

The Other Forgotten Warriors

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"I hate Vietnam!" Jessica sobs. "Ed went over there a warm, outgoing person. He came back angry, withdrawn, taking out all his anger on me and the kids. Why he has to turn on us - the ones he loves the most - I just don't understand. The verbal abuse - the yelling, the being called every name in the book - it hurts deep, very deep, even more than the physical abuse.

"He's angry at me, his own wife, almost all the time. It's like I'm another person to him, a stranger, not the wife who has stood by him for fifteen years. Maybe I remind him of 'Nam or something."

Jessica is the petite attractive wife of Ed, a Vietnam combat veteran she met just before he went overseas, and she has been his faithful partner ever since. For over a year now, Jessica has been attending a women's group at a local Vietnam Veteran's Outreach Center. In this group, Jessica, like the other Vietnam wives, shares her pain, her fears and her profound loneliness.

Although still living with Ed, Jessica feels alone and abandoned. Her husband, it seems is involved with another woman. The other wives have the same complaint - their husbands are involved with another woman too - the SAME other woman.

Her name is Vietnam. She is ugly and battle-scarred, but her power over the husbands is great. Somehow this "other woman" can hold and entice the men more than their own wives.

More than 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam, but many more are dying emotional and spiritual deaths here at home as they struggle daily with PTSD, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. That is the current psychiatric label given to a malady more commonly known as shell shock, combat fatigue, or war neurosis, which caused the evacuation of some 10% of enlisted men during WWI and, at various points, of many more during WWII.

PTSD is not a sign of insanity or a personality deficiency, but a normal reaction to an abnormal amount of stress. Imagine being in a car accident, 20 times a month, 12 months in a row, or being raped, twice a week, or an entire year. How might you feel? Even if these terrible things were not happening to you directly, what if they were occurring to people all around you and you were powerless to stop it? What if you know that at any moment, you might be the next victim?

That's what it was like in Vietnam, during a war where bar girls had hand grenades and even babies were booby trapped, where almost anyone, man, woman, or child, could be a possible enemy. Under such

conditions, the soldier tended to stifle his emotions. He had to, for if he had connected with his grief, anger, fear, and sense of powerlessness during combat, he would have been less able to figure out what to do next in order to save himself or others.

In the face of a traumatic event, this emotional repression, called psychic or emotional numbing, is an entirely appropriate response. Problems arise, however, when the numbing is carried over into present-day situations where there is no danger, as is the case with PTSD-afflicted veterans.

Psychic numbing is a central feature of PTSD. Other symptoms include nightmares, insomnia and other sleep disturbances; survivor guilt, social withdrawal and alienation; flashbacks, hyperalertness (the startle response), depression and anger. Some, but definitely not all, veterans may use alcohol and/or drugs to fight the memories and the seemingly unbearable feelings associated with those memories, powerful feelings such as sorrow, rage, fear and moral confusion. Healing for the veteran involves learning how to confront his war experiences directly, by talking about them and sharing them with other veterans, rather than indirectly, via symptoms, substance abuse, workaholism, self-isolation and other self-destructive behavior.

The root of PTSD is fear of death or dismemberment or losing others. It can be suffered by anyone who has experienced an event or series of events of such magnitude of pain and horror that they would overwhelm almost anyone's natural coping mechanisms. Hence PTSD has been found among survivors of the Nazi concentration camps and the bombing of Hiroshima, among prisoners of war and refugee children and survivors of natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes, floods and fires. Victims of rape, incest, wife abuse and other assaults also have suffered from PTSD, as have persons who, although they do not experience trauma directly, witness trauma on a daily basis or are subject to unremitting stress as a part of their job. Among them are police officers, firefighters, rescue workers and health-care workers.

While experts disagree on the extent of PTSD, most put the figure at from 500,000 to 1 million. Since PTSD is by definition a delayed response to the war, the number of veterans eventually in need of help may reach as many as 1.5 million or more. Based on this figure, an estimated 900,000 Vietnam wives and partners and approximately 1.098 million children also may be affected.

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. Only during the past two or three years have Vietnam veterans finally been given some public recognition for their many contributions. Nevertheless, the psychological effects of Vietnam experience are still poorly understood, not only by the general public, but by many veterans and their families. Even less understood are the effects of PTSD on family life. To date, fewer than two dozen articles have been published on the wives and children of Vietnam vets, the other "forgotten warriors." "Vietnam Wives" is the first book which focuses directly on the impact of PTSD on the wives and children of Vietnam veterans.

