

Basic Concepts for What a Family Can Do: Walking with a veteran in transition home from war

A short article is nearly impossible on the subject of relationships. Not only does one size not fit all, it may not fit the same person over a period of time. That is to say, determining how to best help each family, relationship, or veteran is a matter of constant discernment. Veterans differ greatly; people come home with differing impacts from their deployments.

So what is a family member to do? Inform yourself, pay attention, avoid judging the veteran, gently shepherd the veteran to resources if indicated, take care of yourself, and hold the veteran in love. Seeking help from your congregation and pastoral staff is totally appropriate.

INFORM YOURSELF

Fortunately, many good books are available as companions on this journey. The Greek-American Aphrodite Matsakis writes with decades of experience helping veterans and their families. At www.matsakis.com, note especially her “Seeking help” section where she lists how to evaluate appropriate help providers. An excellent book is *Courage After Fire: Coping Strategies for Troops Returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and Their Families* by Keith Armstrong, Suzanne Best, and Paula Domenici.

In *War Trauma: Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam to Iraq*, veteran and social work professor Raymond Monsour Scurfield devotes a chapter to “The Return Home and the Ricochet Effect on the Family.”

To learn more about the Iraq war experience, the book *What Was Asked of Us: An Oral History of the Iraq War by the Soldiers Who Fought It*, by Trish Wood, provides numerous first-hand accounts. *In Conflict: Iraq War Veterans Speak Out on Duty, Loss, and the Fight to Stay Alive*, by Yvonne Latty features more veterans’ accounts. While not your veteran’s personal experience, these accounts can give you some background for talking with your loved one.

PAY ATTENTION

The transition home from war is rarely easy or without confusion, even though veterans may appear not to be hurting. Nearly everyone prefers not to deal with their pain and to try to leave uncomfortable experiences behind them. “Stuffing it,” or compartmentalizing the pain can be necessary and can work – for a while. Most people who “bottle things up” will experience physical symptoms, outbursts of inappropriate behavior (like anger), or develop negative coping mechanisms, like excessive alcohol use.

Denial, detachment, and numbing are characteristic of war zone behavior. A veteran in transition will be having better and worse moments. As someone who knows this person before their deployment, you are in a key position to help identify when the veteran’s inability to “let go” of the war zone survival attitude and mode of living is interfering with their functioning in important ways.

Just as someone who has an open wound needs special temporary protection from infection, a person who is in transition with post combat stress reaction needs protection from incurring additional trauma and loss as a result of their war-impacted behavior.

LET GO OF JUDGEMENT

Avoid making conclusions about how the veteran “should” be. How people respond to the confrontation with war and in what timing has great individual variation. If the veteran shares with you some of their war zone experiences, try not to imagine that you might have acted differently. Your thinking will come through in your attitude.

Try not to leap to conclusions about the future based on current behavior. The veteran in transition is struggling to find their “new normal” equilibrium. Missteps are likely.

Try to dance with the uncertainty of how things will be in the future as your relationship re-adjusts. Everyone needs to grieve their losses that have occurred, and accept their anger and resentment over what has happened during periods of absence. Also remember to turn to the delight of being re-united with your loved one. Remember the great relief at being finished with the period of anxiety during deployment.

GENTLY SHEPHERD TO RESOURCES

The veterans themselves must decide when and how they want to change. Avoid getting into a power struggle over seeking help. Make materials and resources available. If you think it appropriate, make self-assessment charts available so that the veteran themselves can evaluate whether they have a problem.

Our society is still groping with how best to help people deal with their war experiences. The Veteran's Administration and the Vet Centers offer help to many. Others pursue counseling with civilian providers. (See Resources link on synod Web site.)

The Coming Home Collaborative, a Twin Cities based association of helping professionals and veterans seeks to review "adjustment home" alternatives and stimulate new healing modalities. We recommend that veterans have a chance to talk with each other in safe settings (i.e. Gatherings should be conducted with understood and maintained healthy standards of interpersonal behavior during the talking.) We think veterans are their own best resources for "listening each other into speech" as veterans deal with their challenges, both what they faced in war and when they come home. Accordingly, we applaud the gatherings of veterans Thursday nights at Calvary Lutheran, Golden Valley.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF as well as your relationship

The single most important predictor of those who will develop long-term post-traumatic stress disorder is that they were unable to derive comfort from another human being. That being said, many veterans returning from a war zone may be initially unable to feel. They have had to numb their feelings and reactions in order to perform as they were asked.

The "at home" warrior can be mindful of preserving the relationship for the time when the war-zone veteran is more able to be a full participant. The relationship can be a powerful aid in helping the veteran to heal, when they are ready. You need to take care of yourself and get support along the way. Reach out. Congregations are at our "most Christian" when we can bear each other's burdens.

The veterans must gestate their own desire to change. Most of us are of divided "mind" about how we want to act. Try to side with the part of the veteran that is oriented towards their health and wellness without telling them what to do.

Some relationships are contrary – an adult child may automatically react against what a parent recommends. Remember, your goal is not to "be right," you want to have a successful/healthy relationship. Try to avoid setting up a power struggle by recognizing the difficulty of finding the path. So you might say things like, "I understand that this may be difficult for you initially just coming back from war, but you might want to look at whether you want to continue this pattern of ___(gambling, carrying a loaded weapon, getting mad quickly, etc.)"

Many parents talk of the new level of maturity with which their children return from war. Some veterans are more appreciative of relationships and life in general. Many are no longer let trivial matters distract them from matters of significance. Unfortunately, you may not consider your issue trivial! If the behavior is causing a problem, it's a problem.

Point out problematic behavior without requiring a certain action. Attending Al-Anon groups can be very helpful as a family struggles with the dance of how to deal with someone whose behavior

may be destructive and who needs to seek help. Other family members are at risk here. Treating a person as not responsible for their behavior, and accommodating their problems can lead to not meeting other family needs. Some adult children of veterans have had problems and been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder incurred by the way their family lived with the PTSD of the parent.

At times, during the transition home, you may need to protect yourself – and the future of your relationship – from the consequences of harmful behavior.

Special concern is required whenever violence and/or weapons are part of the situation. If violence is part of the picture at anytime, remove yourself from harm. You need to protect yourself and vulnerable others, such as children. Do this for the sake of the veteran who most likely would regret harming you when she/he recovers from the nightmare/flashback/anger outburst. Have an emergency plan and kit prepared for a temporary departure. (See Mayo Clinic recommendations for securing weapons at home.)

HOLD THE VETERAN IN LOVE and prayer

Love is powerful and unparalleled in its ability to connect across obstacles to the humanity of your loved one and help them heal. We make missteps because there is no cookbook set of instructions for how to be present with a hurting person—and because we're human ourselves! Yet, Love is best at finding the way. We often can "intuit" how best to be present for those we love.

Try to manifest that pouring out of love to your veteran. Remember to connect yourself with God's love for both of you as you seek to be both wise and loving with your veteran. Sometimes you may need to refresh your connection with God. We all can get drained! Countless recovering veterans have testified to both the aloneness they have felt in dealing with post-war issues, and how important it was to have a loved one say, "We're in this together."