

Surviving the War: PTSD and the Children of Greek-American Vets

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When Eleni's father came home from Vietnam, he slept with his eyes open, the lights on, and a gun under his pillow. When Eleni was seven, he wanted to take her to a shooting range for gun practice. Eleni's mother (and grandmothers) objected. Eleni belonged in the kitchen, rolling *dolmades* and *koulourakia* with her mother, or in ballet school, with the other girls from her Greek school class.

Eleni's father exploded. Deathly afraid that something would happen to one of his children, he insisted that all of them, especially his *monocori* (only daughter) be prepared for the worst. By the time Eleni was twelve, she could load and fire ten kinds of pistols and had mastered several forms of self-defense.

For years, her father triple-checked the family seat belts and made everyone (even his wife) call home whenever they went out. If a family member was even ten minutes late returning, he could easily start hyperventilating or have an anxiety attack.

Once Eleni heard her father say that God was going to punish him for killing people in Vietnam by taking away one of his children. "But other than that, he's never talked about the war," Eleni says. "If we ask, he just gives us a blank stare. My mom calls it his 'wall'".

"When his 'wall' is up, we can't cry. My dad can't stand tears. He's afraid if he starts crying, he'll never stop. Even when *Papou* died, my father couldn't cry. But at least he came to the funeral. Some combat vets can't even do that."

Today Eleni is sixteen. Much like her father she is "on guard," suspicious of strangers, and has a "wall" around her heart. Although she grew up surrounded by highly social, emotionally expressive aunts, uncles, cousins, and other Greek Americans, in her particular home emotional openness was almost "taboo." Her father kept his feelings to himself. When others emoted, he became visibly upset, afraid that their emotionality might trigger a release of the powerful feelings of sadness, rage, and guilt he was trying so hard to control within himself.

As a result, Eleni learned to repress her emotions and is reluctant to share her feelings with others. Inside she feels very “unfeminine,” very “unpassionate,” and therefore, very “un-Greek.”

As Eleni’s case illustrates, the psychological effects of the Vietnam War can have a continuing impact not only on the veteran, but on his children. Although there is no “typical” Vietnam vet or child of a vet, certain patterns have been found among families afflicted with PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the current psychiatric label given to the malady more commonly known as “combat fatigue” or “war neurosis.” Not all vets suffer from PTSD. But those who do have symptoms similar to those of Eleni’s father: sleep disturbances, fear, guilt, anxiety, and difficulty handling grief and other strong emotions.

The root of PTSD is fear of loss, coupled with yet another fear—that the trauma of war, with its many deaths and dismemberments, might somehow repeat itself in the present. Consequently, a highly protective attitude toward one’s family is not uncommon among PTSD afflicted vets, especially among Greek-American vets whose ethnic tradition emphasizes the father’s role as protector of the family.

Children of Greek-American Vietnam vets often have difficulty distinguishing which of their fathers’ rules and restrictions stem from his patriarchal Greek mentality and which arise from his PTSD. While Greek-American children from non-veteran homes may also be overprotected and, in some cases, over-controlled, by their parents, when the father is a vet, this tendency can be magnified considerably.

For example, daughters of Greek-American Vietnam vets typically have an even harder time obtaining permission to date than Greek-Americans whose fathers are not vets. The vet may also prohibit his son, as well as his daughter, from activities perceived as being potentially dangerous, e.g., sports or travel.

However, if the child (or young adult) is rebellious or desires to be independent, the culture clashes and generational conflicts inherent in the acculturation process can become exceptionally bitter and intense. In many cases, years of unresolvable father-son or father-daughter disputes can leave the veteran father feeling misunderstood and unloved.

At the same time, the children can feel guilty for further upsetting a father who they know has already suffered much due to the war. If the father has a hearing loss, an amputation, Agent Orange tumors, or some other wounds from the war, the children's guilt may be overwhelming and may paralyze their emotional development.

In some homes, one of the children becomes traumatized by the veteran's war experiences. This process, called "secondary traumatization," has been found not only among children of Vietnam vets, but among children of World War II vets with PTSD and among children of the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust.

In secondary traumatization, the child, in some manner, relives the father's traumatic war experiences or becomes obsessed with related issues of trouble and concern to the veteran. The child may even manifest symptoms similar to those of the veterans. For example, the child may have nightmares about combat or worry a great deal about death and injury. Vet Center counselors report that, in some cases, children as young as 3 or 4 years old have learned to imitate their fathers and hide under their beds when an airplane or helicopter flies overhead. Whether or not these children are actually experiencing fear or are simply imitating daddy is not known.

In families of World War II vets where there was secondary traumatization, psychiatrist Dr. Rosenheck found that for some of the veteran's offspring, their father was by far the most important person in their lives. "It is as if they were constantly together, constantly embroiled in a shared emotional cauldron," Rosenheck writes. "For these children, life seems to have been a series of anticipation of, and reactions to, their father's moods, impulses, and obsessions."

In another study, Rosenheck cites the case of Alan, the ten-year-old son of a Vietnam vet who had great difficulty sleeping because he worried about being killed or kidnapped. His main fear was that he, his father, or both of them, will be shot "like in the war." In many of his [Alan's] fantasies, Rosenheck points out, "it was as if he was living in one of his father's flashbacks rather than in his own reality."

