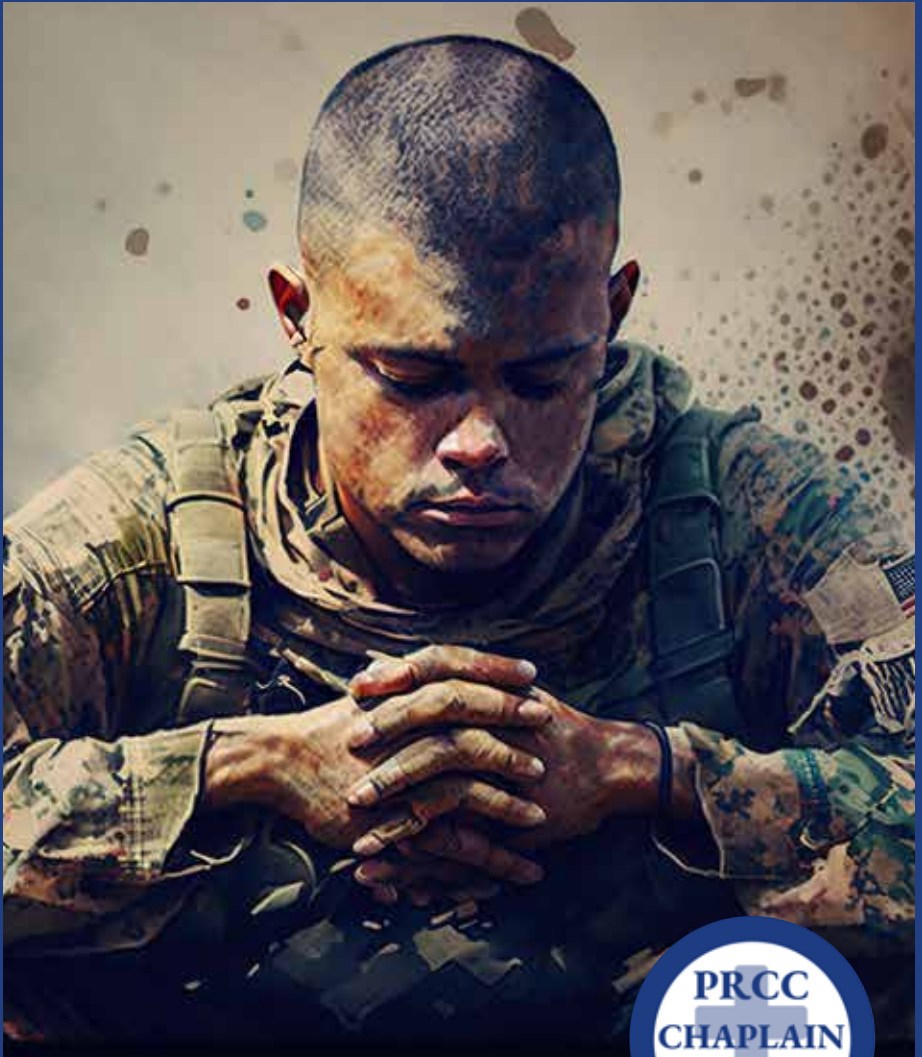


PTSD from War



*The Ever Real, Ever Present,
Ever Controlling Impact of Combat*

and the need for light to shine in the darkness

The military is a culture unlike any other. It brings challenges, temptations, and struggles that are unique to its mission. Uncovering what these issues are and addressing them is vital for churches and organizations that are connected to those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces.

To assist civilian ministry in this effort, the Presbyterian & Reformed Chaplain Commission (PRCC) offers resources to make the gospel relevant and accessible to military life. What we provide is based on the beliefs (a) that overcoming any challenge in life begins by turning to Christ, and (b) that apart from the enlightenment of the Word and the regenerative work of the Spirit a person will not find their greatest purpose, peace of mind or recovery from sin or afflictions. With this vision, we hope this booklet will prove enlightening in understanding issues confronting military members while pointing to how God can enter and bring hope. Please give your feedback on what we offer or should consider offering as we are open to how we can better refine this ministry and make a greater impact in the kingdom of God.

This booklet provides an overview on the topic of PTSD from War. It begins by giving a stark picture of how someone with PTSD views the world, and afterwards, provides suggestions to Veterans and Churches regarding how to deal with the challenges that PTSD brings.

We are grateful to Dr. Dwight Horn for his authorship of this booklet. It is our hope this will be beneficial to you and your congregation.

Dr. James R. Carter

Executive Director & Endorser, PRCC

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PTSD from WAR:

The Ever Real,
Ever Present, and
Ever Controlling
Impact of Combat

When the enemy tries to kill you, the memory of that moment does not go away. The bullet as it zips past, the deafening explosion of an I.E.D. or mortar round, the guttural screams of a combatant who charges at you with lethality will forever become a part of you. When these experiences lead to injury or result in the death of those by your side, the trauma can be relentless and haunting.

What is needed most after intense combat is time away to deal with the losses, fears, memories, and impact of being in the situation. That, however, is impossible. The mission grinds forward, and so must you. Every second of every day presses in, ticking by with panic, anxiety, adrenaline-filled anticipation, grief, rage, resentment, fear of death, and questions of why pulsating in your brain.