In many ways, the Vietnam veteran has borne the burden of our national shame, guilt and confusion regarding the Vietnam War. His wife, however, has borne society's burden for the veteran. More often than not, it is the Vietnam wife and nobody else who has nursed her husband through his flashbacks and nightmares, through his depressions and suicidal episodes and through his mourning, as well as his rage reactions. Usually it is she and she alone who has maintained her husband's will to live and has served as a buffer between him and the world. Even when abused by her husband, the Vietnam wife has often remained by his side, not only from fear, but from compassion, realizing that her husband's rejection of her or his explosions were not due solely to his individual temperament but were due to the frustrations and stigmas imposed upon him by others and by a variety of social institutions. Intuitively, the Vietnam wife often sensed that underneath her husband's abrasiveness or coolness lay enormous amounts of self-hate and confusion.

The Vietnam wife has sacrificed much. Yet, despite her many sacrifices, she has been treated like a footnote. Outside of Vet Center women's support groups, she has received practically no acknowledgement of her pain, anger or anguish. In many cases, she has been as misunderstood and as unsupported by her family and community as her PTSD afflicted husband. To the extent that the vet has been perceived as crazy, the Vietnam wife also has been perceived as crazy - for staying with him, for loving him and for helping him through his "PTSD attacks."

Like their husbands, Vietnam wives have their war stories too. Most of the women feel emotionally neglected, if not outright abused. Their chief complaint is that their husbands often use them as scapegoats for problems having to do with Vietnam or with life in general. Many of the women have been hit at least once. However, in my experience only about a fourth fall into the battered woman category, where the abuse is repeated and severe and where the man exercises an emotional and financial, as well as physical, stranglehold over his wife. (This rate, however, is based on a limited sample and is not significantly different from rates of wife abuse found among other groups in our society.)

Where there is no overt emotional or physical abuse, often another form of emotional abuse, a stony silence, prevails. Many wives feel as if they are living with strangers, not husbands.

Some of the women are in touch with their anger; others are not. Most have ambivalent feelings about their anger. On the one hand, they feel it is a legitimate response to being mistreated, unloved and overburdened. The majority of the wives are the economic, as well as the emotional, mainstays of the family, holding down two jobs - one at home, one at work.) On the other hand, the women feel that, since their husbands suffered through various hardships in Vietnam, they should be more understanding and patient.

Jane, for example, works two jobs while caring for three children. She drives her sons to ball practice, her daughter to ballet. Her husband, Dan, is often so depressed he can do very little around the home. Since the war, Dan has been in and out of treatment for PTSD and is

able to contribute little to the family income other than his disability check. In deference to Dan's ego, Jane keeps her complaints to herself or shares them only with the group. Like many Vietnam wives, Jane is exceptionally dedicated and loyal to her husband, very sensitive to the fact that her husband lost his hearing in one ear in Vietnam.

"Half his unit was wiped out too. After all he went through, maybe I have no right to moan. But it's been 13 years of me being Supermom. I'm worn out and I keep wondering when is he going to get over this thing? I try to be patient, but when I come home and the dishes aren't even done, I blow up. Then he says I'm aggravating his PTSD."

In group, Vietnam wives learn it is perfectly possible and normal to be both understanding and angry at their husbands at the same time. Nevertheless, most of the women hide their anger. Some fear their husband's rage. Others do not want to interfere with their husband's healing process. Still others keep quiet because their husbands are suffering from, or slowly dying of exposure to Agent Orange or because their husbands have talked about suicide. This is a real possibility for some Vietnam veterans. Although there are no definitive statistics, some sources allege that as many veterans have died by their own hand as were killed in Vietnam. Equally distressing are the high number of deaths and injuries due to one-car collisions and other "accidents" among Vietnam veterans that are often viewed as suicidal in nature.

When the veteran suffers from PTSD, his children may be affected also. Low self-esteem and self-blame for their father's unhappiness are the two most common problems seen so far. Some children show symptoms similar to the fathers', e.g. nightmares.

Vietnam wives often feel as if they are single parents with the burden of the children's emotional and physical well-being on their shoulders. Often, they try to compensate for their husband's difficulties by being Supermothers.

According to some Vet Center counselors, the future may well see self-help groups for adult children of Vietnam veterans similar to contemporary groups for adult children of alcoholics.

Help is available at VA medical centers. Twenty-eight of them have inpatient PTSD units and at 189 Vietnam Veterans' Outreach Centers.