

The Effect of the Iraq War on Returning Soldiers

A Look at Post Traumatic Stress

By
Jay Uhler

did not use disorder in the title of this article. You will understand why as you read on.

Let me state immediately that **a person can heal from post traumatic stress and also from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.** Therapy, not merely talk therapy, but therapy where a person can **release the feelings** connected to the traumatic events, brings enormous relief and permits a person to begin a new life without the struggles of post traumatic stress. **When the emotions are released in a safe setting, soldiers can overcome night terrors and the other symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.**

However, let us look at Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as a diagnosable disorder for the purpose of a standardized way of understanding how it affects people. The commonly used Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) states that Posttraumatic Stress Disorder exists when a person (1) “experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, (2) the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.”¹

The things I am about to say may disturb some people. But if it helps one soldier, it is worth the risk. **To understand the intent of this article can reduce, and hopefully take away, the stigma of getting help when it is needed.** It has always been a relief to people I have known when they understand that whatever is upsetting them is a natural result of their experiences and they are feeling or reacting the way they do because they are human—their response and emotions fit their experience.

Let’s not look at post traumatic stress as a psychiatric disorder. Let’s acknowledge post traumatic stress as a natural outgrowth of war, thus taking away any stigma attached to a diagnosable category indicating a mental illness. It is not a mental illness to have a reaction to seeing people die, to killing people, to being under the threat of being killed. That is a natural human response—not a mental illness.

In our country with our moral and legal codes, it is a violation of human dignity to kill another human being, and in some states punishable by death. To go against those deeply ingrained values and to vomit when you kill someone in battle, to be afraid for your life, to be upset that your mate and children have to live without you, to experience pain and rage at the death of your combat friend(s) and to have any of those bother you for days, years, a life time is not a mental illness.

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In fact, it can be a mental illness when seeing other human beings killed or when killing them doesn't bother you. This is not a judgment for those who somehow manage to function after such events. It is a declaration that there is something right about being troubled by violence or the fear of violence.

Post traumatic stress can be a result of observing violence or brutality of others which causes guilt by association. Observing other soldiers doing things that you would not do, but feeling helpless to prevent or stop their actions can be traumatic. Trauma can occur by being ordered to commit acts that you would never do, but you know you will not return to your family or friends at home if you don't. One soldier suffered for years because his commander insisted that he kill a little girl because she had seen other soldiers kill her family members.

So, let me emphasize that you are not mentally ill if you have post war traumatic stress or are diagnosed with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. You are having a human response to a traumatic experience—seeing people being killed and killing people.

Why would I say these things? Because people need to hear them in order to heal.

Let me re-emphasize that you do not need to live with it forever—if you are willing to get help. The soldier who killed the little girl regained the ability to sleep nights after receiving therapy. His night terrors stopped after two sessions.

A soldier who had been a prisoner of war did not lose sleep over being a prisoner of war, but every night had nightmares because he had killed a 15 year old boy, quote, “the enemy.” He stopped having nightmares when he talked about the event in detail and released the feelings linked to it.

What are signs that you are reacting to post traumatic stress related to war. Soldiers report being edgy around people. Not surprising if you have been surrounded by people who want to kill you and you can't tell who does and who does not.

Another sign is being startled by noises—the louder, the more startling. Not surprising if you have been exposed to or learned to respond when a sniper could be firing at you—or a bomb could be going off—or mortar attacks are a possibility.

Another sign is having intense anger get triggered easily. There can be anger simply to be thrust in a war when you volunteered for the military to get an education or to get out of a life location or life style that was not conducive to growth and your only option was to enlist. Especially for soldiers returning to the United States from Iraq, there can be anger and helplessness that your vocational opportunities are limited and there is no assistance to get a job by the government that sent you into battle.

Another sign of post traumatic stress is nightmares of the events that you experienced. One soldier was startled awake realizing that he was strangling his wife as a result of dreaming about combat. Due to a fear of hurting her, he slept on the living room couch after that. Imagine what that can do to a marriage and to a family with children seeing their parents sleeping apart.

Post traumatic stress because of these issues mentioned above can cause difficulties in a marriage or in forming and keeping a relationship.

Any of three kinds of depression can be a result of war related post traumatic stress. It is common for a person to have all three.