Once you return home with these scars of battle, no matter how you try to bury or silence the emotions and the moments you most want to forget from that time, nothing works. The feelings rise in your body and the memories play endlessly in your mind. It makes you crazy. You would do anything to quiet the insanity, and try. But you are forced into another day, doomed to live it again. That is PTSD from war.

Chris Reiss enlisted in the army out of a sense of duty and desire for adventure.^[1] That brought him into Kandahar, Afghanistan, where the fighting with the Taliban was intense. It did not take long before he changed. Having his buddies blown up and killed by his side and being targeted himself with direct fire by the enemy forced a different view of life upon him.

Those changes became apparent when he came home. It was not long before he felt that he was better off living a nomadic life. The constant irritability, depression, and inability to relate to others, including his wife, made isolation the way to cope. As he said: "I felt I would be better off alone. I was doing more harm to people close to me, being near them."

Chris did try to get help but when he refused to take the prescribed cocktail of some twenty drugs for his diagnosed condition of PTSD, he was told that his treatment was over. From there, he chose to have a meagre existence on the fringes of society. Pain medication, little food, and an apathetic will to survive became his life.

"I felt I would be better off alone. I was doing more harm to people close to me, being near them."

It was his wife, or ex-wife now that he was divorced, whose love rescued Chris. She found him and got him into treatment. It was a process, but Chris was able to rebuild his life. His goal became to become a social worker and assist other veterans going through the same struggles. It became his sole purpose: "My happy ending would be where I am in a position to help combat veterans possibly

not go down some of the paths I went down when I came home. I want them to know that they are not alone.”

How many veterans do feel alone, isolated, miserable, and have no way as they see it to escape? Bridging the gap between the resources available to support them and helping those on the outside to figure out how to get inside the problem and help is challenging. It is another casualty of war.

2

Defining the Problem

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) begins as the name suggests with an event that alarmingly destroys one’s core sense of security and goodness. A person faces death, extreme violence, physical or mental destruction, or witnesses these kinds of horrors. Shock, utter fear, grievous loss, helplessness, incomprehensible evil, apathy, fatigue, inability to focus, regret, inconsolable grief, and/or anger are some things that impact one’s emotional and mental states from that point on. The world and one’s view of it is changed in an instant.



For Chris Reiss, it was the continuous exposure of the violence, the loss that comes from war and his inability to resolve those thoughts and emotions that followed which brought on his PTSD. The adage, “time has a way of healing,” does not work with this condition. Dreams, memories, and flashbacks recreate the initial drama endlessly. Insomnia, toxic emotional states, inability to trust or relate to others, loss of interest in people and life, and overreactions to trivialities bring on depressive and dark thoughts that death is better than the pain of living.

A person in this place tries to get help, but it is an arduous journey. One usually ends up believing that counselors, friends, and family simply do not and/or cannot understand. There is fear too that others would be horrified to know the truth and could not be trusted with it. It is better to contain one’s nightmare and be alone, doing whatever it takes to repress and silence the pain. Drugs, alcohol, erratic or illicit behavior often become one’s best companion as hopelessness settles in. At this point, without someone willing to intervene, the future is bleak.

3

Why Healing PTSD can be Elusive

What causes PTSD is difficult to discern. There is not one contributing factor that if resolved would bring healing. It sometimes gets confused as well with Moral Injury. PTSD begins because of bodily trauma whereas moral injury comes from a perceived and/or unresolved violation of one’s conviction about what is ethically right. Since both can happen simultaneously, they can become fixed together and produce similar impact. Sorting it out and getting to the actual factors which underlie a person’s PTSD, thusly, can be challenging. Let us consider a few of the major issues involved:

a. Physiology of PTSD

John Thuesen, a former Marine who was diagnosed with PTSD from a combat tour in Iraq, killed his ex-girlfriend and her brother.^[2] He was sentenced to death for the murders, but questions were and are raised about the justice of this: should PTSD be considered a mitigating factor in sentencing? “Dr. Stephen Xenakis, a retired general and an Army psychiatrist for 28 years, has served as an expert witness in a number of veterans’ trials and says most of the men who’ve committed these crimes have had multiple problems—everything from traumatic brain injuries and depression to concussive symptoms and substance abuse—that can ‘lead to a situation and a state of mind where they commit these horrendous offenses’”^[3] His point is that war can change a person and negatively impact behavior. It does not excuse criminality but shows the profound effect that can come from trauma.^[4]

This impact begins in the brain. It is constantly working to meet external conditions and threats. It does this through sensory data as received by the five senses. That information gets fed into parts of the brain that allow for action to be taken to ensure safety and health.

For instance, when danger is perceived—a person aims a gun at you—a part of the brain called the limbic system (the emotional control center) initiates the process of releasing cortisol, norepinephrine, and adrenaline. This instantly causes the body to shut off unneeded systems and empower response capabilities to address threats. Digestion is halted; glucose for quick energy is released; the heart beats rapidly; the muscles tense; pupils dilate; body temperature rises; rapid breathing begins; and other instant reactions throughout the body occur to either fight or flee the danger. One jumps into action or freezes without thinking about it.

