

Athena's Story

Greek-American Vietnam Wives: The Other Forgotten Warriors

By Aphrodite Matsakis Ph.D.

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Many Vietnam veterans suffering with PTSD know that it is only the support of their wives and families that have kept them alive for years. But their problems have had a major impact on these supporters.... The pain is real, as is the commitment to do all that is needed to help their veterans survive.

Mary Stout, president, Vietnam Veterans of America

The wives and children of Vietnam veterans are the forgotten warriors of the Vietnam War. For them, the war never ended; it just came home. Often, they share their lives with veterans afflicted with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the name given to a devastating psychological problem that plagues at least 500,000 to one million Vietnam veterans. Some authorities estimate that the number of vets in need of psychiatric help may reach as many as 1.5 million. Based on this figure, an estimated 900,000 Vietnam wives and partners and approximately 1,098,000 children may also be affected, not to mention the approximately 4.7 million members of the veterans' extended families.

Among the afflicted are an undetermined number of Greek-American families, such as that of war hero, Big Louie. "I have never set foot in Vietnam. Yet I consider myself a veteran also," says Big Louie's wife, Athena. "Most Vietnam vets only served for thirteen months. I've lived, breathed, slept, and fought with that war for thirteen years."

As the wife of a combat vet with a severe untreated case of PTSD, Athena has lived through many crises. Her husband has suffered from the usual symptoms--the flashbacks, the nightmares, the emotional numbing, and the rage reactions. Every Fourth of July, Veteran's Day, and Memorial Day, Athena can expect smashed records (both Greek and American), or

another hole in the wall. She can also expect that sooner or later, she will be up all night holding Big Louie. For Big Louie, as for many combat vets, anger and sorrow go hand in hand.

"Big Louie has a *kali kardia* (good heart)," says Athena. "But there's another side to him, the anger side. *Ola touftene, protantos ego*. (He has lots of anger, which is directed at everything and everybody, especially me.) Sometimes he goes out and he doesn't come home. Now and then he goes camping, but mainly he goes to a nearby Vietnam memorial. He can sit there for hours."

When Big Louie falls to the floor with flashbacks or commands her (and the children) to "walk the point" with him, they fear not only for their own safety, but for his. His moves are unpredictable. He could easily hurt himself in so many ways. How can they protect him? How can they protect themselves? How long will it take until he "comes back" this time? What if he never "comes back" or kills himself to end his anguish?

At such times, Athena caresses her husband's face. "It's me Athena, your wife. You're home, not in 'Nam. It's me, Athena, your wife, and I love you." Meanwhile, the children automatically remove all breakable objects from their father's path, wipe his brow, and whisper words of love and reassurance, just like their mother.

Athena never makes *pilafi*, *souvlaki*, or any form of barbecue. Rice ("gook food") and burning meat remind Big Louie of the Vietnam. Popcorn is forbidden too, since Big Louie can react to the sound of the popping kernels as if they were gunfire. On several occasions, he has even confused Athena with "the enemy" or someone he killed in Vietnam. Yet Athena has never once called Big Louie "crazy" or threatened divorce. Instead, she has intensified her efforts to please him by improving her *hamogelo* (smile), her *nikokirio* (housekeeping), and her *rizogalo* (rice pudding), in hopes that her love and nurturing can help to bring her husband home.

From her mother and grandmothers before her, Athena learned that being "a good wife" meant standing by her husband, especially during times of trouble. Her self-esteem and identity are rooted in the home roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper, not in her outside role of company supervisor.

When Big Louie embarrasses her by disappearing from family gatherings, Athena stifles her anger and makes excuses for him--to his parents, her parents, even to the children. She knows

that as a result of his war experience, her husband has a low tolerance for crowds, noisy places, and the emotional intensity of Greek family gatherings.

Family gatherings are also stressful for Athena. She constantly watches Big Louie's face for signs of anger or withdrawal, and lives in fear that someone will bring up the subject of the Vietnam (or war, or politics, which is almost inevitable among politically aware Greek-Americans) and send her husband into a fit of rage--or worse--into a state of numbing.

Sometimes Big Louie is a wonderful family man, but sometimes he can stay behind his impenetrable wall for hours, days, or weeks on end. Like many PTSD afflicted vets, he has periods where he is "normal" (i.e., pain and anger free). But when he withdraws into himself and becomes in Athena's words an "iceman," Athena feels as if she was married to an *agnosto* (stranger).

