

# If You've Never Been There You Wouldn't Understand: The Evolutionary Reasons for Veteran Mistrust

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When veterans return from war, many experience difficulties with interpersonal trust, particularly those suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While proximate explanations for veteran mistrust have been proposed, the ultimate explanations lie within our evolved psychology, shaped as it was by a long evolutionary history of coalitionary violence between men. The exchange of signals of mutual commitment, especially in the context of violence, reflects important features of our evolved psychology. While such exchanges may have typified the small, cohesive social environments in which our brains evolved, those exchanges are comparatively lacking in the modern societies to which veterans return, resulting in what biologists describe as a *phylogenetic mismatch*. This mismatch may underlie a variety of veteran reintegration problems. Though largely neglected in the literature, evolutionary explanations for PTSD sequelae among veterans offer invaluable insights for clinicians, family members, friends, or employers interfacing with veterans during their reintegration into peacetime civilian life.

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## Evolutionary Foundations

From the human dyad to the global economy, trust has been an influential force in human affairs (Fukuyama, 1995; Simpson, 2007). Among men, perhaps nowhere is there a more critical role for trust than in the context of war. Men, who predominate among the world's fighting forces, carry forward rules of trust and cooperation that our species forged through millions of years of male coalitionary violence. These rules are grounded in evolutionary biology. Although women have in recent decades

increasingly been granted combat positions in the United States and other militaries, paralleling the shrinking gender gap across many facets of modern society, women entering the military join a highly masculinized culture founded on male evolutionary psychology, and are largely expected to adapt to that culture. For this reason, I focus here on evolutionary trust among men.

When men come home from war, too often their everyday capacity to trust other human beings has shifted from its prewar frame. What most of us in peacetime usually take for granted—the ability to move about among one's community, casually, without apprehension—becomes compromised as concerns over others' motives rush into the foreground. This issue of trust is often central to a slew of painful and disruptive social problems for the veteran—withdrawal, family strain, reluctance to leave the home. Mistrust can lead to arguments, or even fights, when bad intentions are reflexively imputed to others. While often perplexing to family, friends, or coworkers, whose mental trust “module” is better tuned to community

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than combat, it is not hard to imagine how getting into conflict with people, or withdrawing from them altogether, could arise from the perception that human interaction carries a high probability of danger. Psychosocial problems such as these are symptoms, or outcomes of symptoms, that typically fall under the rubric of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, difficulties trusting other may also arise among returning veterans who do not meet diagnostic criteria for PTSD.

There are many proximate explanations for psychological phenomena. But the fields best suited to unpacking the ultimate origins of our tendencies are arguably the evolutionary sciences. These sciences tend to answer the *why* of a specific trait or behavior, to describe its original function. A relatively small but growing body of research in the field of evolutionary psychiatry is beginning to illuminate the ultimate *reasons* for clinical sequelae, explaining how many phenomena that we now regard as pathological actually have their roots in adaptation (Stevens & Price, 2000). PTSD symptoms are among these adaptations (Cantor, 2005).

First, it is important to understand that we spent 99% of our evolutionary history living in small bands of hunter-gatherers, in environments very different than the ones in which we currently live (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997). Given this time ratio, and the fact that our technological development has blazingly outpaced our biological evolution, much of our current psychology reflects adaptations in the environments in which our brains spent the most time evolving—notably in the African savannas where survival was often brutal and tenuous, and mortal threats from the neighboring tribe were common. Many of our passions, preferences, dislikes, and fears therefore reflect that evolutionary past.

The same is true for our current psychopathologies. Ties to our ancestors' world can be traced from anxiety disorders. For example, snakes, spiders, and heights represent dangers prevalent in our evolutionary past. As a result they are vastly overrepresented among phobias, whereas phobic fears of dangers more realistic in the modern era, such as cars or electrical outlets, are minimal because our exposure to them has occurred during such a short span of our evolutionary history (Agras, Sylvester, & Oliveau, 1969).