Almost simultaneously, the sensory information that started this impulsive reaction is being evaluated by the cognitive parts of the brain to determine what the threat is and how best to react. It is a two-step process. One goes from that quick first response as driven by the limbic center to a newly formulated response based on reasoning. With this more sophisticated determination, a person might calm down or ramp up the reaction, depending on if the initial threat response was deemed appropriate.

In war, where danger abounds because I.E.D.s, enemy fire, and attacks arise unexpectedly, one is endlessly on alert for anything that might bring serious injury or death. What this means to the person is that the brain and body are constantly going through this process of ramping up and down emotionally and physically, depending on how real a threat appears in the moment. It is like having a loud siren jolting one into action, only to be repeated as soon as the person calms down. Over a short time, these incessant and intense experiences cause the brain to change, making a person hyperresponsive, hypervigilant, anxious, irritated, angry, and restless. It has become a new physiological norm. What is called an allostatic shift takes place where new set points in the brain are created because this kind of “always in emergency” mode seems normal.^[5]





I will never forget the face of a raging Marine who lost it with road rage in California. His car was lightly bumped in traffic but that was enough for him to get out of his car, go to this other car window and become apoplectic, banging on the other car, and yelling invectives and deadly threats to the driver. The video of this was captured and splashed on the news, causing many to defame the Marine and the Marine Corps.^[6]

What was missed by most in the news story was a picture showing this Marine in his dress uniform. He was wearing a purple heart from his time in Iraq. Here was a man whose poor behavior in that moment might well be explained from the trauma he underwent while putting his life on the line for his country. It shows that when the trauma of facing death becomes internalized, it can become one's every response to trauma. This explanation would not make the Marine's actions right, but it should make us realize that when we send people to war to protect us, there is a cost to that person.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD: "In people with PTSD, their response to extreme threat can become 'stuck.' This may lead to responding to all stress in survival mode. If you have PTSD, you may be more likely to react to any stress with 'full activation.' You may react as if your life or self were threatened."^[7]

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The reasoning behind this is easy to understand. The brain’s response centers not only cause a person to react, they record the information associated with trauma so that the next time this kind of data is registered in the brain, a person moves quicker, with more precision and with heightened responsiveness to the threat.^[8] It is a part of saving one’s life.

Yet, here is where the problem can arise once a veteran returns home from war. Say that a cat meows next to the ear of a veteran while he is watching T.V. in the comforts of his home. This, of course, is not a big deal, except as it so happens, this exact sound was a part of war trauma in that a cat meowed right before an I.E.D. exploded. Thus, with this sound, seemingly insignificant or possibly endearing to most, the veteran might well rocket off the couch and either attack the threat or run away, leaving anyone else in the room shocked and utterly confused. That is the impact of trauma to the brain. The one sound, “meow,” triggered a flashback, lighting up that horrific memory and returning the veteran to that moment of terror.^[9] “It might be something seen, heard, tasted, or smelled that serves as the reminder and sets the flashback in motion. It can just as easily be a sensation arising from inside the body. Sensory messages from muscles and connective tissue that remember a particular position, action or intention can be the source of a trigger.”^[10] Whatever it is, that one detail becomes enough when sparked to set a veteran into a major response of fight or flight.

You should be aware too that every sensory detail from that event—from sight, to smell, to taste, to sound, to touch—is recorded, and all of it can do the same thing once triggered. This causes some veterans to withdraw from public life to avoid these kinds of supercharged and highly embarrassing situations.

One veteran with PTSD, Kyle Prellberg, describes his experience this way: “Within a year of leaving active duty, I started to notice when I would get angry. It wouldn’t go away. The most innocuous thing can happen and that will set you off. I had to direct it toward something, so walls, doors, anything that I could put my fist through and hopefully break, until you do it and all you feel is regret.”^[1]

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Physiologically, a person can return from war and as family and friends will say, “this is not the same person.” In truth, he/she is not. Structures in the brain have metamorphosized in terms of how they respond to life.^[2]

b. Psychology of PTSD

The psychology of PTSD is about horrific thoughts that circle about in the mind like speckles of glitter in a snow globe when agitated. The cascading memories and associated emotions are dark and disruptive, negatively controlling how one views life and leading often to judgements of worthlessness and self-incrimination. How much do these thoughts color one’s view of the world?



Bessel van der Kolk speaks about this in his best-selling book *The Body Keeps the Score*. He relates an experiment where he shows veterans random and ambiguous inkblots.^[13]

While anything could come to mind for this group, what they see are horrific and macabre images of death that relate to distant war experiences. It is a picture of how the mind manipulates one's view of reality, captivating a person's focus to the point that what is haunting from the past will be consuming in the present because it is always there.

Even more insidious is that these provocative memories once triggered can be recreated to the point that they become just like the original moment of trauma. The sounds of screams, the images of blood and guts, and the smells can return in the present.^[14] Further, a veteran can be entirely disassociated from the current state of reality, having **“distortions in perceptions about the self or the environment.”**^[15] When in this state, the person can relive their moment of trauma, believing that what they are perceiving in the present is taking place in that traumatic event from the past. One veteran in his flashback attacked and shot at his brother-in-law, certain all the while that he was attacking enemy forces in war.^[16] It is a haunting reminder of how **“the body keeps the score.”**

How does one carry on a normal life like this? The answer for those with PTSD is that they do not. They try their best to exist and find ways to avoid, numb, forget, distance, withdraw, and escape their painful past. They want to control their thoughts and mind. Yet, healing the scars and overcoming the trauma seemingly remains impossible.

