

# **The Parents of Greek American Vietnam Vets: The Grieving Process**

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## *Night Darkness*

*Night darkness is coming*

*Come my child and see*

*What is happening to me*

*My heart's blood*

*Is spilling over for thee*

-- An old Greek song from the island of Karpathos

Until recently the Vietnam veteran was aptly named the “forgotten warrior.” His experiences in Vietnam and subsequent readjustment problems upon return were too often readily swept aside by a society that for the most part wanted to forget about Vietnam. Today, however, our nation is undergoing a healing process with regard to the Vietnam War.

“Yesterday you were guilty if you served; now you’re ruined if you didn’t, writes Washington Post columnist Charles P. Freund in a commentary on Senator Dan Quayle’s National Guard Service. Pointing to the current plethora of books, movies, and television programs on Vietnam (,) Mr. Freund, like other eminent columnists, concludes that today our “nation seems to be working out its guilt about its treatment of vets a decade ago.”

This national healing process will not be complete however, until all who have been harmed by the psychological consequences of the war have been acknowledged. This includes not only the veteran’s wife and children, but his parents as well.

Like the veteran, his parents may suffer from social isolation and low self-esteem due to the stigma which until two years ago was attached to having served in Vietnam. In addition, the vet suffers from PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, more properly known as the Post-

Vietnam Stress Syndrome), his parents may feel irrationally guilty as if some genetic defect or child-rearing mistake on their part is the cause of his symptoms. Or perhaps they berate themselves because their best efforts have not been able to cure their son of his affliction.

These parental feelings of pain, guilt, and powerlessness are intensified when the veteran is unmarried, divorced, or is living at home in such cases, it is the parents who bear the burden of helping their son with his emotional problems. They may also be helping to support him financially and assisting him to obtain his medical and other benefits.

Among the Greek-American families observed by the author, some parents have literally organized their lives around their son's PTSD, throwing the entire family off balance and placing the needs of their other children and grandchildren in second place. Even when the veteran has engaged in anti-social activities, e.g., the destruction of property or excessive drinking, his parents have tended to support and not abandon him.

Even though these parents were angry, if not enraged, at their son for his misbehaviors, they were generally hesitant to adopt a "tough love" approach. Instead of withdrawing their emotional and financial support when their son violated social norms or the law, Greek American parents bailed their sons out of jail, paid for the broken windows or the car wrecks, then searched furiously for the best psychiatric care or rehabilitation facility in the area, regardless of the cost.

Yet, for many Greek American parents the battle to help their son has been a lonely one. "It's a hurt I will carry with me to my grave, but I can't tell anyone about it," says Maria Vlahos, mother of Elias S., a former medic who suffers from PTSD. Mrs. Vlahos fears that if she reveals the family "secret," others will not only fail to understand but ridicule or blame her. "How do I feel?" She says. "That if I had been a better mother, my son would not be having such problems." Mr. Vlahos feels likewise. However, being alienated from their natural support systems, i.e., friends, neighbors, and extended family, has only intensified the Vlahos emotional pain.

Even parents of men who died in Vietnam, have, until recently, hesitated to open up about their pain. In *"Shrapnel in the Heart – Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial"* Author Laura Palmer writes, "the controversy over the Vietnam War stifled a lot of grief. The shame society felt over Vietnam delayed for years any national recognition for the men and women who served them. Americans' shame, confusion, and humiliation certainly

did not dent the pride or love families felt for their sons, but it did lessen the likelihood of their talking about it.

“The bitterness surrounding Vietnam stripped it of any honor and the veterans who did come home were stripped of their dignity. They were ignored if they were lucky, scorned if they were not. And if you lost someone in the convulsion of Vietnam, the way to protect his memory was not to talk about it. As [one mother] said, “I could find people to share my grief because I lost my son, but few wanted to hear where he died.”

Yet losing a child is perhaps the greatest emotional pain a parent can bear, whether that loss is to death, or to chronic stress disorder, such as PTSD. ‘Every time I see Elias punishing himself over the men whose lives he failed to save in Vietnam, a part of me dies,’ says his mother. Like the parents whose sons died in Vietnam, parents whose sons suffer from PTSD undergo the grieving process. Although their son is not physically dead, if he has not received proper help, some of his emotional, intellectual, and vocational potentialities may be severely stunted and, in some cases, lost entirely.

