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A Soldier's Story: The Impact of War Trauma

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It was a tough first session. The tall, fifty-something retired soldier spent much of the time telling me with considerable hostility that counseling was a “bunch of bunk” and he had no respect for therapists. And he let me know in no uncertain terms that he was not going to reveal anything personal. He blamed his spouse for making him come because she thought he had an “anger problem.” I remained rather low key, letting him vent until he was fairly played out on the subject. Then as I asked about his family and his children, his face softened. The picture of my grown children on the table caught his eye and he inquired about them. As I shared a little about the joys, trials and tribulations of parenting three girls, he smiled--a connection finally made through the common ground of parenthood.

After meandering through several benign topics, I asked about his military background. At the question, his rather youthful face suddenly seemed to age. And as he started talking, like any good soldier, he began by reporting only the necessary facts—names, places, dates of tours of duty. I interrupted this litany by asking him what it was like serving in Vietnam. Staring out the window, he fell silent, his eyes moving as though he were watching a movie, tracking scenes only he could see. Then, without changing posture he began to talk, releasing a flood of emotions that had been closely guarded for years.

He was eighteen when he enlisted with three of his high school buddies. They were young, wild, free-spirited, and thought fighting a war would be a great adventure. But instead they found themselves in the suffocating jungles of Vietnam--homesick, afraid, and surrounded by death.

The soldier suddenly paused again and I realized that he had left me, traveling back in time. His jaw tightened in a losing effort to fight back tears as he resumed, describing soldiers in his unit who were dismembered or killed by grenades and land mines. Weeks later, he discovered his comrades' abandoned decomposing hands, feet and other appendages on the trails. And with his body trembling, he recalled the vivid memory and still present smell of burning flesh after he witnessed a close friend being consumed by the flames of a fuel tank explosion.

I called him back, concerned that the session had become too intense and overwhelming. As though awakened from a trance, he turned to me seemingly surprised by his own revelation. We talked a while longer and he agreed to return to address the memories and his marriage. And he did. He stayed in

individual and marital counseling for over a year as he and his wife became an army of two in his amazing journey of recovery.

Many of the men and women who have sacrificed to fight for their country are survivors of war trauma with substantial but often underestimated residual impact on marriages, relationships, self-worth, work performance and health. This is part one of two articles focusing on educating spouses, families, and others who love and work with veterans with combat experience and/or trauma symptoms.