It does not take long for many of these veterans to lose their ability to function well. Hence, homelessness, poverty, and suicide become the result of military service post war for an alarming number of those with PTSD.^[17] As one study shows: ***“Military veterans are at higher risk for poor health outcomes due to the myriad of physical and mental health problems that may occur during or after deployment to one or more military combat operations.”***^[18]

Read carefully to get a sense of what it is like to deal with the mental trauma associated with PTSD. One veteran offers these words under the title: “Want to Sleep but can’t. Flashbacks are driving me insane.” He says, “I need them to just [curse word] Stop. Ugghhhh. I want to slam my head against the wall to make it all shut up. I don't want it. I don't [curse word] want this in my head. Make it [curse word] stop. I want to scream. [Curse word] this. [Curse word] all the [curse word] who decided that my body was theirs to use. This is MY [curse word] BODY. Mine. Why the [curse word] are they allowed into my brain?? Why??? I want to sleep so it can stop. But I can't because it's all too loud. I wish I could dissociate and forget it all but I can't. I'm stuck in this [curse word] torture and I HATE IT.”^[19]

How harsh life can be for those who wanted nothing other than to serve their nation proudly.

c. The Spirituality of PTSD

“Traumatic distress has been reported to be associated with spiritual alienation, which is defined as a separation from God, the transcendent, or the divine.”^[20] It is connected to one’s expectation of the higher power. God is supposed to be a loving and omnipotent God, but if so, how could such a God allow for suffering to occur? The answer must be that God does not exist.

“In a 2004 study of approximately 1,400 Vietnam veterans, almost 90 percent Christian, researchers at Yale found that nearly one-third said the war had shaken their faith in God and that their religion no longer provided comfort for them. ...The trauma of war seems to be especially acute for men and women whose faith in a benevolent God is challenged by the carnage they have witnessed.”^[21]

This very truth confronted one Army Chaplain, Roger Benimoff.^[22] He was angry, jittery, and found it hard to get through a day once he returned from Iraq. He ended up in a psychiatric ward. He wondered where God was in all that he endured. He says about his experience, ***“I couldn’t stand to hear that phrase any longer—‘God was watching over me. He wasn’t watching over the good men I knew in Iraq. Faith was the center of my life yet it failed to explain why I came home and those soldiers did not.’”***

War confronts a person at the core of their being. It can easily create an existential crisis where every aspect of one’s sense of truth is challenged. The deepest and most profound element of this will be centered on religious beliefs. This is what often grounds

and holds together a person's convictions about meaning, values and purpose. When a crisis disturbs one at this level, the anchor of the soul can become dislodged and leave a person floating in a sea of doubt. It will put a person on the brink of insanity where nothing or no one brings hope or deliverance from the pain. Without healing, living will become less desirable than the prospect of death.

4

The Bible and PTSD

We see how complex PTSD is. Yet, with God, overcoming this struggle is possible and there are some practical steps that should be taken both by those suffering and by churches as they reach out to those in crisis.

a. For Veterans with PTSD:

1. As you process the experience of war, be mindful that injustice in this world is not a result of God's doing (II Thes 1:6-7). God desired for mankind to live forever in holiness and goodness, maintaining the perfect order of creation in themselves, with all things created, and with Him. Yet, as we know, to rebel against God and choose sin was preferred in the Garden of Eden and it still drives our desires today (Psalm 51; Rom 3:10-18, 5:12ff). God could stop this desecration now, as He could have back then, by destroying creation. Instead, He offers His Son, Jesus, to restore mankind and make us whole (Rom 8:1ff). In His forbearance, God continues on this path, desiring that we seek His redemption (Rom 3:21-26) and righteousness (Rom 6). One day, this will end. God will bring the final judgment (Rev 20:11-15) and right all wrongs through true justice (Isa 13:9-11). Until that time, let us rejoice that we can bring light into darkness (Matt 5:14-16), restoring goodness through love (Prov 10:12).

2. Resist judging God as you struggle. People often determine “in their own minds” who God should be and what He should do. They develop false beliefs and notions of God. When these expectations fail, they get frustrated with God as if it is His fault. It becomes an excuse for them to assail or turn from God. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day do that to Him, failing to see past their own understandings of God (Matthew 23; II Tim 3:1-9; Rom 1:18-23, 10:1-4).



What is never considered by these people is that the real problem is not with God, but with the false idol they have created in place of God. Their god is one designed to bring about their worldly kingdom, a god to secure personal hopes and dreams. Thankfully, God does not conform to these sinful images. He is God. He must be accepted for who He is (Psalm 115:1-8), and ironically, once we come to this place, when we are humbled in His majesty, we uncover how wonderful, holy, and right His ways truly are (Psalm 145). We see our own corruption and foolishness and desire nothing more than to repent and be sanctified in the work of the Spirit (Rom 6-7).

