

Children of Veterans Also Struggle with PTSD

by Amy Blumenshine

“How could anyone understand what I’ve been through?” Cathy Madison’s father, a military surgeon and prisoner of war in Korea, explained. She had asked him why he never sought help for his symptoms—violent outbursts, ever-pending rage, social withdrawal, catastrophic thinking and anxiety in crowds, including traffic.

Madison has been exploring the family impact of living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in her writing, in the hopes that her experiences will be helpful to others. “Mother had the hardest time. She tried to protect us from him,” Madison recognized. As an adult, she asked her mother what it was like when her father first came home from the war. “No one ever asked me that before,” her mother sadly replied. His children called him “Colonel Surgeon Father God” behind his back and learned not to try to hug him. His startle response was so intense that no one wanted to wake him because they did not know how to deal with his sudden, sometimes violent reactions, which would in turn startle them. His children seldom invited their friends home for the same reason, and he was reluctant to attend their activities because he avoided crowds. Everyone in the home lived in tension and “walked on eggshells” in an attempt to keep their father from exploding. “None of this was spoken; it was just something you knew,” said Madison. “But as children, we didn’t really attribute it to his experience; we thought it was just who he was.”

Madison began to explore these experiences with her father when as an adult, she was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result – not of a distinct trauma – of living with her father. She has learned to identify her catastrophic thinking – always imagining that the worst thing possible is likely to happen and that she would not be able to do anything about it – as a PTSD symptom. Therapy has helped her moderate her symptoms of severe startle reactions, anxiety and fearfulness, but she realizes that she may also have passed symptoms on to her own children.

Explains Madison, “My father showed all the signs of PTSD before we knew such a thing existed. So much of his emotion was tied up in this box, and the family could never get to it. It certainly affected the family to a much greater extent than any of us would admit for a long, long time. The impact ripples much farther out than you would imagine. It’s not a pebble dropped in a lake, it’s a boulder. It has a powerful and insidious impact.”

Imagining how churches might make a positive impact with families like hers, she wishes that someone had asked her mother what it was like for her. “Having that kind of support for the other people in the family would



be huge. Like Al-Anon, groups of kids with common issues need each other; we didn’t know anybody else who struggled as we did.”

People interested in ministry with veterans are invited to hear Madison and enjoy a simple lunch on September 8 at the bi-monthly Veterans Ministry Roundtable. RSVP to ListenToVets@comcast.net.

Upcoming Events

- On Tuesday, September 8, Cathy Madison will speak of her personal learning in growing up with a father with military PTSD at the Veterans Ministry Roundtable lunch, noon-1:30 p.m., Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church, 2315 Chicago Ave., Minneapolis.
- North Heights Lutheran Church in Arden Hills will co-sponsor a care conference with the Minnesota National Guard on September 26. Open to anyone “with a heart for military families,” the 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. program will focus on challenges families face when separated by military duty and identify ways people in faith-based communities or one-on-one can help. The event takes place at North Heights, 1700 W Highway 96, Arden Hills, and costs \$10 which includes lunch. Contact Bob Schirm at 612-889-4711 for more information.
- People “with a heart for military families” might also urge a loved one to participate in the Healing of Memories workshop planned for October 23-25. This will be a unique opportunity for veterans to benefit from the healing model developed and conducted by Father Michael Lapsley (Anglican), a military chaplain disabled during the anti-apartheid conflict. Contact Sheila Laughton at 651-641-0008, ext. 13, with questions.