In her landmark book, *On Death and Dying*, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler Ross explains that the grieving process consists of five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Not only the dying, but those, who are close to the dying or to a loved one who is physically or emotionally suffering, usually experience the five stages of grief. These stages don’t always occur in order and a person can be in more than one stage at the same time.

**Denial.** In the first stage, denial or shock, the loss or the problem is not acknowledged. It is not unusual for parents, even parents who are psychologically minded, emotionally sensitive and non-judgmental, to be initially in a state of denial about their son’s PTSD. It is only human to want to avoid painful realities, and observing one’s child suffer from a life-threatening, financially and emotionally disruptive problem, such as PTSD, hurts.

Like Achilles' mother who sought to make her son immortal, every parent hopes that by lavishing their child with love and care that they can protect their child from harm. When, for parents of PTSD afflicted Vietnam veterans, that hope is shattered by irrevocable evidence that their son has indeed been psychologically affected by the war, their world comes crashing in on them. Because of the overwhelming pain involved in the shattering of denial, many parents prefer to remain in denial, especially if they are unaware that help is available.

The first few times Elias had nightmares, for example, his mother assumed it was indigestion. Even when the nightmares persisted, she felt that they were temporary. Similarly, the first time Maria saw Elias go numb, she didn't understand what was going on. When he had a few car accidents, she thought he had just been drinking too much. But once he ran into a pole, then went on to hit two or three more objects in the road, she and her husband realized that Elias had a death wish.

In similar situations are Greek American parents whose sons have not chosen typically Greek professions but elected to pursue life-threatening occupations, such as police, detective, rescue squad or firefighting work. Or perhaps their son has decided to work at risky construction sites where he always volunteers for the most dangerous assignments, e.g., handling radioactive waste, making deliveries in crime-ridden neighborhoods, cleaning potentially explosive equipment, etc. In other cases, the veteran's hobbies have included boating in shark infested waters (when he can't swim) or wine tasting, gourmet cooking, cake baking, (when he is obese or diabetic), or participating in high risk sports such as, skydiving or high-speed motorcycle racing.

Yet even under such circumstances parents have persisted in denial until an accident or injury has forced them to acknowledge that their son is consciously or unconsciously, seeking self-destruction, self-punishment, or perhaps death itself.

Contributing to parental denial is the "predisposition theory." In its crudest form, the predisposition theory states that Vietnam veterans who are "cracked" were "cracked" before they ever set foot in Vietnam. Such thinking exists in the Greek American community as it does in the American society at large. Because of their strong identification with their children, Greek American parents seen by the author tend to extend the predisposition theory to include themselves. For example, they assume that if their son is "cracked," they must be "cracked" also or that it was some personality or moral failure on their part which helped create a "lack of stamina" in their son.

Such thinking is fallacious. PTSD is a result of the veteran's war experiences, not his pre-trauma personality, his defects, his flaws, or his parents' mistakes. It is only reasonable to expect that men who had social or psychological problems prior to their tour in Vietnam would be more adversely affected by the war than their better adjusted fellow soldiers. However, under the circumstances in Vietnam, even well-adjusted and dedicated men "cracked." Understanding

the circumstances of Vietnam that acquiring a combat-related stress disorder is now considered a more normal response than repressing the war experience or coping with it in other ways.

Many parents are helping to overcome their denial once they realize that they are not to blame. Greek American parents, however, must also overcome the stigma which frequently attends mental illness in the traditional Greek American thinking.

Historically, Greek culture, with its exaltation of physical beauty and perfection of form has not exhibited such tolerance towards physical deformity. In ancient Greece for example physically malformed children were often left to die. Some of this same cultural evolution toward physical handicaps also applies to those who are emotionally damaged. The psychological scars are almost as embarrassing as physical ones. If one wishes to preserve one's self-respect and social status, emotional problems need to be well hidden, not only from the community, but from one's self.