The luminaries of the Bible, those recorded in Hebrews 11, showed this kind of true belief in the Almighty. For them, faith in God maintained its vibrancy and certainty not just when blessings came their way, but equally as much through hardship, loss, physical harm, or death. It was the same faith we saw with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When these men faced certain death by

King Nebuchadnezzar as they were about to be thrown into a fiery furnace because they refused to worship a golden statue, they boldly proclaimed about the God they worshipped: ***“Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”***^[23]

That is faith in the true and living God. It is a faith that is not created as a way to seek happiness, but one that is founded in the work of the Holy Spirit, and which brings an unbounded belief ***“that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”***^[24] That kind of faith inspires a belief that no amount of suffering or the prospect of death can overturn (Phil 3:7-14).

When you are tempted to reject God because you have built a false idol, repent. Ask God to reveal Himself as He truly is, not as you want Him to be. Remember the lesson of Job when he challenges the fairness and wisdom of God. He finds out that at the end of his reasoning ability lies foolishness. It is one which is exposed instantly in the presence of God: ***“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding.”***^[25]

Like Job we must realize how myopic it is to pretend that we should orchestrate the matters of the universe and determine what is truly right and good. The complexities of reality lie infinitely beyond the greatest minds of all time. Why would we ever pretend to judge God in any matter?

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things

not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.”^[26]

3. Remember, your identity is not “that person with PTSD.” You are a child of God (I Jn 3:1). You are known directly by the Father (I Cor 8:3), Jesus Himself intercedes on your behalf (Rom 8:34), and the Holy Spirit uplifts and prays for you in your weakness (Rom 8:26). You are entrusted to be an ambassador for Jesus (II Cor 5:20). Therefore, always define your role by the honorable status you hold and realize that nothing else determines who you are or limits the noble calling God has for you (Rom 8:31-39).

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.”

4. Be patient in your struggles to deal with PTSD and do not get discouraged. Intrusive and upsetting memories, volatile emotional states, and avoidance of people and public events are common symptoms that plague those who have experienced extreme trauma. These are natural responses to unnatural occurrences. Do not think you are weak or abnormal because you deal with these things. Rather, learn through the suffering to surrender to God (James 5:10-11). Trust and rely on His grace, finding sufficiency in Him like Paul with his thorn in the flesh (II Corinthians 12:7-12). Focus on God and let go of your failures, accepting them only as opportunities to grow in God’s mercy: “We glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to

shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."^[27]

5. The symptoms of PTSD might often cause you to offend others, creating even more anguish. Yet, remember in these times that God has already forgiven you for your sins. That is what Christ did for you (Rom 5:1, 8:1). When you fail, therefore, confess those sins to God, and then, seek forgiveness from those you might have hurt (I Jn 1:9, Eph 4:32). After that, move forward in service to God and others.

6. Focus your mind so that negative thinking or emotions do not overtake you. You are able to direct your thoughts to things that build your faith and strengthen your resolve to pursue God and His will for you (Rom 12:1-2). It will be challenging but the more you practice meditation and memorization of scripture, the better your mindset will be (Psalm 119). Whenever negativity controls your mind, redirect it by going to scripture.

7. Develop an Operations Order for overcoming PTSD. Military members know well that every successful mission is only executed after a detailed plan has been constructed, one that addresses the central lines of effort to overcome the enemy. You should do the same. You are in a battle against sin (Rom 7:14ff). Satan is there to ensure you fail (I Pet 5:8). Yet, your victory is assured with Christ (John 16:33). What you need to do, therefore, is find your purpose in Christ and the pathway to a victorious life in God's Kingdom.

To assist you with this, find a wise leader in the church who can guide you, and offer spiritual wisdom. Seek out a licensed counselor and/or medical practitioner who can help address the physical issues involved. Together with these professionals by your side,

develop the battle plan for each day as you move to your future goals. Paul says that we should prepare a well-conceived plan by thinking in advance about how to avoid sin (Rom 13:12-14; Eph 4:6:11ff). Take small steps forward in this process, celebrate every victory, and watch God lead you toward His ultimate purpose for your life.

8. Get established in a support group and find a counselor or mentor. The Bible makes clear that two are better than one, making the comparison that a cord with many strands is stronger (Eph 4:9-12). We find strength in others as they listen, challenge, pray, serve, guide, and care for us. Do not go through your struggles alone. Find “Battle Buddies.” Allow people to be by your side to assist when needed. There are many resources to support you in this. Some can be found at military facilities, on websites, by phone (dial 988 or text 838255) and through local churches. Be persistent until you find that perfect avenue to get the help needed.

9. Practice Self-Care. Avoid behaviors that destroy your body and mind (alcoholism, drugs, over-eating, or a poor diet). Find a form of exercise that you truly enjoy and make it a part of your daily routine (running, biking, palates, weightlifting, fitness training...). It is about disciplining your body so that nothing corrupts your service to God (1 Cor. 9:24–27).



