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Spiritual Solutions for Combat Trauma

by Bob Dees

The reality of war is that everyone gets wounded. Some wounds heal rapidly, but some last for a lifetime. Some wounds can be seen. Some wounds are invisible inside the heart, soul, and spirit of the warrior. These unseen wounds are often the most difficult to heal – they must heal from the inside out.

The Faith and Hope Gap

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is on the extreme end of the spectrum of trauma-related symptoms and conditions. PTSD was not an official psychological diagnosis until the early 1980s, but it has existed over the history of warfare, being referred to as “Soldiers Heart,” “Battle Fatigue,” or “Shell Shock” in former conflicts. Today, PTSD along with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is called by many the “signature injury” of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Government agencies are working hard to help wounded warriors from past battlefields of WWII, Korea, Vietnam and wounded warriors from current conflicts in the Persian Gulf and around the world. In particular, the Armed Forces and the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as numerous civilian organizations, are working tirelessly to help with the mental wounds of war.

A Department of Defense Mental Health Task Force report found that 49% of National Guard members, 38% of active duty Soldiers, and 31% of Marines are experiencing mental health issues after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Task Force recognized that programs within DoD are not adequately reflecting the increasing demand. The treatment shortfall is partly caused by a lack of resources, but the fear of stigma to military and civilian careers is also a significant hurdle blocking requests for treatment.

In response to the need for more PTSD care, Veterans Affairs is seeking to add 40,000 new mental health hospital beds costing roughly \$3 billion dollars, and also on significantly increasing the numbers of available mental health professionals.

The Services are likewise scrambling to reach the capacity needed to handle the PTSD challenge. In spring 2007, the Army surveyed over 100 combat-tested company commanders who indicated that “dealing with combat stress/PTSD among soldiers” is a major area in which they and others need deeper understanding. The Army, seeking to better train its leaders, recently conducted “chain teaching” for all echelons of command regarding PTSD. All the Services are working PTSD issues and related family issues hard and fast.

The reality, however, is that the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense simply don't have the capacity or the means to address the magnitude of this national challenge, particularly for the many National Guard, Reserve, and former troops and families who often suffer invisibly because they are not eligible for the same programs as active duty military.

The reality, also, is that wounds of the heart, soul, and spirit are not addressed adequately by government services. Despite the valiant efforts of chaplains and many organizations and the commitment of billions of dollars, there remains a serious gap – the faith and hope gap.

For Christians, addressing this gap starts with the premise that God is the true healer and that Jesus Christ is the avenue to experience true recovery from the ravages of combat trauma, particularly those visited on the mind and emotions. For many of our veterans and returning warriors, this will be a long road – but there is

hope. In my own life and in the lives of many wounded warriors, I have observed the peace, the calm, and the healing that God can bring to war-ravaged souls.

Whether it's the Veteran who has lived in the lonely isolation of combat memories for decades, or young Warriors just returning from their first combat horrors, the power of God, the power of God's written word, and the community of God's people around our nation can become powerful resources in this healing process. And this healing can certainly extend to military families and many others impacted by these mental, emotional, and spiritual wounds of war.

As an example from the Bible, David was honored as a "man after God's own heart" and as a "mighty man of God." Yet, David's Psalms indicate he was also a serious PTSD sufferer. For instance, consider his following lament:

My heart is in anguish within me, and the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror has overwhelmed me. Psalms 55: 4-5 (NASB)

And we read about David's trust in God for his ultimate healing:

He will redeem my soul in peace from the battle which is against me. Psalms 55:18 (NASB)

Faith is absolutely a critical factor in resilient recovery from combat trauma, every bit as relevant today as in David's age.

Campus Crusade for Christ Military Ministry (<http://www.militaryministry.org/>) seeks to bring Faith in the Foxhole and Hope on the Home Front to the Ends of the Earth. It is said that there are "no atheists in foxholes." This is certainly true. Daily we receive reports from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other corners of the earth that testify to the importance, the eternal importance, of "faith in the foxhole." We hear constantly from troops, chaplains and commanders about the power of prayer before dangerous missions, about the value of the Bible to their sense of hope and comfort, and about the healing that comes from faith. They believe wholeheartedly, with David, that God is their "Rock, Fortress, and Deliverer." Psalm 18:18 (NASB)

Whether in peace or in war, American troops (Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen) seek faith to anchor their souls. And families on the home front need the same anchor as they wait in fear and uncertainty. This anchor is available through faith in Jesus Christ.

Military Ministry

At Military Ministry (militaryministry.org), our privilege and responsibility is to assist chaplains and commanders with caring for the spiritual well-being of troops and their families. We do this at our armed forces initial entry training sites (boot camps) and operational locations, on ROTC and academy campuses and on the Internet, with military family seminars and small groups and by publishing and distributing spiritual resources direct and through chaplains, to troops and families. In addition, we seek to help every troop, every leader, and every family member hear, receive, and draw hope from the life-changing message of Jesus. Only in this way will these ones who selflessly serve us at home and abroad be truly ready, spiritually ready, to face the challenges which will certainly come their way.

In our present time of war and the aftermath of war, Military Ministry is working diligently to provide spiritual solutions relevant and sensitive to the needs of combat trauma and PTSD sufferers. We seek to accelerate the spiritual healing of many thousands of veterans and returning warriors. Hence, we have established the **Bridges to Healing Ministry** to mobilize, equip and support Christians in churches across America creating a "corps of compassion" that will help heal and restore PTSD sufferers, families, and caregivers. In the early stages of this **Bridges to Healing Ministry**, we have seen churches and communities in New York, Texas, California and elsewhere capture this vision. We are also developing relevant Christ-centered content for PTSD sufferers and caregivers. Our [Church Guide for Ministering to the Military](#) provides a basic orientation for churches and civic organizations seeking to come alongside our military at such a critical time

in our nation's history.

We have published the [Combat Trauma Healing Manual](#) to offer PTSD sufferers a roadmap to for spiritual healing. By combining the latest insights from the medical and psychological communities with the timeless principles of God's Word, this book outlines a step-by-step program that will help PTSD sufferers . . .

- Understand their trauma – spiritually, psychologically and physiologically
- Adopt therapeutic spiritual disciplines to bring them closer to God
- Process their loss and grief
- Experience the freeing influence of giving and receiving forgiveness
- Rebuild their identity based on what God says about them
- Strengthen themselves spiritually against future attacks
- Connect with those who will support them in many ways
- Define plans to fully reintegrate into society as a strengthened man or woman of God, to include becoming an asset to other trauma sufferers

Military Ministry's partnership with the [American Association of Christian Counselors](#) (AACC) is particularly relevant to reversing the PTSD epidemic in our land. The 50,000-plus Christian counselors within the AACC community will have a far-reaching impact in the lives of many military men, women, and families. AACC and Military Ministry are jointly producing a 30-hour video series and certification program that will help prepare professional, pastoral and lay counselors for serving military members and families. Together, Military Ministry and the AACC will join forces to deploy tens of thousands of Christians from thousands of churches in the fight to build bridges between PTSD suffering and God's love and healing power.