purple Heart recipient. When I returned from Vietnam in 1968, I was told by the VA in Los Angeles, CA I was not entitled to any disability benefits. I didn’t realize until 2008 that benefits were being provided since the Civil War but 1980 was when the political forces began to change. I found out through my own research I had rights. I received no notices from the Veterans Administration letting me know I could apply for benefits.

However, the Veterans Administration System has improved but it can still be a challenge. There’s more to be done not just for veterans but also for families and loved ones of veterans. I realized early on that a major key that is missing is the matter of educating parents and loved ones on what to expect when a veteran returns home from war.

I propose there are some veteran types that might help you understand some things you need to know in order to prepare or help the returning war veteran in your life. These veteran types are of my own design based on my personal experience. The types are not all inclusive and are suggestions to help educate loved ones of veterans. It is possible for a veteran to fit into a number of categories I have listed:

- » The Functional Veteran. Some veterans come home from war with no changes. They are able to function, interact with family, finish school or get a job. They are just like the family remembers them. It could be that they were able to fend off trauma. It is also possible that they had the internal energy to keep the demons of war at bay. However, demons are good at waiting. It could take years or decades until the defense systems break down and PTSD or medical issues surface connected to military service experiences. It is not uncommon for the VA to see soldiers for treatment after they retire from full-time work. I was one of those soldiers.
- » The Angry Explosive Veteran. War can make a person angry. No one can know the horror of seeing others die around you or the helplessness of feeling bullets wiz by your head in combat. The deep fear or the destruction of human beings by explosions and bodies riddled with violence changes the soldier’s DNA. Yes, a veteran can return angry and vomit that anger upon the loved ones and family until they get the help they need. This can be shocking to the family and appear to the family the veteran is not appreciative of the family’s love. The veteran is significantly traumatized. Until the trauma can be addressed the veteran and family will suffer.
- » The Introverted Veteran (Won’t Talk or Feel). This type of Veteran is similar to an alcoholic but instead of substance abuse he or she becomes silent. All the trauma is stuffed inside the body to

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be carried deep within the psyche. This is what past generations of veterans did because there was an unwritten code to not talk or feel about your war experience. The science was not there to help veterans address their trauma. Some of our returning war veterans today still hold to the belief that you must “man up” around war experiences. Veterans who killed the enemy in battles may have moral guilt along with survivor guilt. Not talking or feeling creates numbness and distance from loved ones.

- » The Reclusive Veteran (Isolating/Depressed). Some war veterans do not feel like they fit into society anymore. They choose to be alone, have no friends and refuse support. They get to like being isolated and might decide to find places to “hide” from their war experiences. In addition, they are usually depressed. Depression can lead to suicidal thoughts and even suicide attempts. When a veteran begins to isolate it is a serious symptom that needs to be addressed immediately through local VA agencies, therapeutic programs or medical care.
- » The Addicted Veteran (Self-Medicating with Alcohol, Drugs, Sex, Gambling or Numerous Acting Out Behaviors.). Anything that can decrease the anxiety and trauma of war can grab onto veterans who have addictive tendencies. Unfortunately, our society has an availability of substances that can be secured rather easily to help mask symptoms of deep trauma. If the family has a history of substance abuse the family can become enablers of the disease leading the veteran to a destructive lifestyle. It's not uncommon for there to be overdose episodes, black-outs, or even death. Substance abuse treatment is essential to get to the root of the addictions.
- » The Anxious & Compulsive Veteran. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a trauma disorder. High anxiety is a major symptom, night terrors, hypervigilance, war flash-backs, psychological distress, physiological reactions to internal and external cues, internal negative beliefs, feelings of detachment and many more symptoms impact trauma victims. The veteran can be constantly scanning the environment for threats of danger, feeling uncomfortable in crowds, not enjoying social gatherings, jumping at being touched or hearing loud noises. Compulsive behaviors can begin like checking locked doors multiple times or being upset if something is not in a designated place. Unless the anxiety is decreased this becomes self-destructive.
- » The Aggressive Dangerous Veteran. Some veterans have been significantly damaged from war. Their whole belief system including their moral inventory is gone. They have lost their name and have the potential to be extremely violent. Any weapons in the home should be secured including household knives. They need immediate intervention because they can be lethal to themselves or others. Some counties have Veteran Courts for veterans who are arrested for a crime. Entrance into these programs are tailored to help traumatized veterans receive the help they deserve in spite of criminal behavior.