The secret to overcoming PTSD comes when we surrender our expectations and desires to God and seek His provisions to live daily for Him. This is where we enter a divine space, embracing the power of the Holy Spirit to intercede and strengthen us in the battle against the flesh (Romans 8:26-28). Life, in this transformative process, becomes focused on love for others, which is the very embodiment of God's presence. It is walking as Jesus did, dying to self out of the sufficiency that God provides to bring life to others. This is how Jesus destroyed Satan and overcame the temptations of the flesh, and it is how we can do the same (I Corinthians 10:13).



b. For Churches serving Veterans with PTSD:

1. The church and what it provides through worship is essential to all in need of grace. It is that place to be in the presence of God (Matt 18:20; I Cor 3:16-17), to hear the word proclaimed (I Cor 2:1-5), to partake in the sacraments (I Cor 11:23ff), to gain from the fellowship of believers (Gal 6:9-10), to be loved and held accountable for faith (Gal 6:1-2), and as grace and recovery allow to be involved in the missional calling of the church to move out from worship into the world to serve and be a witness of the gospel (Matt 28:16ff). These are all essential ways that God will bring new life and restore brokenness to any in need, and the church is the center of that

ministry. It is the healing community for the suffering, the means by which grace, holiness, compassion, and goodness flow.

2. Ministry to those with PTSD begins with love. That is the hardest thing to offer one in struggle. The temptation is to put ourselves in the place of God and effect the healing. But God must bring this change (John 1:12-13; Psalm 62). Our role is to provide unconditional care, support, compassion, prayer, and service to the person with PTSD, living out our faith and testimony while letting go of our agendas and allowing God to work (Phil 2:1-4; John 13:34-35). This is what has the potential to bring healing.

3. Build a network of services that support practical needs for veterans (Acts 2:44-45). When leaving the military and struggling through PTSD, it is easy to lose control of finances. “Veterans are 50% more likely to become homeless than other Americans due to poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing.”^[28]

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Make it a mission of the church to connect veteran needs with gifts and services. To offer support without attending to a veteran’s basic needs is not addressing what often prevents healing from taking place.

4. Connect veterans to other veterans. While going through PTSD, there is a temptation for one to build walls and struggles. What gets through this the quickest is another veteran, one who has served in the military and has experienced the challenges of this vocation. If no one in the congregation fits this profile, reach out to

other churches or Veteran Affairs communities. To build a connection is critical as a means to process the trauma.

5. Make available Christian-centered materials that allow a person to explore the topic of PTSD and uncover ways to find healing.

6. Give training that addresses trauma. Look at all sides of this issue and make clear what the signs and symptoms are for PTSD. Give stories of differing ways that people encounter trauma and create an atmosphere of trust and love. This will allow participants to share issues when they are ready.



7. Preach on issues that prepare the congregation to understand and prepare for war. Confrontation with other nations is inevitable and churches must teach their people how to respond (II Tim 4:1-5). How does the church view war and killing (Eccl 3:8)? Do people have any sense of what Just War is or what justice is as an extension of God (Rom 13:1-7)? In what ways are all responsible to act when their nation is at war? Allow these kinds of messages to be given so that congregants can engage on the topics associated with war.

8. Remember that PTSD has two sides. One is about the person who has endured trauma. The other is about those close to this person who are impacted by seeing loved ones suffer.

This is called vicarious trauma. It happens to caregivers as they live with the issues that a loved one is enduring. Look to see not just how a veteran is doing, but their family and friends too.

9. For all who reach out to those with PTSD, be mindful that giving love and service does not mean caregivers should be subject to abuse. Work with church leaders and professional mental health experts to establish healthy and productive boundaries in these relationships. Ultimately, be at peace knowing that God can accomplish His purposes with or without you.

The church has responsibility to be the light and salt, teaching and preparing those who come through the doors on issues relevant to faith (Matt 5:13-14). War and what it means to those who serve and those who benefit from that service should be a major focus. The military Service Chiefs are all revamping their respective services for what they see as an inevitable reality, conflict with a peer competitor. Churches too must engage with what is going on in our world and provide spiritual perspective when it comes to war.

5

Conclusion

Nick Lee went to war several times, having been in both the Army and Marine Corps. As he recalled, ***“I had seen the worst of the worst. ...I had seen so much death and so much nastiness in third world countries, I didn’t see God as a positive light in my life. I just never thought of any type of God who would allow something so horrific to happen.”***^[29]

Coming home for Nick was overwhelming. The violence and carnage of his experiences changed him. He was always on alert,

agitated, and easily angered. Those around Nick suffered through this, confronting him at times by saying, **“Look, Dude, you're not right. Something's wrong here. No one acts like that.”**^[30] Nick ignored the comments and believed that he was doing well. He refused to accept he had problems, even when his marriage fell apart.

God did have mercy on Nick despite his hardness of heart through his then ex-wife, Fresca. She was a Christian and constantly prayed for Nick after their divorce. Her prayers were powerful. Once the marriage ended, Nick attempted to kill himself. Yet, the gun he was using inexplicably did not fire. It was a true miracle.

The next miracle was that at the very moment when his gun did not go off, Nick said he felt like God was speaking directly to him. That instantly humbled and convicted Nick, causing him to seek a new life: **“I just repented of everything I had done, all I could think of at that moment. I was harboring all this hate for so long and frustration and-and I was just angry. And it was just like wow, just went away.”**^[31] Nick gave his life to Jesus at that moment.



The next time Fresca saw her ex-husband, she said he was a changed person. He was totally different; God healed him of all he suffered. Then, as Fresca and Nick reconnected, growing in faith together, they decided to get remarried, and they joined a church.

