

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

PTSD and Vietnam

Most veterans adjust well to life back in the United States following their wartime experiences. For many veterans, however, their war experiences are an ever present reality. As William Faulkner wrote - "The past is never dead. It is not even the past". For example, conservative estimates indicate that at least half a million Vietnam veterans still lead lives plagued by serious, war-related readjustment problems. For some veterans, these readjustment problems can reach the level of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD symptoms can present in a variety of ways; but many of the veterans that I treat in PTSD groups, initially do not know what is "wrong" with them. They tend to deny the symptoms they experience.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is an anxiety disorder, and it can happen to anyone who faces a life-threatening experience. This could be combat, rape, armed robbery, or natural disasters. The person gets through the traumatic experience, but several months or years later they start to experience problems. The diagnosis of PTSD was established in 1980 in response to the large number of Vietnam veterans seeking treatment for their war-related problems. Anyone reading this article knows that Vietnam was a different experience from other conflicts. During World War II, troops went over as a unit, and came home as a unit. They had time to process their combat experiences on the "long boat ride home." Additionally, they came home to a country that was very supportive of their wartime efforts. For the Vietnam veteran, there was little time to process the war experience; and the veteran returned home to a hostile and punitive environment, which aggravated an already festering wound. As noted in the famous quote:

"We went to Vietnam and some of us came back. And that's all there is...except the details"

For the veteran with PTSD, it's the reaction to the details that can lead to problems. However, once a veteran starts to accept PTSD as part of his/her life, the healing can begin. There are certain classic symptoms of PTSD including: a decreased sleeping pattern, poor concentration, nightmares of combat, night sweats, flashbacks of combat, increased startle response, hyper-vigilance (always being on guard duty), isolation, increased anger/rage, increased anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, avoidance of discussion of combat experiences, diminished interest in pleasurable activities, feeling detached from others, foreshortened sense of future, survivor's guilt, and intrusive memories. Some of these symptoms are clearly visible. Many veterans are compelled to sit with their back against the wall in restaurants. This is directly related to their hyper-vigilance, and need to be aware of their surroundings at all times, as they had to be aware

of their surroundings in the combat zone. This behavior alone doesn't necessarily mean the veteran is suffering from PTSD; but the symptoms can be disturbing for the veteran, as well for his friends and family members.

The usual stereotype of the Vietnam vet returning home was "there is another crazy Vietnam veteran"; and many of us thought that we were crazy. This type of perception and the symptoms of PTSD may cause others to distance themselves from the veteran, which only serves to increase the sense of isolation and detachment. PTSD, however, is a medical illness, just like high blood pressure or diabetes. It's funny that no one would be ashamed of having high blood pressure or diabetes, but people often do not want to admit that they have PTSD. I truly believe that "accepting" the illness is the beginning of the healing, and PTSD is a very treatable illness. The symptoms of PTSD can be stabilized with safe, non-addicting medications. There are also PTSD groups at the VA Medical Center, Mental Health Clinic, as well as at the Vet Centers.

Although no one is ever "cured" of PTSD, the veteran's quality of life can be dramatically improved. If you think that you have PTSD, come to the VA Medical Center, Mental Health Clinic for an evaluation. One last thing – Welcome Home!