Several Greek American parents of PTSD afflicted veterans have persisted in denial about their son's PTSD by attributing it to physiological rather than emotional causes, e.g., to "hormones" or "insufficient" diet. Their firm belief was that all that was needed was some form of medication, better diet, or a trip to Greece. Or perhaps they tried to "save" their son themselves by giving him a new car, new clothes, or a vacation. Other parents wishfully assumed that a new job, a love relationship, or the achievement of some other life goal would eradicate their son's problems.

Only when, over time, parents saw their son symptoms worsen, or began to observe symptoms of their grandchildren (such as low self-esteem, sleep disturbances, depression, aggressiveness, or a preoccupation with power and death) did the painful reality of their son's condition set in. Their hearts then became full of unbearable pain which they had to periodically suppress in order to go on with their own lives. When the pain became intolerable, sometimes they had to slip back into denial.

**Anger.** Once their denial is cracked, parents are often flooded with anger. "Why me? Why my son? What did I do to deserve this?" They ask. In this stage, parents may be angry not only at life or at God, but at the US government or society in general. "If those hippies hadn't spit on my son at the airport, maybe my son wouldn't be so disturbed," Mrs. Vlahos feels. It is at the anger stage that parents often become politicized, especially if they encounter frustrations

and delays in obtaining medical and psychological help for their son, and, in the process, encounter anti-Vietnam veteran attitudes or negative stereotypes about Vietnam veterans.

Unfortunately, some Greek American vets, like other vets, were not spared the humiliation of psychiatric misdiagnosis. Prior to the American Psychiatric Association's acknowledgement of PTSD as a *bona fide* psychiatric problem in 1980, some troubled vets were given negative sounding psychiatric labels such as, "character disordered," "sociopathic personality," "schizoid personality," or "borderline personality," especially if they were from minority groups or if they challenged certain military procedures.

Until recently, battered women and incest survivors have also sometimes been mislabeled due to the historic therapeutic assumption that most of an individual's problems are rooted in the individual's inability to resolve certain childhood conflicts. Today, however, more and more mental health professionals are realizing that significant stressor, e.g., combat, incest, child abuse, wife abuse, or multiple deaths in a family, can create psychological symptoms in an individual regardless of their pre-trauma mental health status.

Some Vietnam veterans are now in the process of being psychiatrically re-evaluated in hopes of having the negative sounding labels removed from their records. In some cases, however the damage of misdiagnosis has already been done. For example, Ted, a Greek American combat vet, was inaccurately labeled "paranoid" and a "menace to society" which all but destroyed his self-confidence. Now psychiatrists attribute his symptoms to his Vietnam experience rather than his "paranoia" and other "psychopathologies."

Yet Ted is still convinced he is a "hopeless case" and that no woman would ever want to marry him. His mother, usually a timid woman, feels almost homicidal towards those who mislabeled her son for so many years. "My son left Vietnam without a scratch. But he was ruined anyway," she says. "Where do I go to complain? How do I wash away his hurt and give him back his dignity?"

Like other parents who almost daily observe their son's low self-esteem, Ted's parents live in a state of nearly constant grieving, and anger. They are also angry at themselves, for ever allowing Ted to go. When Ted enlisted, they felt he was fulfilling his patriotic duty. Today, however, they feel that Senator Quail's parents were right. They too should have found a way to keep their boy home

**Bargaining.** The bargaining stage is characterized by the “what if’s?” And the “if only’s.” “If only I had stopped him from going to Vietnam. If only I had been more understanding when he came home. If only I had forced him to go to a counselor the first time he showed signs of a problem.”

At this point, parents might start going to church more often and lighting larger and larger *lambades*. Or perhaps they promise to never lie, steal, or cheat again, or to make larger contributions to charity. Sometimes they punish themselves and hope that their sacrifice will purchase their son’s mental health and happiness.

**Depression.** When parents realize that their anger and attempts at bargaining are futile, depression sets in.

**Acceptance.** In the final stage of grief, there is some form of acceptance of PTSD and the toll it has taken, not only on the son, but on the entire family. It is at this stage that parents realize what Vietnam parents eventually realize, that they can only do so much to help their son. This painful letting go is difficult for most parents, but especially for Greek American parents who generally feel a strong attachment to their children. Parents, however, do not need to grieve forever. Professional help is available privately or at local Veteran’s Administration Medical Centers.