Similar ties to our ancestral past can be seen in PTSD. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th edition; *DSM-5*) describes four main PTSD symptoms clusters: (a) intrusive (or “re-experiencing”) symptoms, such as nightmares, intrusive memories, or triggers; (b) avoidance of stimuli such as places, people, or situations associated with a traumatic event; (c) alterations in consciousness in mood, such as chronic anger, fear, horror, or chronic negative beliefs, for example, “No one can be trusted”; (d) alterations in arousal, such as anger outbursts, sleep disturbance, or hypervigilance (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 272). While it is understandable how these phenomena can cause distress in PTSD-sufferers, PTSD sequelae, like phobias, are rooted in adaptations designed to help our ancestors survive dangerous environments.

Australian evolutionary psychiatrist Chris Cantor (2005) argues that reexperiencing symptoms (intrusive memories, triggers, etc.) were designed to ensure that dangerous encounters are never forgotten, and tend, because they continually replay mentally, to reinforce caution. Similarly, argues Cantor, nightmares consolidate the transfer of danger information into long-term memory storage, also to ensure that vital, potentially life-saving information is never lost. The more obviously useful symptoms are (*hyper*) *vigilance*, which helps us to detect danger, and *avoidance*, which keeps us away from potentially high-risk situations or places. For example, if the last time you walked past a certain cave a giant bear rushed out and nearly killed you, avoiding that cave in the future has survival value.

Carrying the logic forward to the dangers faced by combatants in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the same can be said about avoiding crowded market places, open spaces with no cover, or sitting with one's back to the door—behaviors common among veterans of these wars. Avoiding these normal behaviors in safe civilian environments is not particularly adaptive—in fact it is mostly maladaptive—but avoiding them in a combat zone is critical for survival.

The impulse of many combat veterans to continue avoiding situations or places (such as crowds) after they return from war may have its roots in the fact that mortal threats of our evolutionary past were far more enduring across the

lifespans of our ancestors than they are today. In fact, animal brains are programmed to learn danger information very quickly but to forget it very slowly, which makes perfect sense—those who quickly forgot dangerous experiences would be rapidly weeded from the gene pool. There is even evidence to suggest that the tendency to develop PTSD may be transmitted *epigenetically*, meaning that traumas experienced by an individual may trigger changes in that person's genome that are passed on to his or her offspring, making these children more sensitive to developing PTSD (Yehuda et al., 2013). This finding paints a fairly dark picture of our evolutionary past. If it was adaptive for trauma sufferers to pass genes coding for wariness onto their offspring (and all the other defensive responses of PTSD), mortal danger may have been pretty much continuous, or at very least prevalent *across generations* in the lives of our ancestors.

While predator avoidance may underpin many of the defensive responses we see in PTSD—almost none of our prehuman ancestors were the apex predators of their day—the biggest threat during much of our evolutionary history came from *other humans*. Homicides among modern day hunter-gatherer societies, which may resemble the societies of our past, are high, and injuries inferred from archaeological evidence suggest that human-on-human conflict was prevalent among our predecessors (Mirazón Lahr et al., 2016; Pinker, 2007). Hence, the same logic of avoiding cave bear entrances applies to avoiding placing trust in potentially dangerous humans. In this sense, it would be adaptive to mistrust, for example, an ingroup member with a violent temperament, or people from an unfamiliar tribe. Imagine the risk, particularly for males of our evolutionary past, of walking alone into an unfamiliar tribe's camp with complete trust in the good will of the men living there. It is not difficult to see how a certain degree of interpersonal mistrust, particularly among men, would keep individuals from being weeded from the gene pool.

The vast majority of the world's intergroup violence is enacted by men, from intertribal conflicts, to inner city gang fights, to world wars (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). Our species' long history of intergroup conflict has had important implications for fitness among men. For men, warfare has often

involved either getting removed from the gene pool by other men, or acquiring mates or resources that facilitate mating. Understandably, these direct selective pressures have shaped male psychology. Known as the *male warrior hypothesis* (Van Vugt, De Cremer, & Janssen, 2007), such pressures have resulted in an ingroup/outgroup psychology where outgroup members are treated with suspicion and hostility, and ingroup members coalesce to form trusting coalitions against outsiders, often on the fields of combat. Research finds, for example, that men tend to be more xenophobic than women (e.g., Sidanius, Pratto, & Brief, 1995), and tend to characterize outsiders as nonhuman more easily (Van Vugt, 2009), creating the illusion of genetic distance, which may make them easier to kill (Grossman, 1995). Men, more than women, also tend to endorse the idea that their ingroup should establish a dominance position over outgroups (Sidanius et al., 1995).

