

# **WARNING SIGNS, TRIGGERS, AND COPING STRATEGIES FOR IRAQI WAR VETERANS**

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## **WARNING SIGNS THAT HAVE LEFT THE IMPRINT OF THE WAR, RESULTING IN DIFFICULTIES TRANSITIONING TO CONUS AND HOME**

1. Vivid flashbacks and recurrences of images from the war that are painful, intrusive repetitive, and undesired
2. Nightmares that are disturbing in nature, often with associated sleep disturbances (i.e.; insomnia, nighttime awakenings)
3. Social isolation, alienation, and withdrawal
4. Remaining detached or emotionally distant from others, even in their presence
5. Difficulty or inability to experience or express emotions appropriately (for instance, crying when sad or grieving)
6. Remaining on "high alert" status (hypervigilance) and scanning the surrounding environment continuously
7. Obvious startle responses to loud noises, being approached or touched by others
8. Excessive boredom with the commonplace and ordinary aspects of life on the home front, thrill-seeking and looking for the "adrenalin rush", while posing unnecessary risks to self and family members
9. Finding little worth, meaning, or purpose to life on the home front and longing to be back in the war zone to find it
10. Preoccupation with bitter and angry feelings directed towards a society or government for maltreatment, exploitation, and failure to keep promises, as has been the case with veterans of previous wars
11. Feeling confused, angry, or cynical in regard to one's fate in life; pessimism and hopelessness about one's future and any possibility of altering what lies ahead

## TRIGGERS THAT MAY BRING ABOUT AN OUTPOURING OF UNDESIRABLE, VIVID, AND DISTURBING MEMORIES

1. Sights, sounds, smells, actual physical surroundings, and situations that are similar or suggestive of the war zone
2. Powerful emotional states of mind that are reminders of those experienced in the war zone (terror, rage, grief, adrenalin rush, etc.)
3. Repeated or current exposure to traumatic events by the soldier or significant others, which may include any degree of victimization, assault, racism, or catastrophic losses
4. Anniversary dates or noteworthy "time anchors" such as holidays, birthdays, times of the year, or specific dates that are reminiscent of significant events in the war zone
5. Media exposure to war zone events that are traumatic in nature and clear reminders of actual events (i.e.; terrorist attacks), whether similar or dissimilar to actual war zone events; television broadcasts or movies with similar scenes, settings, or events that occurred in actuality
6. Music, lyrics, or melodies that elicit feelings related to those experienced during or following previous traumatic events
7. Experiences involving significant losses, such as death of a loved one, divorce, separation, financial or job losses, geographic relocation, serious illnesses, loss of bodily functions or parts, or imminent death
8. Authority conflicts involving medical, governmental, religious, command, or supervisory personnel, etc.

## WAR ZONE SURVIVAL MODES

1. Instinctual and genetically based **fight or flight reactions**: engaging and destroying the enemy; withdrawing and retreating in order to return to combat missions day after day
  - A. This may lead to excessive guilt, humiliation, regret, and rage in regard to taking human lives in order to survive and protect the lives of others
  - B. This may occur in theater or return to haunt the veteran many months or years following redeployment
2. **Emotional detachment**: denial of feelings to protect oneself from the horrors of war; self-anesthetizing to escape feelings of rage, fear, anxiety, shock, repulsion, depression, grief, etc.
  - A. The negative side to this is remaining detached and unable to

experience a normal range of emotions following the return to family and "civilian" life on the home front; perfecting the ability to function at a level where emotions are unavailable.

3. **Tunnel vision:** preserving an intensely focused state of mind to assure full attention to tasks and missions at hand, while unmindful of surrounding events

- A. The inability to switch out of this mode may severely impair relationships with loved ones and prevent full enjoyment of what life has to offer.

4. **External discharging of emotions:** finding means to discharge pent up stress, anger, frustration, grief and loss, fear, anxiety, and an assortment of negative emotions, critical to survival in the combat theater; these must be set free to thwart the fueling of continued internal anger, previously directed at the enemy

- A. It may be extremely difficult for soldiers to free themselves from accumulated anger and rage in the face of insurgent and terrorist tactics and enemies who wear no uniform, resulting in constrained emotions that may "detonate" when least expected at innocents or other Americans in theater or loved ones at home. It may become all too easy to bury feelings until they escalate to the point of eruption or to continuously socially isolate oneself to prevent this from happening.

