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## **War Trauma Affects Individuals, Families**

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The scenario is so familiar. Another veteran, this time an eighty-four-year-old, sitting in my office sharing the difficult details of his war experience for the first time--a World War II vet reliving the unthinkable events of a war that ended over sixty years ago as though it were happening in that moment. Sometimes the soldier is young, having just returned home and struggling with the overwhelming task of picking up the pieces and returning to civilian life while emotions and memories are still raw and unprocessed. War has undeniable, significant impact on the lives of veterans and their families.

Surrounded by death and constant threat of imminent harm, combat changes these men and women forever. Witnessing the human suffering inherent in war, they return to their families and loved ones with a different set of priorities and frequently a tragic loss of confidence in mankind. And for so many, the war experience occurs at a young age, an impressionable time when most are unprepared to deal with death and the realities of war. According to a recent study, roughly one in five soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan displays symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Military training is a powerful process necessary for preparing soldiers to survive combat. The ability to be single minded, compartmentalizing emotions and extraneous information that could jeopardize the mission at hand is critical. Soldiers must react quickly and instinctively, keeping sensitive information and feelings close to the vest.

These important survival skills that protect the soldier in the field do not always serve as well in family and close relationships. Yet veterans and their families tend to underestimate the impact of combat and war trauma on communication, intimacy, parenting, and work performance. Regardless of how long ago the military involvement occurred, these experiences affect relationships in ways that may not always appear to be directly war related. The ability to form attachments and trusting relationships can be compromised by war trauma, especially in situations where the enemy was not always easily identifiable.

Although it is important to note that not all who serve in the military experience adjustment difficulties, war trauma and combat survivors may manifest irritability, anger, withdrawal, isolation, depression, distrust, detachment, avoidance of feelings, anxiety and intense need for control. Seemingly benign events may trigger emotional reactions that go far beyond the circumstances at hand. There may be little tolerance for surprises or complaints from family and friends about the everyday challenges of life when a

soldier suffered grueling and unpredictable wartime conditions. Feelings kept in check during the military experience may be inappropriately expressed or displaced toward something or someone who is not the primary source. Some have difficulty with playfulness or may use excessive play or addictive behavior as an escape from painful memories. Others may experience flashbacks and nightmares.

The dynamics of war and combat trauma are complex; many aspects of the subject are beyond the scope of this two part series. Veterans benefit from an ongoing compassionate family and community support network offering opportunities to share feelings honestly and openly. Education and counseling about trauma symptoms and treatment aid in the development of coping strategies helpful for both vets and their families. And most importantly, there is immeasurable healing power in the acknowledgement and thanks to a soldier for his or her sacrifice and service to our country.