As we would expect if intergroup warfare has been a critical driver of male psychology, not only are men warier and more hostile toward outsiders, but they also appear to be primed to form coalitions with other men in order to aggress against outside (male) coalitions. Across history, men have tended to have stronger kinship ties than women (Wrangham & Peterson, 1996), not unlike chimpanzees, their primate cousins. Jane Goodall observed that “as a result of a unique combination of strong affiliative bonds between adult males on the one hand and an unusually hostile and violently aggressive attitude toward nongroup individuals on the other,” the chimpanzee “has clearly reached a stage where he stands at the very threshold of human achievement in destruction, cruelty, and planned intergroup conflict” (Goodall, 1991, p. 137).

More direct evidence comes from the research lab. One study found that men identify and cooperate with others significantly more when experimenters posit an outside threat than under no-threat conditions; this response is largely not found among women (Van Vugt et al., 2007). Indeed, brothers in arms have reported having closer emotional connections to each other than to their own wives (Grossman, 1995). In short, the pressures of coalitionary violence speak to the utility of mistrusting outsider males, and forming trusting relationships with insider males. Failure or inability to do

either would have posed a survival risk to our male ancestors.

Another type of risk may occur in trusting an unworthy comrade in battle. In combat the ability to rely on one's comrades is critical, and rules governing cooperation must be negotiated. For a deeper understanding of alliance making among men at war, it is helpful to review certain characteristics of our biology. First, we must reconcile with the fact that lethal aggression is a fundamental part of life. From the most basic life forms to the most complex, survival usually involves killing other life forms for their energy. Genes coding for both cooperation and aggression are what orchestrate all of this.

In his revolutionary book, *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins (1976) explains how organisms, including humans, function as the survival machines of genes. Thus, genes can propagate more copies of themselves by influencing behaviors, even if those behaviors occur in other (usually related) individuals. Consider acts of altruism such as helping an individual at your own expense, including in situations that involve putting your own life at risk. If I save my child from mortal danger, but get killed in the process, 50% of my genes are still passed on. If I save my nephew, 25% of my genes are still passed on, and so on. The likelihood I will lay my life on the line for someone is typically proportional to the amount of genetic material we share. On this point, British geneticist J. B. S. Haldane once said, "I would lay down my life for two brothers or eight cousins" (as cited in Ackerman, 2001, p. 141). This process is known as *kin altruism*, and experience demonstrates that vets relate to their warrior comrades as kin.

When our male ancestors went on raids, or defended themselves from the neighboring tribes, most were in fact blood relatives (as were the people in the camps they defended or provided for). Risks taken in battle were therefore likely to have genetic payoff. As our societies grew, our shared genes thinned out, including those between men in combat. Yet today militaries around the world exaggerate genetic relatedness—promoting the idea that fighting men are brothers in arms, or are fighting for the same fatherland or motherland. Similarly, they tend to promote enmity toward the enemy by exaggerating genetic distance—characterizing the enemy as dogs, pigs, monsters, or in some other way as subhuman (Grossman, 1995). Exaggerating either genetic closeness or

distance may thus facilitate either altruism or killing. Often, however, little coaxing is necessary. The ease with which fighting men call themselves brothers is notable, as is how readily military leaders experience strong paternal feelings toward their subordinates. This process may even extend to the general populace as many civilians will speak of their country's troops as "our boys" and feel strong emotional ties as they would to their own offspring, even when none of them actually are. The facility with which these genetic parallels are made suggests that our brains may be preprimed for kin altruism in the context of violence.

While it's at least statistically true that blood is thicker than water—most people trust their genetic relatives more than nonrelatives—humans are able to extend their cooperation far beyond their genetic kin, even in performing acts of altruism. American evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers explained the evolution of altruistic acts between genetically *unrelated* (or distantly related) individuals, what he calls *reciprocal altruism* (Trivers, 1971). He noted that when altruistic exchanges occur between nonkin, it is often with the expectation that help will later be reciprocated as those acts of altruism are remembered. As such, these exchanges are expected to aid the survival of the helper's genes when he or she gets paid back.