The blunting of emotions experienced by Big Louie, called psychic or emotional numbing, is a core symptom of PTSD. It is not a sign of insanity, but a normal reaction to an abnormal amount of stress. Under the traumatic conditions of combat, the warrior tends to repress feelings of anger, grief, guilt, and powerlessness. At the same time, however, he is, shutting off his ability to feel positive emotions, such as love, joy, and tenderness.

Psychic numbness has been found not only among Vietnam Vets, but among World War I, World War II, and Korean War vets, as well as among survivors of other traumas, e.g., earthquakes, fires, floods, rape, incest, or concentration camp experiences. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, a Jewish physician who survived the Nazi death camps, writes that "by all means of this insensibility... the prisoner surrounded himself with a protective shell."

Psychic numbing was necessary for the veteran to survive the trauma of war. Problems arise, however, when his numb state persists into the present. While numbing may not necessarily create problems on the job, where intimacy is usually not required, it creates havoc in close interpersonal relationships, such as marriage. "I can tell the minute he walks through the door whether or not his 'Vietnam Wall' is going to be up for the night," says Athena. "If it is, there's no chance of sex or any kind of communication. Big Louie seems to be on a *monopati* (path) so much of the time, sometimes I wonder why he's married at all."

"But he loves me. I know he loves me. And he's a good man, an honest man, who is only hurting himself. But in hurting himself, he hurts all of us-- me, and the kids. The only reason he can't feel for me is that he can't feel for himself."

According to Dr. Candace Williams, who has worked with hundreds of veteran families, coping with the veteran's emotional numbing--his tendency to shut off emotionally, to be reluctant or unable to share on a deep emotional level, and in other ways to withdraw from his wife and others-- is a vast problem for most help-seeking Vietnam wives. This problem is compounded for Greek-American (or Hispanic) wives whose husbands are often heavily invested in presenting a "macho" image of a "strong silent strength" and do not want to be identified as being vets "with problems".

Other common concerns of Vietnam wives seen at the vet centers include:

1. Coping with the veteran's hypersensitivity-- his tendency to overreact to his wife's statements and behavior and to interpret them as insulting to him.

2. Loneliness and social isolation. (Often the vet expects his wife to make him the focus of her life and is jealous of her activities outside the home and her relationships with others, even with other women, members of her family, or her own children. The vet's jealousy creates a special hardship for the Greek-American women who are closely bonded to her extended family or feels a strong commitment to her parish or other Greek-American groups. It is not unheard of, for example, for the vet, at times, to present his wife with impossible choices, such as, "your mother or me", "church or me", "our son or me", etc.)

3. Coping with veterans with verbal abuse.

4. Fearing to speak to the veteran. (One *Sopa* or *Skase vre gynaika*— (Shut up! Or go choke yourself, woman)! -- can keep some women silent for years.)

5. Feeling confused about which problems are Vietnam related and which are not. (Once the woman learns not to attribute her husband's PTSD to her inadequacies--real or perceived-- she may find it difficult to distinguish her husband's Vietnam problems from his assimilation or acculturation difficulties, or from any long-standing personality problems.)

6. Self-doubts created by the veteran's emotional instability or the family's financial problems.

7. Feeling as if she has lost her identity in constantly responding to the **veteran's** needs and many family crises.

8. Coping with the veteran's outbursts of anger, such as destruction of family property.

Many Vietnam wives also feel overwhelmed and resentful by having total or almost total responsibility for the emotional and financial stability of the household. The Greek-American woman of Athena's generation, who usually expected to be a traditional wife and mother, may be psychologically or vocationally unprepared to assume the role of the head of the household. But if her husband's working abilities are impaired by PTSD, she must usually assume at least a part-time job.

Like Athena, many wives hold full-time jobs, while at the same time shouldering the bulk of the childcare and housework. According to Dr. Williams, "In many Vietnam veteran homes, there is an over attachment to the cultural stereotyped roles," despite the "tremendous role changes that have occurred in the family during the past decade". This is especially in the case among veterans whose ethnic heritage includes rigid sex-role stereotyping.

While the Greek-American wife may have to work because of her husband's psychological dysfunctions, in deference to her husband's ego, she may keep this reason to herself. Some wives have even minimized or lied about their salaries. Athena, e.g., does not want to "emasculate" Big Louie by exposing that she makes considerably more than he does. In other ways too, she tries to sustain his belief that he is still the head of the household.