(In a nationwide survey, about 65% of the Vet Center counselors pulled observed symptoms similar to the veterans in the latter's children. This does not mean that 65% of the children of Vietnam vets evidence symptoms similar to those of their fathers, but rather that 65%

of the counselors said that they had witnessed this phenomenon in some of the children of vets. No statistics were gathered specifically on children of Greek-American vets.)

The author has observed only one Greek-American child evidencing secondary traumatization, Stavro. Like the ten-year-old observed by Rosenheck, Stavro was obsessed with power and violence. He was constantly playing war games, reading war comics, and only wanted war toys for Christmas. It was impossible to have a conversation with him without his mentioning Vietnam and his father's heroic feats. He would also attack his sisters with plastic swords, hurling anti-Vietnamese epithets.

Despite Stavro's superior IQ, he had trouble concentrating in school and was in fights frequently, much to the shame (*dropi*) of his parents. They wanted him to be a model student and become a doctor, not a warrior. Yet Stavro couldn't wait to grow up and join the Marines. His fervent wish was that there would be another Vietnam. That way, he could prove to his father that he was strong and brave as any Vietnam vet.

Far more common than secondary traumatization is the pattern of the father's emotional distancing. Parenting requires an enormous amount of energy, which some PTSD-afflicted vets lack due to depression or preoccupation with their war experiences. Sometimes these vets feel they cannot handle the stresses of childbearing while also trying to recover from PTSD. This does not mean that these vets do not love their children, but rather that their PTSD interferes with their desire to be involved parents.

Psychoanalyst Sarah Haley, who has worked intensively with Vietnam veterans for many years, explains: "fatherhood" may overtax the veteran's ability to resolve a trauma. Any point during the child's development can impinge on the veteran's depression, withdrawal, or conflicts."

"We used to call my father's bedroom 'The Apartment'," says Eleni, whose father would sometimes spend one day to two weeks in his room by himself. "He'd be close to us sometimes, taking us to gun practice, Sunday school, picnics, movies, etc..... but we could never count on him. We never knew when he'd get into one of his PTSD moods and wall us out."

Until children learn that their father's mood swings and retreats from the family are his ways of coping with the war, they tend to attribute their father's emotional upset and withdrawal

to their inadequacies as children. “If only I was a ‘better’ child my father would not feel so bad,” children often think, either consciously or unconsciously. If the vet verbally berates his children, low self-esteem is inevitable.

Such problems are intensified in Greek-American homes where children are raised to feel that it is their duty (*kathikon*) to please their parents and live up to parental expectations. Some children hope that through their achievements, obedience, or love, they can compensate their father for all he lost in Vietnam. While in some cases this sense of obligation toward the father motivates the child to achieve in school or otherwise reach his or her potential, in other cases, it stifles the child’s individuality or creates a defeatist attitude. For example, a child might think, “I don’t make my dad happy no matter what I do. So why try?”

In traditional Greek-American homes, children are often taught to be quiet as a sign of respect. In PTSD-afflicted Greek-American homes, however, being quiet may also be a matter of survival. Sudden unexpected noises may precipitate a flashback, during which the veteran may confuse his children with the “enemy,” and possibly, attack them. Or perhaps the veteran simply becomes irritable because of his low tolerance for noise.

As research has shown, PTSD has a physiological component. In some cases, the veteran’s nervous system has been so damaged by heavy combat, by a brutal POW experience, or by injuries or diseases caused by the war, that he may forever “overreact” to high noise levels and experience even “normal” noises--such as crying babies, cranky children, television, and radio as extremely stressful. For music-loving children, not being able to play the radio or stereo can feel like a major deprivation.

This is not the case in all homes, however. For example, when Niko’s father cannot sleep, he blares the radio full blast--all night sometimes. The next day, Niko has trouble concentrating in school, not because of his interrupted sleep, but for a far more profound reason: he loves his father and feels powerless to help him. Like so many children of Vietnam veterans, both male and female, Niko is grieving-- not only for his father’s pain, but for his own, for the “ideal” father that he’ll never have and for the fathering which he is missing now:

“Sometimes I think if my dad really loved me, he'd do things, like spend time with me or say I love you. He never says he loves me, but he shows me love by buying me almost anything

I want. Yet I can honestly say that until I learned about PTSD and why he needed to be alone so much, I hated him. Then I felt guilty about hating him and ended up hating myself.”

Greek-American children from PTSD afflicted homes often feel different from their American peers, not only because of their Greek background, but because of their father’s PTSD. At the same time, however, they may feel cut off from their Greek-American friends because of their father’s war-related problems. Niko and his sisters, e.g., feel protective of their father, yet embarrassed by him.

“Sometimes I wish my father was an alcoholic,” says Niko. At least alcoholism is something my friends, even my Greek friends, have heard about. Alcoholism is ‘bad,’ but it isn’t ‘crazy,’ like PTSD. Who ever heard of PTSD?”

Another set of problems attend those children whose fathers suffer from Agent Orange contamination. Although the vet may attempt to hide his skin tumors or other evidences of chemical exposure, children cannot always be totally protected.

(The remainder of this article is currently unavailable.)