Although humans are highly adept at reciprocal altruism, which influences everything from interactions with coworkers to global politics, still there is the ageless tendency for genes to program organisms to behave in self-interested ways, namely by cheating—attempting to receive help without taking the risks or expending the energy required for reciprocating. A cheater on the reciprocal exchange could be, for example, the hunter who is perfectly willing to eat a portion of his tribesman's kills, but who secretly scarfs all of his own kills without sharing. Another example would be a warrior whose comrades put their lives on the line to protect, but who fails to take similar risks. In this context, cheating on the reciprocal exchange can easily have fatal consequences for all parties.

### Costly Signaling

Nature has provided for this contingency by making sensitive cheater-detection systems in the brains of species that reciprocate. As a result, humans tend to be extremely wary and

mistrustful of those who cheat, and spend a great deal of effort to define ingroup membership. One way to accomplish this is by exchanging signals of mutual commitment. Behavioral ecologist William Irons (2001) reminds us that, “for such signals of commitment to be successful they must be hard to fake. Other things being equal, the costlier the signal the less likely it is to be false.”

Costly signals therefore allow ingroup members to cooperate, even altruistically, with a degree of certainty and trust. This idea is known as *Costly Signaling Theory*. Membership in some tribes, for example, requires harsh initiation rites, such as ritualistic scarring, which tells other group members that this person is trustworthy and will reciprocate if called upon. In other words, individuals are much less likely to put themselves through this kind of pain unless they are sincere, thus reducing the chance of freeloaders among groups of reciprocators.

Societies are filled with examples of costly signals, even outside the context of war. Anthropologist Richard Sosis (2006) writes about how costly signals in religions often take the form of the three B's—behaviors, bans, and badges. Behaviors can be things like long pilgrimages or time-intensive rituals; bans can be restrictions on certain foods, tobacco, or alcohol; and badges may be long beards, circumcision, or special clothing. We can observe the three B's across all kinds of human groups. Some fraternity “brothers,” for example, will brand or scar their respective Greek letters onto their arms as “badges” of commitment. Such signals are common in the military. Unit tattoos, grueling training regimens, extremely harsh or painful qualification procedures, such as in the case of elite forces like Navy Seals or Army Rangers—each stands as a signal of commitment. Many qualification hurdles come with actual military insignia.

Costly signals of commitment are not only common in the military, but they hold the ultimate importance. In war one makes the commitment to push past any fear, pain, or personal risk, in order to help one's comrade fight other men, as he will you. Failure or refusal to do so can bring death. For this reason, cheaters on this exchange are severely punished. Across the history of organized warfare, treason, desertion, or cowardice have frequently been dealt with by execution, either on the order of military lead-

ers, or more informally by equals, as in the notorious practice of *fragging* in Vietnam—killing one's own with fragmentation grenades.

One critical means of signaling the willingness and ability to reciprocate in war is by not showing fear. Excessive, or even *any* overt expression of fear, may call into question one's ability to help on the battlefield. This concern is not without merit. Panicking while under attack, or, say, when attending to a badly injured comrade, can be dangerous. Importantly, fear can prove not only dangerous to the individual panicking, but also to those whose lives depend on his keeping a cool head. This is why emotional suppression is so highly valued in military settings, and to males more generally who have been fighting other males since before modern humans appeared on the scene. As such, men will often apologize to each other if they ever “break down” and shed a tear. While having taken a beating by social scientists studying gender role norms, male stoicism can mean the difference between life and death. This is true not only for suppressing fear. Excessively grieving one's buddy in theater can also be a fatal distraction. In short, trust between fighting men includes trusting that one's comrade is able to contain his emotions.

Costly signaling may also be at the root of veterans' difficulties trusting civilians, who haven't proved themselves in combat, which is often voiced in the refrain, “If you've never been there, how can you understand me?” This divide takes many forms. For example, veterans may become frustrated with the relative lack of discipline and order in the civilian world. Compared to the military, such laxity feels not just sloppy, but also dangerous. In combat, relaxing the imperative for things like precision or being on time can mean the difference between life and death, whereas it rarely means this in most sectors of the civilian world. Hence veterans may overreact to what are relatively minor infractions among civilians; being five minutes late for a meeting may feel to the veteran like an inexcusable breach of trust.

