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Vietnam vets, counselors await new wave of suffering soldiers

By ALLISON KING *Post Register* April 22, 2003 Publication: *Post Register (Idaho Falls, ID)* Page: a1 Word Count: 677

One Rexburg man wouldn't close his eyes. He still saw flashes of his bloodied comrades. He went days without sleep.

Another can't watch the news. He sees himself and his old buddies in the faces of young soldiers on Iraq's sands. And once, an Idaho Falls man heard a drill outside the grocery store he was shopping in and immediately flung his body down in the store's aisle, looking for cover from "machine guns overhead."

Local mental health workers have seen it all. And they're seeing it again in full force.

While some 350,000 soldiers are fighting a battle on Iraq's sands, veterans back home are struggling against post-traumatic stress disorder.

Post-traumatic stress disorder afflicts an estimated 5.2 million Americans, according to the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, mostly military veterans who have lived through high-stress situations.

"I handled human remains on almost a daily basis," said Kenneth Tucker of Basalt, an Air Force Vietnam veteran and director of the Southeast Idaho Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America. "You're bound to suffer from that. But I just keep busy and try not to think about it."

Mental health workers and military officials fear today's soldiers will become victims of the

illness as well.

"In this war, you have the enemies disguised as civilians who are shooting at you; there are suicide bombers; women and children being used as human shields; there are threats of chemical warfare. These are all significant stressors that could instigate the disorder," said Lt. Col. E. Cameron Ritchie, M.D., director of Department of Defense mental health programs.

Those memories are permanently locked into the mind's eye very vividly, said Dr. Stephen Denagy, an Idaho Falls psychiatrist who specializes in treating PTSD cases. Over time, he said, anything remotely related to the trauma and its memories will cause the body and mind to automatically relive that event.

"It can be a really bad situation. You never know when it will pop up on you," Tucker said, comparing the disorder to a time bomb. "So many struggle with it."

People of all ages, cultures and genetics are subject to PTSD, said Edward Kinghorn, Ph.D., a local psychology professor, neuropsychiatrist and Red Cross disaster mental health worker.

While one of the primary causes and biggest traumas linked to the disorder is combat, traumas such as rape or sexual assault, severe beating, shooting, unsuspected death of a loved one and natural disasters can inflict post-traumatic stress disorder.

"The myth is that (PTSD) only happens in soldiers," Denagy said. "But there is a wide variety of people afflicted by it who have been severely traumatized."

The Department of Defense is trying to help veterans. It has a specialized branch to deal with the problem, and mental health professionals in uniform.

It's also changing its training. Cadets, officers and enlistees engage in live-fire battle simulations to better prepare them for combat.

This way, Denagy said, the bullets and the fires "aren't such a novelty and a shock."

The Department of Defense also has a fledgling program to help soldiers readjust when they come home. Soldiers are briefed before they go home on how their families have changed, whether there are still war protesters or whether any major changes have happened while they've been away at war.

Denagy said some veterans are in need of counseling because they don't want to think they're crazy.

"They don't want to admit that what they saw or did had that much of an effect on them."

Tucker has found respite from the plaguing memories in poetry. He started writing about his experiences in combat several years ago.

Now he has 50-plus poems detailing a breadth of feelings he carries about the war he fought in and the war he's seeing now.

Denagy said just talking about the trauma and explaining that it's not the person's fault could be a huge and needed relief.

"It's treatable. The traumas are very treatable," Denagy said. "You just have to take that step and get help."

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