The patterns in Athena's marriage typify some PTSD afflicted Greek-American households. However, their marriage cannot be considered representative of all marriages touched by the war. The ways in which PTSD manifests itself in a vet and impacts on a marriage varies considerably from one household to the next. Big Louie for example, can only work part time (but pretends to work full time.) If Athena did not work, the family could not eat.

Other PTSD afflicted Greek-American vets however, are economically prosperous due to their workaholicism, which, in some instances, represents a means of dealing with (or rather, not dealing with) Vietnam issues. Since their ethnic tradition highly values vocational achievement, it is easier (and more acceptable) for them to escape their torment via achievement rather than via drugs or alcohol.

Those Greek-American Vietnam vets seen by the author who do drink or use drugs, however, typically do not permit their use of these substances to reach the stage of addiction or substantially interfere with their work performance. For example, they may drink heavily on patriotic holidays, on the anniversary dates of certain battles, and on weekends, yet also work 10-12 hours a day and be highly admired by their colleagues. Nevertheless, in adopting a lifestyle devoid of emotion, they may be alienated from their families and, as time goes by, their families may emotionally divorce them and develop a lifestyle of their own.

Like many Greek-American (and Hispanic) Vietnam wives, Athena first turned to her family and church, rather than to mental health professionals, for help. Her parents were supportive, but her mother-in-law blamed her for Big Louie's problems. If only Athena would give up her job, her ceramics course, and her other *trelles* (crazy habits), and try to be a “better Greek wife,” Louie would recover.

The priest was not judgmental. But, not understanding the nature of PTSD, he could only suggest that Athena pray harder and “go home and give more.”

Athena hesitated to turn to her Greek friends for fear of gossip. But her American (and Anglicized Greek) friends were no help either. They felt that while Big Louie was “crazy,” Athena was even “crazier” for staying with him.

Yet, to Athena, leaving Big Louie felt like an American solution, not a Greek one, a betrayal of all she was brought up to be. On the other hand, *parigories* (false comforts) such as *tha perasi* (it will pass), or denial, such as *then einai tipota* (it's nothing really), were not solutions either.

As a last resort, Athena came to a woman's group at a local vet center, feeling guilty about the possibility of revealing “family secrets” to *xenous* (strangers) and afraid of being blamed for her husband's unhappiness. In the group however, Athena is learning that:

- A) She is neither the cause, nor the cure, for her husband's PTSD.
- B) That while she can have *pathos* (compassion) towards her husband's PTSD, she does not have to allow herself to be victimized by it.
- C) That she is entitled to some happiness of her own, despite the enormity of her husband's pain.

In addition, she is finding that she has issues of her own to work on, issues remarkably similar to her husband's, e.g., repressed grief, repressed anger, and emotional numbing. Just as

her husband has yet to fully mourn his lost buddies-- and lost innocence--Athena has yet to grieve for the years she spent pouring energy and love into a man who, too often, was unable to love her back. Her dreams of *erota* (love) with a passionate man have been shattered by the reality of a husband's whose depression sometimes renders him impotent and who often needs a mother more than a wife.

Big Louie still harbors intense rage toward certain officers and policies which resulted in needless deaths during the war. Similarly, Athena is enraged at being the brunt of her husband's unresolved anger having to do with Vietnam. However, she has yet to experience her anger, much less express it directly in a group, or to Big Louie. Hence, like her husband, she suffers from depression. Also like him, she has come to develop a "Vietnam Wall" around her heart. Over time, she, like many Vietnam wives, has built up her own defenses against other people, especially her husband, and is at times emotionally numb, and, like the goddess Athena of old, sexually indifferent.

At Athena's insistence, Big Louie has begun to see a counselor at a local vet center. It was a monumental achievement for him to overcome his Greek pride and admit he needed help. Since he, like many Greek-American veterans, was not comfortable self-disclosing in groups (especially if they included alcohol or drug addicted vets or homeless veterans with whom he could not identify), he has chosen individual rather than group therapy. As Big Louie works through some of his Vietnam issues, Athena hopes that he will attend couples counseling with her.

Counseling for combat veterans is available at many Veteran's Administration Medical Centers or Veterans Outreach Centers. Some facilities also offer family therapy.