

# Returning Veterans:

## Recognizing and Healing Hidden Wounds

*By Jon Christensen*

American soldiers in Iraqi and Afghanistan are returning home with physical *and* emotional wounds. At *least* 10% of all returning veterans --- the actual number will likely be much higher -- are expected to experience significant symptoms of traumatic shock. And this disturbing trend is being anticipated even though the military *is already* expending considerable resources to identify potential emotional problems stemming from trauma on the battlefield.

The author of this article, a Vietnam veteran, addressed this issue at a recent trauma conference sponsored by local community groups, and the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. Participants were provided with an overview of current combat stressors. Today's experiences were compared with the lessons learned from past clinical experiences working with combat veterans. Clinically recognized signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other psychological consequences resulting from combat-related stress, were placed in a context of current and anticipated reactions among veterans. Suggestions were offered for identification, intervention, referral, and direct assistance to the individuals and their families.

The military and the Veterans Administration -- through their 77 medical centers and 206 vet center programs -- are making significant efforts to address this problem, but they are hampered by funding limitations. Although the House and Senate approved a budget that provides \$990 million more than the Administration offered, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the largest veteran group in the country, states that the increase is still \$2.5 billion short of what it is needed. Helping individual veterans with medical problems including psychological/emotional readjustment, requires highly skilled, trained, and experienced providers within a system already overburdened with existing needs. \*

To date, there have been over 483,000 National Guard and Reserve troops called to active duty since 9/11/2001. As if the emotional issues related to being separated from loved ones aren't enough to deal with, many troops and their families are also dealing with significant financial matters. For example, in an unstable economy, veterans returning to the civilian workforce may find their position -- or even their previous employer -- downsized or eliminated. As a result, in the past three years more than 4,400 complaints have been filed with the Labor Department regarding employment concerns. Complaints have risen by 62% since 9/11, and the Labor Department has collected \$3.2 million in back wages and benefits. In fact, an anonymous donor in California gave \$1.6 million to a group that provides relief to financially-strapped military families.

From an EAP perspective, the information presented in this article will hopefully provide significant insight in predicting some of the challenges that employees will face, if they're not dealing with these issues already. Since we are providers of services to employers, employees and their families, this information, limited as it is, should not fall on deaf ears. Veterans are returning home with needs and expectations that their country will have difficulty addressing. For one thing, they will be returning to their jobs, if they still exist, trying to fit back in. Many will do just that. They are proud of their service and the opportunities they had. They'll pick up the pieces and move on, or "continue the mission" in military speak.

However, many other veterans will *appear* to readjust, when in fact their internal turmoil won't match their outside façade. And for still others -- the 10% or more of veterans mentioned as in need of immediate assistance -- may not know how to ask, or what to ask for. The symptoms they are experiencing can be frightening and overwhelming for them, and for their families.

What can Employee Assistance professionals do? Be aware. Learn what you can about

the experiences that returning employees have dealt with - not the media or political hype. Prepare your organization's response through education and awareness sessions. Work with supervisors and work groups on re-entry and re-adjustment (what happens after the parades and picnics are over) into the workforce. For employees currently deployed, offer help and support to their families as they have also "served" indirectly. Acquaint yourself with community and other resources — local veteran organizations, county veteran service officers, the federal VA and especially local vet center programs. Finally, Join the Tri-Care Network's Operation Comfort (818-762-6666), and watch for local developments in your community.

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