



Mental Health Care for Our Warrior Veterans: The Importance of Getting It Right

A Review of

Caring for Veterans With Deployment-Related Stress Disorders: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Beyond
by Josef I. Ruzek, Paula P. Schnurr, Jennifer J. Vasterling, and Matthew J. Friedman (Eds.)

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Looking back on my childhood, I can remember the nightly news updates focused on the Vietnam War. These were regularly scheduled reports on the most recent events in the war, including the body count of the number killed in action. Gradually, in my mind, the war became just background noise. It seemed as if America must have always been at war, and these battle updates were just part of the regular nightly reports of the news, sports, and weather. Considering that I was likely not alone in my emotional numbing to years of military conflict in a far-off country, it is no wonder that the psychological, medical, and social impact of the Vietnam War was not fully realized until decades after the end of the war.

A generation has now occurred between the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the attacks on America on September 11, 2001. We are now at a similar point in America's military history—we are in the midst of another intense and extended Vietnam-like military conflict. Our now-continuous 24-hour news programs also include routine updates of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These background-noise reports are now often imbedded beneath seemingly more important topics such as unemployment, the economy, and health care reform.

Because military conflict was fairly limited between 1975 and 2001, many American citizens—including mental health professionals—have either lost touch with or never understood the mission and roles of the U.S. military and what is asked during a time of war of the men, women, and families who dedicate their lives in support of our nation's defense. In addition, because only a small percentage of American citizens ever serve on active duty in the U.S. military, significant knowledge gaps exist for many mental health care providers in understanding the military warrior culture.

Caring for Veterans With Deployment-Related Stress Disorders: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Beyond, edited by Josef Ruzek, Paula Schnurr, Jennifer Vasterling, and Matthew Friedman, helps fill in these gaps. As summarized in their first chapter: "We must all broaden our skills to help these men and women. As practitioners, program administrators, policy makers, or students, we are called to go beyond our current understanding of the mental health consequence of deployment to master emerging knowledge" (p. 3).

Who serves in the military? What are the unique deployment-related stressors that occur during a deployment to the Middle East? What is the impact of deployment on individuals, couples, and families? How should mental health personnel complete psychological assessments with veterans who have deployed? What are the recommended treatment approaches for deployment-related stress disorders? What must we learn now—and do now—to prevent our nation from reexperiencing the national mental health crisis that occurred in veterans who served in the Vietnam War?

From Vietnam to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Beyond

A major difference between the Vietnam War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that we now have almost continuous and up-to-date epidemiological data on the physical and psychological health of our military service members across the deployment cycle. This is due primarily to the implementation of the Department of Defense's Deployment Health Assessment program in which service members complete a self-report health survey immediately before deployment, upon return from deployment, and then three to six months after returning from a deployment (Martin, 2007). In addition, a number of seminal research studies have been conducted to assess the risk for, prevalence of, and incidence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Hoge et al., 2004; Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008), traumatic brain injury (Hoge et al., 2008), and suicide (Bryan, Kanzler, Durham, West, & Greene, 2010).

Many excellent books have been published on PTSD. *Caring for Veterans With Deployment-Related Stress Disorders* is different in that it includes a collection of chapters on critically important topics that should be invaluable to mental health providers involved in the care of our new generation of combat veterans. The book title is very telling of the content of the book.

First, the focus of the book is on *deployment-related* stress disorders. Although the term *combat-related* is often used synonymously with *deployment-related* stress disorders, the use of the former term has been controversial in both the research literature and during Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability evaluations for PTSD. This is particularly true considering that about 40 percent of those who have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have served as "noncombatants," yet these veterans are still at risk for deployment-related stress disorders (Peterson, Wong, Haynes, Bush, & Schillerstrom, 2010). As highlighted throughout the book, many individual, couple, and family problems are deployment related, including those that do not involve direct combat exposure.

Second, the book focuses on deployment-related *stress disorders* and is not limited to PTSD. Although combat-related PTSD is the hallmark disorder that results from battlefield combat exposure, there are many other deployment-related stress disorders that occur as well. *Caring for Veterans With Deployment-Related Stress Disorders* is unique in that it not only provides a concise review of the epidemiology, assessment, treatment, and possible prevention of PTSD, but it also targets a number of other important deployment-related conditions and events such as traumatic brain injury, polytrauma, sexual harassment, military sexual assault, and the impact of deployment on couples, families, and children. Finally, the book appropriately uses the term *veterans* to refer to all of our veterans who are currently serving on active duty in one of the branches of the military, including the National Guard and Reserves, as well as those veterans who have retired, been discharged, or separated from active duty service.

The editors have assembled an excellent list of 38 chapter coauthors, including many of the leaders in the field. The majority of the coauthors (25) have a primary or secondary affiliation with the VA. This VA-heavy emphasis is appropriate, considering that VA mental health researchers and clinicians often dedicate their professional careers to caring for and improving the lives of our estimated 23 million American military veterans. Seven coauthors are from leading civilian research institutions, four are from industry (RAND Corporation), and two work at Department of Defense institutions.

One limitation of the book is that it appears that only one co-author, Captain William Nash, MD, U.S. Navy (retired), has direct military and deployment experience. Although service in the military and deployment to a war zone are not necessary requirements for understanding the military and warrior culture, it certainly helps. One other limitation of the book is that there are limited data to provide specific evidence-based recommendations for topics covered in some of the chapters. This lack of military-relevant research data leaves some chapters to focus primarily on clinical experience and evidence-formed hypotheses.

Our Nation's Mental Health Challenge

In summary, we are at a critical time in our nation's history of military conflict. Deadlines have now been set as to when

all deployed service members are expected to be redeployed from Iraq and Afghanistan: “Our challenge is to provide the best possible support for the more than 2 million members of America’s all-volunteer military force who have served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)” (p. 4).

Failure to provide such support, and failure to do something different from what was done after the Vietnam War, will place our OEF and OIF warrior veterans at risk for lifelong chronic deployment-related stress disorders. *Caring for Veterans With Deployment-Related Stress Disorders* is a book all mental health clinicians should have in their academic tool kit to help prepare them for work now and in the future with veterans and their families.

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Footnotes

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