5. **Challenging of longstanding faith in a higher power:** many may find that faith cannot sustain them when forced to confront killing and brutal crimes against humanity in order to save their own lives and the lives of their fellow soldiers

- A. Spiritual conflicts are frequently carried home, with lingering questions as to why a higher power would allow one to carry out the taking of human life, for chaplains to bless troops before engaging the enemy, and for so much human suffering and loss of life to occur; re-evaluating one's own morals and values may bring about significant distress and a multitude of unanswered questions that plague the soul.

## **SURVIVAL STRATEGIES THAT MAY BE HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON THE HOME FRONT**

### **1. Rage, Agitation, and Frustration**

Rage directed at the enemy promotes survival in the war zone, but may not serve the soldier or his/her family well on the home front. In the War in Iraq, the enemy uses covert operations, the element of surprise, and hasty retreat. The insurgency is often not recognizable from non-combatants. It becomes all too easy to bear and unload rage against an unseen enemy and to carry an unbearable burden of frustration during wartime, particularly in

response to a stealth enemy. These feelings can certainly escalate with continuous and intense combat exposure and in the face of the multiple losses of life, limb, and devastating injuries. Unfortunately, hauling such pent up wrath, agitation, and the overwhelming desire to act upon impulse back home may have dire consequences.

## **2. Dehumanizing the Enemy**

Wartime training fosters a standard detachment tactic: to dehumanize the enemy and to perceive them as evil, immoral, and cruel, and inhuman. Though there may be great truth to this, such an approach endorses racism and the development of negative stereotypes, mind-sets, and language (towel heads, wops, gooks, and the like) aimed at the enemy. It is much simpler to seek out and destroy an enemy for which one has developed tremendous hatred, rather than an adversary who is seen as good, honorable, and fighting for a just cause. This kind of intense loathing can lead to condemnation of those who are of differing races, creeds, religions, and ethnic heritages, poisoning and polluting attitudes over the course of a lifetime and justifying the very rationale for the war itself in the minds of the soldiers who fought it.

## **3. Social Isolation and Alienation**

Emotional detachment is readily promoted by withdrawing from others. On the other hand, the remarkable bonds formed in times of hardship and adversity can sustain brother and sister soldiers through what might otherwise be unendurable. This is a double-edged sword in wartime, with the overwhelming losses of fellow soldiers occurring too frequently and in rapid succession. Time and time again, removing oneself from the nearness of human contact to avoid further agony when soldiers are maimed or killed, becomes the mode of emotional survival. On the home front, veterans may also become uncomfortable relating to anyone who is not a veteran, as no one else could possibly appreciate their experiences. Some war veterans refuse to become involved with veterans themselves, to evade interactions and avoid any discussion of painful and disturbing memories and images.

## **4. Substance Abuse**

Drinkin' and druggin' are the most commonly used means of numbing oneself out from what one prefers not to feel. Traditionally, alcohol intake is promoted in military circles, and is usually low-cost and very readily available. Even in harsh and/or combat environments, soldiers have demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness in the acquisition or manufacture of alcohol and recreational drugs. Soldiers who arrived in theater with substance abuse problems may return with even more serious problems. There is also the potential to acquire a habitual use or abuse problem in theater, seemingly as a survival strategy to escape the psychological wounds of war. Back at home, it may become all too easy to fall back on this habit pattern in times of difficulty.

## 5. **Risk-Taking and Thrill-Seeking**

The adrenaline rush of wartime is a potent cocktail that can be physically, behaviorally, and psychologically addictive. A hankering for danger can be a hard habit to break. Though this may permit survival in combat and combat-related missions, becoming a thrill junkie may be very difficult to surrender upon return to the home front. Looking for life in the fast lane and living on the extremist edge of disaster is likely to plunge the soldier right back into memories and emotions that characterized their wartime experiences. Like a crack addiction, there is no easy switch for shutting this off. For those not employed in high risk occupations (fire and rescue, emergency medical services, law enforcement, Special Forces, Rangers, and so on), the need to satisfy the urge for excitement may lead to devastating consequences. There have been a startling number of Iraqi War veterans killed in single-occupant vehicle accidents upon return to CONUS. Others may try to live life on the wildest side possible, engaging in excesses of speed, food, drink, and whatever extremes are available to them. There is rarely a happy ending in such cases.