HOW CAN FAMILIES HELP THE VETERAN?

1. **Lean about Trauma.** Read articles and books to help you understand the complexity of how this changes a person. Understand the pain, tendency to withdraw and need for family support without ongoing pressure to demand the veteran “return to normal.” Trauma can happen to anyone at any age. It is not just a veteran issue. Any type of ongoing abuse, life or death

situation, terrorist attack, death in a family, loss of health, or disease can paralyze a person with trauma.

2. **Learn about PTSD.** It's amazing how Post Traumatic Stress wasn't known by veterans and was considered a weakness in character in past wars. There are many good articles on the subject. The family needs to be educated on the symptoms and treatments for this disorder. Some VA's have family programs that can be helpful.
3. **Lower your expectations.** You want your son or daughter to be the same person they once were. That's not realistic. Give the veteran time to heal. My guess is it takes 2-3 years to get better once you engage treatment. Remember, the person you once knew has changed. A part of the family or loved one may need to grieve over the loss but there is also the flip side that the veteran is alive and there is hope.
4. **Expect there to be employment problems.** Not all returning veterans will fail to get employment or keep a job but for many it is difficult if not impossible to do work for months or years. Too much emotional and physical damage has happened. The person may seem like a failure or is “giving up” but this is common with individuals who have suffered severe trauma. Be very careful about judging since it can trigger deep resentment by the veteran. Calling the veteran irresponsible only makes matters worse and it's not the truth.

Continued on page 20.

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- 5. **Help the veteran.** This may include financial support if you can. Emotional support, positive reinforcement, and after a short time of being back from war help them link up with the Veterans Administration, local Veteran Organizations, or Community Based Programs.
- 6. **Realize** the veteran may return with health issues due to exposure to dangerous toxins. A medical evaluation for heart disease, traumatic brain injuries, neurological disorders and diabetes are a must.
- 7. **Participate in Veteran Based Programs** for the family. Being around other families that have returning veterans can be a wonderful realization that you are not alone. You are a key person in the veteran's life that can give love unconditionally. You are important in spite of the trauma your child or loved one suffered. You are special because you are family.

Finally, the returning veteran needs to get a VA ID (Identification Card). This can happen through the VA or a local Veteran Service Office. The most important piece of information for any veteran is the military form DD214. This form has the record of the veteran's military history including enrollment, discharge dates, along with military rank, medals and assignments. This form is available on-line, but my suggestion is to go to a local VA Service Office and get help by seeing a Veteran Service Officer (VSO). The VA will need to access a soldier's DD214 form prior to a veteran receiving a VA ID Card. The VA card opens doors to treatment, discounts in the community, and recognition as a veteran.

There are a host of treatments available to veterans. I was personally helped by being with other veterans in a group treatment program through my local VA clinic. Support from fellow veterans helped me

heal much quicker than if I had tried to do it on my own. The typical forms of therapy, medication, employment aids, and alternative treatment is available through local VA's. For me I wanted to find a therapy that allowed me to express myself without too many words. I found art therapy helped me. Each person is unique and finding the right treatment depends on who the person is and what the person feels is the right fit.

Loving family or friends can retraumatize a veteran by being ignorant of what they say or think. Statements like "Just Get Over It", "Let the Past Be the Past", "Just Be Who You Used To Be" are demeaning and hurtful because they do not represent the whole veterans experience. Be nice, patient, and supportive. Give the veteran space with kind prompts to get support. If you find yourself getting overwhelmed seek professional help. Please be careful of getting advice from those who have no experience with war trauma because advice out of ignorance harms rather than heals.

Be aware holidays can be hard for the war veteran. Some veterans can't be around fireworks on the 4th of July. Some were in battles on Christmas or Easter or a major holiday that remind the veteran of death rather than joy. Be sensitive to these cues and don't force your loved one to be happy when it may trigger a negative memory.

This is just a brief overview, but I hope you have learned that the road to recovery for returning war veterans is a long one but can be successful with family, VA, and loved one's support. YOU are the best support a veteran can have because you have the love and understanding. Be there but also be or get educated.

Thanks, my blessings,
Sgt. Clyde R. Horn






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