The rift between veterans and civilians reflects differences in the practical demands of war and peace. But there are more ancient mechanisms at work here as well, related to group size. Returning from combat may have been simpler in the societies of our evolutionary past. In these societies men—who often lived,

slept, ate, and hunted together—left to war together, and, for those who survived, returned together. After war they went back to their usual routines, side by side. Importantly, the groups to which warriors returned were small enough that they recognized everyone in them. Moreover, hunter-gatherer tribes often don distinguishers such as clothing, makeup, jewelry, tattoos, ritualized scars, and so forth, which not only help form a shared cultural identity, but also have the practical value of making allies easier to recognize, much as when soldiers wear the same uniforms. These small, homogenous-looking groups were the social contexts in which our brains evolved, and there is evidence to suggest that our brains are prewired to operate in groups topping out at around 150 people (Dunbar, 1992).

But technology has changed our world faster than our brains could change along with it. The gulf between the current environment and an evolved trait is sometimes referred to as a *phylogenetic mismatch*, particularly when that gulf causes problems in the organism. Modern group size has been described as one of those mismatches (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997). Compared with hunter-gatherer groups, we now live among gargantuan collections of human beings. In the case of modern combat, the mismatch becomes exaggerated. When men go to war, their evolved need for costly signals awakens with force. During combat they are surrounded by their “tribesmen,” living closely together in small groups, much as we did in our evolutionary past (Junger, 2016). Some scholars even point out that modern fighting units mirror the size of early hominid groups, and that militaries have settled unwittingly on evolutionarily familiar unit sizes (Cantor, 2005). Yet today, when men come home from war the unit is dispersed—one man goes back to Texas, the other to Vermont, and the next to California. They are no longer surrounded by those with whom they had established reciprocal arrangements, that small group for whom affiliation was reinforced by military uniforms and unit patches, not to mention close, daily interactions, where one man continually proved to the other that he is willing to die in order to protect him. Instead they return to vast megalopolises of unfamiliar people, each focusing on different tasks, cooperating, but only in distal ways, and few clearly distinguished as friendly. If our

brains were wired to operate in smaller bands, it’s no wonder that many veterans want to retreat into the refuge of their homes.

Despite no longer being required to wear military uniforms, many veterans continue to wear their campaign colors on baseball caps, T-shirts, pins, or to swath their vehicles with bumper stickers; these insignia advertise that one has put his or her life on the line, making them, in essence, costly signals. Many vets take comfort at seeing them. Even so, compared with the military and with our tribal past, such markers may appear too infrequently amid the vast oceans of unidentified civilians that they return to, leaving many veterans feeling alone, as “tribesmen” without a “tribe.”

Because most civilians never need to rely on the support of their comrades to survive the day, the need to emphasize their commitment to lay their lives down for their fellow citizens holds little practical meaning. This leaves many veterans at odds with the world they live in. In this sense, peacetime societies of the modern era may never fully accommodate veterans’ trust needs. Instead the veteran’s struggle is in re-learning the rules of the relatively safe environments to which they return.

### Veterans and Tribal Bonding

Even in the wake of combat, the urge to close ranks with other men around danger remains both emotionally intuitive and powerful. Many veterans seek out proxies for the tribal bonds they experienced in combat. Some substitutes are relatively benign—the bowling leagues or the intramural sports teams which give veterans another taste of vigorous competition, and of uniting with other men toward a common goal. Others gravitate toward more risky sets. The notorious biker gang the *Hells Angels* was in part founded by veterans, and has high veteran membership, as do many other motorcycle gangs (Michalowski & Dubish, 2001). The bonding within these tribal proxies is often achieved via the glue of mutual trust. Here we have groups of (often armed) rough men wearing insignias and living dangerous lifestyles, with a mutual commitment to get each other’s back in a fight. There is much that would seem to match up with the evolved psychology of men. Motorcycle gangs are nothing if not tribal, and may even engage in intertribal warfare.

Motorcycle clubs that are not generally associated with criminality have similar appeal.

Thrill-seeking attracted some returning veterans to choose a saloon society lifestyle centered around motorcycles. Positive views of military experiences, and the intense camaraderie they bred, also make such a lifestyle attractive . . . Conventional activities afforded no acceptable alternatives and these men were threatened with a loss of identity, companionship, and security as military involvement ceased, says James Quinn (2001, p. 388), a professor at University of North Texas.