God powerfully restored Nick through the patient love of a spouse. He can use all of us to do the same for those with whom we come in contact. Begin the process of reaching out to veterans. You might be their last hope. As a church, prepare and support your people to understand war and the impact of it. If we as a nation are going to send people to war, we owe it to those who serve to share the gospel in a way that will equip them and protect them from mental and spiritual harm.

About the Author

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The material is written by Dwight Horn. He retired in February of 2023 from service in the Navy as a Chaplain (CAPT, CHC, USN, Ret.). His advanced education includes a D.Min, M.Div., M.A., and ThM. He works for the Presbyterian and Reformed Chaplain Commission (PRCC) for Ministry to Veterans. Dwight has authored articles and a book on war, [Emasculating Warriors: A Nation at War with its Warriors](#) (ISBN: 179298443X).

Resources to Explore on PTSD

Websites:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, PTSD: National Center for PTSD, <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>.

Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, PTSD, <https://worship.calvin.edu/> (then type in the search box PTSD and some great information is available, including the link to – Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Veterans Resource Guide).

Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC; French: Anciens Combattants Canada), a department within the Government of Canada with responsibility for war veterans, has an excellent paper that goes through PTSD and provides great clarity on many facets associated with this condition: https://www.veterans.gc.ca/pdf/mental-health/ptsd_warstress_e.pdf

Rich Morin, “The Difficult Transition from Military to Civilian Life”, <https://www.pe-wresearch.org/social-trends/2011/12/08/the-difficult-transition-from-military-to-civilian-life/>.

Books:

“Coming Home”: A Guide for Spouses of Service Members Returning from Mobilization/Deployment. (Department of the Army, Office of the Chief of Chaplains, 2700 Army Pentagon, Washington DC 20310-2700).

Courage After Fire: Coping Strategies for Troops Returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and their Families, by Keith Armstrong, Suzanne Best, and Paula Domenici (Ulysses Press, 2005).

Families Under Fire, ed., R. Blaine Everson and Charles Figley, (Routledge, 2011).

Living and Surviving in Harm’s Way, ed. Sharon Morgillo Freeman, Bret Moore, and Arthur Freeman (Routledge, 2009).

Resilient Warriors, Robert Dees, (Creative Team Publishing, (2011).

War Trauma: Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam to Iraq, by Raymond Monsour Scurfield (Algora Publishing, 2006).

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Endnotes

^[1] The following offers a summation with a few quotes from a podcast called "This is War". Cf., Anthony Russo, This is War Personal Journals, 34 Chris Reiss, Incongruity Media, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/34-riess/id1346963040?i=1000442801161>, (2017).

^[2] A J Vincens, "An Ex-Marine Killed Two People in Cold Blood. Should His PTSD Keep Him From Death Row?", Mother Jones, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/05/veterans-death-row-ptsd-categorical-exemption/>, (May 2, 2016).

^[3] Ibid.

^[4] "Appellate courts have found criminal defenses based on PTSD to be viable and compelling when a clear and direct connection between the defendant's PTSD symptoms and the criminal incident was found by the expert. The PTSD phenomena that appellate courts have found to be most relevant to criminal defenses include dissociations, hyperarousal symptoms, hypervigilance symptoms, and the overestimation of danger." Omri Berger, Dale E. McNeil, and Rene e L. Binder, "PTSD as a Criminal Defense: A Review of Case Law", Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law Online December 2012, 40 (4) 509-521, <https://jaapl.org/content/40/4/509#:~:text=in%20this%20article%2C%20we%20review%20United%20States%20criminal,precedents%20for%20courts%20to%20follow%20in%20subsequent%20cases>, (June 2023).

^[5] "Allostasis, or stability through change that depends on predicting future needs and conditions, emphasizes our ability to anticipate and adapt to diverse environmental forces to

balance internal needs and external demands. ...The brain is continuously evaluating our internal and external environments based on previous experience, predicting what is likely to occur, and then determining the best course of action based upon this available data. Allostasis, therefore, is about adapting to changing internal and external environments with the goal of stability even when faced with uncertain circumstances, balancing internal parameters essential for life with the changing world around us." Patrick R. Steffen, Dawson Hedges, and Rebekka Matheson, "The Brain Is Adaptive Not Triune: How the Brain Responds to Threat, Challenge, and Change." *Frontiers in psychiatry* vol. 13 802606. 1 Apr. 2022, doi:10.3389/f-psyt.2022.802606. Also, Valery Krupnik, "Trauma or Drama: A Predictive Processing Perspective on the Continuum of Stress", *Front. Psychol.*, 30 June 2020, Sec. Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, Volume 11 - 2020 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01248>, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01248/full#:~:text=In%20case%20of%20failure%20to%20return%20to%20its,suboptimal%2C%20homeostatic%20state%20that%20can%20lead%20to%20pathology>

^[6] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNwTzaKd44U>.

^[7]VA » Health Care » PTSD: National Center for PTSD » Understand » Related Problems » Anger and Trauma, "Anger and Trauma", PTSD: National Center for PTSD, <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/anger.asp>, (1 June, 2023).

^[8]"Brain areas implicated in the stress response include the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex. Traumatic stress can be associated with lasting changes in these brain areas." Douglas Bremner, "Traumatic stress: effects on the brain." *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience* vol. 8,4 (2006): 445-61, doi:10.31887/DCNS.2006.8.4/jbremner.

