

The long recovery: Many combat veterans deal with PTSD

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PANAMA CITY (Tribune News Service) — When Ephraim Lopez recalled his military service in the Vietnam War, he broke into tears and had to walk away for a moment.

Lopez deals with post-traumatic stress disorder relating to his time serving in the Navy. He went to Vietnam in 1969 and wasn't the same person when he came home.

He's not alone. About 30 percent of the U.S. servicemen and women who have spent time in war zones experience PTSD, according to the Nebraska Department of Veterans Affairs. An additional 20 percent to 25 percent have had partial PTSD at some point in their lives, the NDVA said.

Lopez talked about PTSD while eating at a Panama City diner recently with fellow veteran friends. The group regularly meets for breakfast where they kid around. Sometimes they tell war stories.

While in Vietnam, Lopez saw people he knew die, and there were times he felt disrespected when returning from the war. One old friend who was "sitting in the same bar stool" from before the war made a comment to Lopez along the lines of asking whether Lopez was a baby-killer. Lopez said he punched his friend after that comment.

"There was no on and off switch coming back from Vietnam," Lopez said. "I wasn't easy to get along with."

But the PTSD didn't register with Lopez at the time. He first learned about PTSD around 10 years ago when he joined a local group of veterans.

Lopez met his wife while he came back to America during a brief break in his military service. She has become his life support, he said. As he cried while recalling his experiences at the group breakfast, he said he wished she were there with him.

Symptoms and statistics

PTSD has been known by other names throughout history, such as "shell shock."

The condition is defined as a change or damage to the body's natural "fight-or-flight" response, which defends against or avoids danger, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. It develops after a terrifying ordeal that usually involves physical harm or the threat of physical harm, the NIMH said.

While military members exposed to war and combat are at risk for developing PTSD, it can happen with anyone who experienced a traumatic incident, according to the National Institutes of Health. Those

incidents can include violent crime, child abuse, serious accidents, bombings, or natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes, the NIH said. Not every traumatized person develops full-blown or even minor PTSD, the NIH said.

Specific rates vary by the era of service. About 15 out of every 100 Vietnam veterans were diagnosed with PTSD at the time of the most recent study, the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, which was done in the late 1980s, according to the National Center for PTSD.

Around 11 to 20 of every 100 veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom and about 12 out of every 100 Gulf War veterans have PTSD in a given year, the National Center for PTSD said.

Getting help

Emerald Coast Behavioral Hospital in Panama City is helping veterans and active-duty servicemembers deal with PTSD.

The issue is important since Bay County has a large veteran population, said ECBH CEO Tim Bedford.

Getting a diagnosis for PTSD can be tough for those from a military background. Some would rather have a physical disability, such as a lost limb, than deal with a mental disability, ECBH therapist Denise Folsom said.

"They think PTSD is weakness," Folsom said, who has a group session specifically for people who experienced military combat.

Those with PTSD come into treatment with anger, irritability and emotional issues, Folsom said. They also may deal with substance abuse and not initially acknowledge how they feel.

Folsom said PTSD patients may have feelings of shame and guilt and blame themselves for wartime casualties.

ECBH Addiction Services Program Manager Marvin Hughley said those with PTSD also exhibit hyper-vigilance and paranoia. They use coping skills to avoid or numb their feelings, Hughley said.

Hughley's role is to teach veterans relapse prevention skills. Hughley said more awareness of PTSD has come about in recent years because the military has backed soldiers, which resulted in less stigma.

"Back (during previous wars) it was, 'suck it up soldier,' " Bedford said. "We've learned from Vietnam and recent wars."

For years patients didn't want to tell anyone about what they were going through, but now PTSD is discussed more openly.

"The more we become knowledgeable about what PTSD is ... people will be more accepting of the treatment," Hughley said.

Pulled out the pack

Danny Joe Pauley is one veteran who can now talk openly about his experiences with PTSD and wants to help other veterans. He is a snowbird from West Virginia and was at the same veterans meeting as Lopez.

Pauley, who served with the Green Berets from 1968 to 1980, started getting treatment around 1993. He said he knew veterans who committed suicide or turned to drugs and alcohol to cope, but his faith has

been a source of strength.

"I'm still crying," he said as tears came to his eyes.

He said used to be embarrassed to cry. "Treatment helps a lot."

When Pauley was treated for PTSD and had the camaraderie that came with bonding with other veterans, he felt a weight lifted off his shoulders.

Pauley used the metaphor of the backpack he carried during his service when talking about PTSD. His pack weighed a lot when he carried it during his service. So does PTSD.

"It was like something was pulled out my pack," Pauley said of opening up. "I still have stuff back there. ... Right now I feel better about myself."

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