In an interview for *Military Times*, retired Marine Sgt. Derek Schwartz said about his membership in the Leathernecks, a biker club of exclusively Marine veterans, “Everyone just takes care of each other. It’s a brotherhood very similar to the one in the Marines. It’s one of the most therapeutic things I’ve experienced outside of active duty” (Anderson, 2015). Don Davis, who writes the *Aging Rebel*, a biker news blog from Los Angeles, highlights the surge in motorcycle club membership after Vietnam, and suggests that part of what drove men toward these tight-knit groups of men was returning to a nation that didn’t receive them (Anderson, 2015).

### Lessons From Our Past

Some scholars, such as war correspondent Sebastian Junger (2015), have suggested that we can do far better than what occurred after Vietnam, which is encouraging given that motorcycle clubs are obviously not the solution for every veteran. Junger posits that an important reason many American veterans feel disconnected when they return from war is that wars of the modern era are often fought in distant lands, which leaves the people they return to ignorant of their experiences. This is different, he argues, than the cultures of our ancestors, where war was fought close to home (or *at home*), which allowed the societies that warriors fought for to coexperience the actual ravages of war on some level. Further, argues Junger, protocols designed to share the experiences of battle were the norm. He suggests that we take a lesson from Native American societies, many of which have rituals largely unchanged since our days as hunter-gatherers:

. . . we could emulate many tribal societies . . . by making every town and city hall in the country avail-

able to veterans who want to speak publicly about the war. The vapid phrase “I support the troops” would then mean actually showing up at your town hall every Veterans Day to hear these people out. Some vets will be angry, some will be proud, and some will be crying so hard they cannot speak. But a community ceremony like that would finally return the experience of war to our entire nation, rather than just leaving it to the people who fought.

This is an intriguing idea. Here we have been talking specifically about trust. Having a small group of people waiting to receive your experiences would not only shrink the societal rift that so many veterans find isolating, but also foster trust in a powerful way.

### Veterans and Behavioral Health Care Services

Difficulties with trust are widely seen as central to PTSD, and major PTSD treatments focus directly on correcting trust issues (Resick, Monson, & Chard, 2007). Working through difficulties with trust is essential to restore adaptive interpersonal functioning to the lives of combat veterans with PTSD—trust arguably being a prerequisite for meaningful relationships, and by default, good emotional health. Targeting mistrust has great clinical value because rigid mistrust among veterans often makes them wary of the very psychotherapies designed to correct it.

From those veterans who push past mistrust (and all the other barriers) enough to drag themselves into a first psychotherapy session, clinicians often hear trust concerns expressed as, “If you’ve never been there, how can you help me?” Behind this seemingly simple question are ancient, often unspoken rules governing trust between humans, particularly between fighting men, which date back millions of years. Understanding these rules and their origins does much to illuminate trust and mistrust as they shape the lives of those who return from war.

Given the value of containing emotions, not just in preserving life, but also in preserving trust, it should also come as no surprise that many veterans come to the therapy office highly conflicted about expressing their feelings. Shame, another unpleasant emotion with a useful function, that is, helping humans to avoid socially risky situations, often follows the expression of sadness and fear. Because psychotherapy for PTSD often requires expressing fear

or experiencing it, as well as working through grief and loss, the demands of treatment often run directly counter to the demands of the battlefield. Novice clinicians (or even family members) may make the mistake of trivializing emotional control, or politicizing it by framing it solely as “machismo”. It is not difficult to see how such errors can result in veterans doubting they can ever be understood, or thinking that mushy therapists and combat veterans simply come from moral tribes far too different to work toward a common mission.