^[9]"Flashbacks almost always include the emotional and sensory aspects of the traumatic experience; that is why they are so disturbing. This implies that the amygdala is part and parcel of the flashback process. At the same time, it appears that the contextual features typical of hippocampal processing are absent, which would be consistent with theories indicating hippocampal suppression during trauma and trauma recall." Babatte Rothschild, *The Body Remembers*, New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 70.

^[10]*Ibid.*, p. 45.

^[11]Kyle Prellberg, "You deny, deny, deny, until it becomes untenable: A Soldier's struggle with PTSD", CNN, video, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2023/05/27/veteran-bene-fits-ptsd-resources-life-after-orig-ms-kj.cnn>, (June 2023).

^[12]"Studies using magnetic resonance imaging scans have shown that there is decreased volume of the hippocampus, left amygdala, and anterior cingulate cortex in patients with PTSD compared with matched controls. Other reports have demonstrated increased central norepinephrine levels with down-regulated central adrenergic receptors, chronically decreased glucocorticoid levels with up-regulation of their receptors (possibly accounting for the anecdotal finding that there are more autoimmune diseases in these patients), and hemispheric lateralization in which there is a relative failure of left hemispheric function (possibly accounting for confusion related to time sequence of traumatic events)." Jitender Sareen, "Posttraumatic stress disorder in adults: Epidemiology, pathophysiology, clinical manifestations, course, assessment, and diagnosis", Wolters Kluwer, UpToDate, <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-in-adults-epidemiology-pathophysiology-clinical-manifestations-course-assessment-and-diagnosis/print>, (June 2023).

^[13]Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2015), Chapter 1.

^[14]"One of the difficulties of PTSD is the phenomenon of flashbacks, which involve highly disturbing replays of implicit sensory memories of traumatic events sometimes with explicit recall, sometimes without. The sensations that accompany them are so intense that the suffering individual is unable to distinguish the current reality from the past. It feels like it is

happening now." Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers*, (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), p.45. sometimes without. The sensations that accompany them are so intense that the suffering individual is unable to distinguish the current reality from the past. It feels like it is happening now." Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers*, (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 45.

^[15] Eve B Carlson, Constance Dalenberg, and Elizabeth A McDade-Montez, "Dissociation in posttraumatic stress disorder part I: Definitions and review of research", *Psychological Trauma Theory Research Practice and Policy* 4(5):479-489, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232549457_Dissociation_in_posttraumatic_stress_disorder_part_I_Definitions_and_review_of_research, (September 2012).

^[16] Omri Berger, Dale E. McNeil, and Rene e L. Binder, "PTSD as a Criminal Defense:A Review of Case Law, *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law* 40:509–21, 2012, [https://www.academia.edu/32011294/PTSD-as-a-Criminal-Defense-A-Review-of-Case-Law](https://www.academia.edu/32011294/PTSD_as_a_Criminal_Defense_A_Review_of_Case_Law), (1 July, 2023).

^[17] "Veterans who tested positive for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were associated with a 58% higher risk of suicide right after screening compared to vets without PTSD." Heather Johnson, "Veterans with PTSD at a Higher Risk of Suicide", <https://www.psychiatryadviser.com/home/topics/anxiety/ptsd-trauma-and-stressor-related/vets-with-ptsd-at-a-higher-risk-of-suicide/>, (September 29, 2020).

^[18] Michele Crytzer, "Caring for Military Veterans in the Community: An Interprofessional Approach", *J Community Health Nurs.* 2019 Apr-Jun;36(2):57-64. doi: 10.1080/07370016.2019.1583839. PMID: 30990741.

^[19] Listed on Reddit as by Flumplegrumps, "R/PTSD: Want to sleep but can't. Flashbacks are driving me insane", https://www.reddit.com/r/ptsd/comments/68cj7n/want_to_sleep_but_cant_flashbacks_are_driving_me/, (02 June, 2023).

^[20] Hani Raoul Khouzam, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Psychological and Spiritual Interventions", *Consultant 360 Multidisciplinary Medical Information Network*, Volume 53 - Issue 10 - October 2013, <https://www.consultant360.com/articles/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-psychological-and-spiritual-interventions>.

^[21] Tara McKelvey, "God, the Army, and PTSD: Is religion an obstacle to treatment?", *Boston Review*, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/god-army-and-ptsd-tara-mckelvey/>, (November 1, 2009).

^[22] *Ibid.*, The following is information from an article on Benimoff, "God, the Army, and PTSD: Is religion an obstacle to treatment?", which references his memoir, *Faith Under Fire*.

^[23] *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Da 3:17–18.

^[24] *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 8:28.

^[25] *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Job 38:4.

^[26] *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Heb 11:1–3.

^[27] *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 5:1–5.

^[28] Green Doors, "Veteran Homelessness Facts", <https://www.greendoors.org/facts/veteran-homelessness.php>, (30 June, 2023).

^[29] This quote and the following story come from Rob Hull, "PTSD Wrecks Man's Life, God Puts Him Back Together", <https://www2.cbn.com/article/suicide/ptsd-wrecks-mans-life-god-puts-him-back-together>, (7 February 2023).

^[30] *Ibid.*

^[31] *Ibid.*



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