## 6. **GALLOWS HUMOR**

Laughing about the endless horrors and chaos of war may be absurd and otherwise inappropriate, but finding amusement in the terrible, forges bonds of camaraderie and friendship in times of devastation and loss. Initially, this allows soldiers to stop themselves from confronting genuine feelings in regard to the grisly and repulsive nature of war. This will not, however, remove associated feelings and images from the mind of the soldier and may only serve to delay dealing with what may come back to haunt. Humor and irreverence is healthy and adaptive during challenging times in life. On the opposing side is the tendency to transport anger about what has been intolerable back to home, resulting in longstanding cynicism, rage, and the probability of derogatory, critical, and insulting remarks in the face of mounting frustration.

## **WHAT TO DO WITH WHAT YOU BROUGHT HOME**

1. Fully recognize your strengths and abilities for coping with trauma, tragedy, and homecoming. If you got through all that you've been through, you can endure this too. How much you suffer will depend upon your willingness to cope actively with the hand you've been dealt.
2. Active coping is an ongoing process and not an automatic cure for what ails. This means developing both an awareness and acceptance of how trauma has impacted your life and taking action to resolve the feelings and behaviors that accompany

trauma. Coping calls for a mind set, an attitude, and habit patterns that must be fortified.

3. This does not mean that memories, images, and feelings will magically disappear. They will always be with you in one form or another. The goal is to diminish the intensity of emotions and to learn effective means of managing reactions, symptoms, and distressing memories and images. This is a long-term process referred to as healing. Believing in your own abilities and resources to accomplish these tasks and to accept this as a personal journey is the first step.
4. This road to recovery and overcoming the overwhelming calls for resilience; the ability to adapt to trauma, hardship, adversity, tragedy, loss, grief, anger, and the entire burden of wartime experiences and their far-reaching impact. This path is not free from distress, but one must work through in order to get through.
5. There will be sorrow and some level of misery along this route, but that is the reality of what you have encountered. Do not fear facing these feelings, as this is the only possibility for moving past them. There are times when you may need to put them aside in order to persist in functioning in your daily routines and in order to recharge and renew. There are also times when it becomes wise to rely upon the backing and encouragement of your loved ones and most trusted friends. A critical factor in resilience is the ability to generate and maintain supportive interpersonal relationships.
6. Rely on the most important person in this equation as well: yourself. In order to have endured the trauma of war, know that you already possess outstanding survivorship skills that very clearly indicate that nothing you confront in life will be insurmountable or unendurable.
7. Those traits that are closely connected with resilience are the following:
  - A. the ability to make future plans and to be goal-directed in carrying them out
  - B. belief in yourself, your capabilities, your strengths, and your assets
  - C. the ability to communicate feelings and thoughts openly
  - D. skills in problem-solving
  - E. the ability to cope effectively with intense emotions and behaviors triggered by them
8. Know that your reactions to your experiences are normal reactions to abnormal life experiences. War is certainly

an extraordinary series of life events. Whatever your experiences, take comfort in knowing that you are not alone. Permit yourself to be validated for this. Never overlook the fact that these events are undeniably something to about which to shed tears either.

9. Take time for self-care by attending to your needs and feelings. Engage in activities that you find enjoyable. Exercise regularly; a primary means for de-escalating from stress and distress of any kind. Know that you are worthy of suffering less and finding joys in life once again. Discovering healthy ways of taking time for yourself forges a more durable degree of resilience and the capacity to tolerate whatever befalls you.
10. Be solution-focused. Look back on how you have coped with hardships previously. Count on yourself to build new strategies and skills for coping successfully for all the todays and tomorrows to come.
11. Create routines that allow you to feel grounded once again. Look back on those customary, tried and true activities that worked for you in the past. Include loved ones and friends when appropriate. Engage in them regularly. Find a safe place in what is familiar and pleasurable.
12. Talk it out. Do this often. Find a listening ear with a trusted family member or fellow soldier. Devote time to finding those particular support systems that are most effective and beneficial for you. Have the courage to confront that which is most agonizing to bear and to locate the appropriate mental health professional when the need or desire arises. Never walk alone with these burdens.

## REFERENCES

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