First is **sadness** depression. It is related to the losses that you experience. Loss of fellow soldiers, male or female, who are killed or maimed in battle, the loss of a limb or your health, the loss of a sense of moral self as a result of actions committed while in the military, loss of respect for the government due to betrayal about the reasons for the war and insufficient equipment to protect yourself while you are there, loss of respect for our country because you have given so much of yourself by being in Iraq as a soldier and being given so little by which to have a decent life when you return. All of these are grief situations and cause sadness depression. They require addressing the events and the emotions that go with grieving. (See Jay's Jottings" articles on the grieving process or the article on "How to Move Through the Loss of a Relationship.")

Second is **anger** depression. Anger depression is a result of turning anger toward yourself. Turning anger inward is a form of self rejection and can be experienced as guilt. Guilt/self rejection is painful. In fact, it is the most intense pain I know. Rejection by others is only painful if we then reject ourselves. Guilt is very painful when we reject ourselves. Guilt is one the emotions that accompany any situation of loss and any action that goes against our moral code.

It is crucial to take a hard look with compassion at any self rejection related to our self directed anger that causes our depression. It reduces the pain that accompanies guilt when you understand that guilt lies to you. It tells you that you are a bad person, when you are not. Often the people who experience the most guilt are the people who try the hardest to do their best. Even if you have done things that you regret, a "bad" thing, it does not mean that you are a bad person.

Third is **helplessness** depression. Helplessness is the feeling that we are stuck. It seems to us as though there is no way to get out of our present situation. Hopelessness is the belief that present circumstances and the upsetting emotions that go with it will last forever—or even worse—get worse.

It is important to realize that the emotion of helplessness does not mean that we are helpless. It means that we are feeling helpless—stuck. It means that we must take a look at our options and pick one as a way to get unstuck. We may not like the options, however, when we choose one and act on it, we are creating forward moment. When we create momentum other, often better, options appear, and on and on. As we improve our circumstances, getting more and more unstuck, we reduce our feelings of helplessness.

When returning as a soldier from war, it is not easy, but it is crucial to recognize that we need help. **In the military you learn the buddy system. It is time to put the buddy system to work when you return to the U. S. The tendency when you are hurt or when you have post traumatic stress is to isolate yourself, to be alone. This is the opposite of what most people need. They need a "buddy."**

Having a buddy can take many forms. It can be sharing with another veteran. It can be a friend who is strong enough to handle what you need to express. It is often wise to find a therapist or trained pastoral counselor or pastor as a "buddy." Your "buddy" can be a group for post traumatic stress, especially war related post traumatic stress.

Your "buddy" can be a veteran's organization that is aware of the nature of post traumatic stress and can assist you to understand it and either provides services or can

refer you to trustworthy places to help you to heal. It can be a book or article in addition to a human buddy.

Some resources, “buddies” are:

- A local rabbi, imam, priest or minister who has training in counseling
- A therapist from the social work, psychological or psychiatric disciplines who is good at helping soldiers to recover from war related issues. (Let me emphasize the importance of releasing emotions related to the trauma of war, not covering them with medication.)
- Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America www.iava.org 212-982-9699
- National Gulf War Resource Center, www.ngwrc.org
- Iraq Veterans Against the War, www.ivaw.org 215-241-7123 (IVAW has information on the website about Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and is sympathetic to the issues related to it.)
- WomensLaw.org, <http://www.womenslaw.org/military.htm>
- National Center for PTSD, www.ncptsd.va.gov
- Series on managing grief and loss in "Jay's Jottings."²
- Book on *How to Make Friends With Your Feelings*³ by Jay Uhler

The first step is to gain knowledge about post traumatic stress, the second is to acknowledge that you have it and the third is to accept that you are human and your present stress is a natural result of your experiences in war.

Then, no matter what you are feeling about yourself, tell yourself that you need and deserve a “buddy” to help you recover from your soldier life so you can create a life of freedom to connect with your mate, family, friends and vocation.

¹*Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-IV™*. 1994. Published by the American Psychiatric Association, Washington, DC, p. 209.

²Uhler, J. 1975. Series on managing grief in "Jay's Jottings." *North Reading Transcript* and *Lexington Minuteman* (L. M. shared the articles with twelve other newspapers).

³Uhler, J. 1993. *How to Make Friends With Your Feelings*. Boston: Ambassador Press International. 2003. Unabridged 10 CD package.

“Jay’s Jottings” and How to Move Through the Loss of a Relationship articles can be copied **free** on this website, jayuhler.com.

How to Make Friends With Your Feelings is available in bookstores, on the internet or by calling 800-266-5529. The book is \$12.95 and the unabridged book of 10 CDs is \$29.95.

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