Mistrust of the clinician, or other civilians, is tied to costly signaling in other ways. One kind of costly signal is one’s history fighting. This is an ancient signal among men, and can be seen working in nonhuman primates such as chimpanzees, our closest relatives. When calling for help in a fight, chimpanzees are more likely to be helped by those whom they have helped in the past (de Waal, 1989). More telling, if a chimpanzee fails to help in a fight, that chimp is more likely to actually get *attacked* when calling for help (de Waal, 1998)—not unlike men who are executed for cowardice. The point is that a history of having put oneself on the line is perhaps the best costly signal one can offer, and so naturally combat veterans trust those that have also served in combat. So valuable is the trust won by combat experience that faking this costly signal can bring about violence against other veterans. VA clinicians have reported having to protect probable malingerers (fraudulently seeking VA disability benefits) from assault by *bona fide* veteran infantrymen who recognized their made-up war stories (Junger, 2015). The value of this costly signal is the *ultimate* reason why civilian clinicians often get asked, “If you’ve never been there, how can you help me”?

Just as it is important to recognize the ancient, evolutionary influences on our lives, it is also worth noting that human beings, because of our evolved psychology, are immensely adaptable. More so than any other animal that has ever walked the earth. And so, even though mistrust may be “written in our genes,” irreparably shattered trust is not inevitable after combat. Most combat veterans return from war without PTSD or significant trust problems. Methodologic and bureaucratic issues have resulted in widely varying base rates of PTSD among newly returning U.S. veterans (see McNally & Frueh, 2013). How-

ever, even the more liberal estimates, such as Institute of Medicine’s 13%–20% (IOM, 2012), suggest that majority of veterans adapt to peacetime environments fairly well. And for the rest there is hope. Psychotherapies have been developed to assist in the process of adapting back to life in the modern worlds we have created. Those treatments that have been shown in randomized, controlled research trials to be effective, over and over, are known as evidence-based psychotherapies (EBPs), such as prolonged exposure therapy (PE; Powers et al., 2010) and cognitive processing therapy (CPT; Monson et al., 2006).

PE is a 9-week training protocol in which patients are exposed to memories and situations or places that they have been avoiding, until the fight-or-flight response is extinguished, and those stimuli are no longer generate anxiety. CPT is a 12-week protocol that corrects maladaptive thought patterns that arise in response to the trauma. Addressing mistrust and safety concerns are primary goals of CPT. Often CPT interventions help veterans extend their closed circle of trust from the men they served with to the larger societies to which they return. From an evolutionary perspective, men with combat-related PTSD appear to revert back to an ancient repertoire of responses designed for our ancestral environments—avoidance, turning inward to tribe-sized male alliances, mistrusting those outside the ingroup, and so on. Given that PE and CPT recalibrate those responses so that veterans can function adaptively in peacetime civilian life, the treatments in effect serve to reverse the phylogenetic mismatch created by their return to our large modern societies.

As a psychologist at the VA specializing in EBPs for PTSD over the past decade, the author has personally helped hundreds of veterans achieve healthy and more interpersonally satisfying levels of trust. A majority of these veterans no longer met formal diagnostic criteria for PTSD by the end of treatment. But many of my veteran patients have reported that when they first met me they distrusted not only me personally, but the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) I represented, the therapy I was “peddling,” and nearly everything else about the whole process. However, across the course of therapy I evolved into a trusted ally—and in some cases, I had become like a family member, or even a type of peer to vets. For readers



unfamiliar with PTSD, this is saying quite a lot. In this regard, the recent emergence of veteran and other peer counseling programs offers behavioral health care interventions that are attractive to veterans who might otherwise be reluctant to reach out for psychological support because of their mistrust of nonveteran personnel (Castellano, 2012). Often peer-support services serve as a bridge to EBPs for PTSD. Critically, through the use of EBPs veterans are able to develop a means to gauge trustworthiness in more objective and flexible ways, which equates to worlds of improvement in interpersonal functioning, both within and outside the therapy office.

There is clear value to creating spaces and processes that resonate with the evolved minds of our veterans, as well as to friends and families waiting for them back home. Doing so has great potential to create more intimate, more compassionate societies, which benefits everyone. I have also found immense value in sharing the evolutionary bases for PTSD-related reactions in session. The insight such knowledge affords can be profound. Most combat veterans are unusually receptive to the idea of a brain designed for survival, perhaps more so than those who have never faced death at the hands of other men. Moreover, many feel less “broken” when they understand that, in a way, PTSD is the brain doing what it was designed to do, but in a different time and circumstance. For all these reasons, evolutionary science should always be allowed a place in conversations about who we are, most especially among our warriors, who carry forward one of the most ancient and dangerous occupations on earth.

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