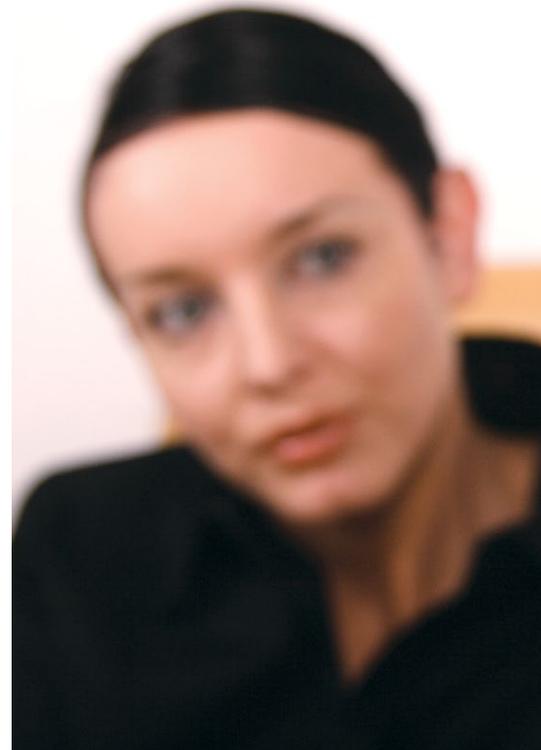


[LISTENING]

A MEANS TO UNDERSTANDING WAR VETS

Connecting ordinary Americans with vets recently returned from Afghanistan is a surefire way of hastening their reintegration into society.

BY PAULA J. CAPLAN



“**W**hen I came back from Afghanistan, hearing the words ‘thank you’ from people who didn’t know what I did or saw was an empty gesture. More than anything, I wanted my community to listen to the stories of veterans like myself—to participate in that moral struggle and gain a deeper awareness of the meaning of war,” says Brock McIntosh, an Afghanistan veteran. Many war returnees agree with retired Col. David Sutherland that there is an “epidemic of disconnection” between them and non-veterans.

Aiming to wipe out that epidemic by providing truly meaningful connections is the *Welcome Johnny and Jane Home Project* (WJJHP). It consists of the deceptively simple but healing pairing of one veteran with one non-veteran. The non-veteran simply listens in silence, with respect, and without judgment to whatever the veteran wishes to say.

A veteran’s loved one can also have a one-on-one session with a non-veteran listener. The goal is to offer the veteran or family member a gift. That is the time and space to say whatever they wish and to do so in confidence.

The listening sessions are not interviews, definitely are not therapy sessions and are not recorded. The listener takes no notes.

The speaker need not present a clear, coherent, neatly packaged story. The vet is free just to report an image, a remembered feeling or smell, a fragment of memory or incidents that are not necessarily connected to each other. The listener is instructed not to speak at all but to “listen with 100% of your attention and with your whole heart.”

And before beginning the silence, the listener starts the session with this sentence: “As an American, I take some responsibility for what you experienced in the military, and if you want to talk, I will listen for as long as you wish to

speak, and I will not judge.”

We used to call it friendship. We used to call it human connection. It is about the astonishing power of listening.

PROJECT’S ORIGINS

Here are the seeds from which the WJJHP grew. One of the first service-members to return to the United States from Afghanistan was unaccustomed to talking about his feelings. I barely knew him, but when I met him at a friend’s home in Boston, he told me that since his return, he had felt disoriented and upset.

He was confused that he did not feel unalloyed delight in being home. Furthermore, he believed he did not deserve to feel troubled because “in Kabul, we only got shot at once.”

He did not want to “bother” anyone by talking about these feelings. But a close woman relative who is known to be generally warm and caring had told him to stop isolating himself and “get on with” his life.



that anger had changed her from a loving, outgoing person to someone who could not enjoy being with family and friends.

When addressing a college class about her military experiences, she described these changes. She was berating herself for not adjusting better to being back home. Then the voice of a student rang out, saying, “I think you’re being too hard on yourself.”

That simple, brief act of outreach and connection from someone in her community whom she had never met had a powerful effect on her. That night, she slept for the first time since returning from Iraq.

DELAYED REACTION

Researchers and therapists often express puzzlement about why the upsetting effects of war sometimes don’t appear until months, even years, after service-members return home.

But isolation plays a major role in the increasing suffering. As many who have been deployed can attest, during deployment, they counted the days and hours until they could go home. They looked forward to what they expected would be a return to how things were before.

But once back, the feelings of being different because of what they had been

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—OPENING STATEMENT IN A LISTENING SESSION

He felt that something was wrong with him, and her lack of understanding made him withdraw even more.

That was the first time I heard a veteran describe this kind of alienation. He was concerned about burdening loved ones and was casting himself as “crazy” for not making a seamless, serene transition. All I did was listen.

Later, I was surprised and moved when he told me how greatly it had helped him just to have that time to speak and not be questioned, advised or evaluated.

Soon afterward, a woman college student in Missouri told me a story. She had

enlisted in the Army because she needed money for college. In addition, the recruiter had promised her she would learn useful skills.

That same recruiter told her she would not serve near combat. Yet she was sent to Iraq, where explosions hit close to her compound every day. She was assigned to repair vehicles that had been blown up by IEDs. Those vehicles came back covered with pieces of the bodies of their occupants.

Upon returning home, she could not sleep and was bewildered to feel filled with anger. Besides, she was troubled that

through were overwhelming. The fears of not being understood or of being judged to be “mentally ill” because they are haunted by what they have seen are overpowering. The wish to avoid burdening their loved ones leads to intense isolation for many.

Over time, as with the isolation of anyone who struggles with painful memories and feelings of being different, the harmful consequences increase.

WJHP reduces veterans’ isolation from the wider communities in which they live. Listening sessions that a Harvard Kennedy School study showed

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to be healing for veterans and helpful to non-veterans are a solution.

They decrease the veteran's isolation and make clear that there are non-veterans in the community who have learned what it means to be a veteran.

Perhaps surprisingly, it helps non-veterans by reducing their own isolation. Many of them were likely unaware they were estranged from an important segment of their community.

Isolation of groups of people from each other is not healthy for a community. It tends to give rise to harmful stereotypes that drive and keep them apart.

One such stereotype is manifested in this comment one often hears from non-veterans: "I know that veterans are suffering, and I'd like to help, but they are mentally ill, and I am not a therapist."

This belief is fed by the widespread American tendency to classify any feeling other than happiness as mental illness.

It is telling that during the Civil War, people suffering from combat experiences were said to have "soldier's heart." Until a few decades ago, as with the Civil War term, each label made it clear that war understandably causes upset, even devastation.

MISLABELING THE CONDITION

Thus, terms such as "war trauma," "shell shock" and "combat fatigue" were used. But the general psychiatry of the human experience has led since the 1970s to replacing those straightforward, non-pathological labels. Now, we have diagnoses of mental disorders, especially "post-traumatic stress disorder."

Unfortunately, there is no war word in that label. "Post-traumatic" could indicate having been in a car accident or an earthquake. So PTSD masks important truths. "Stress" is a troubling minimizing word for what many veterans feel.

Profound grief, loss of innocence, terror, guilt, despair and moral anguish are common. The loss of the close relationships with people in their military unit often causes soul-crushing isolation. So does losing a sense of doing powerfully

important work.

The rapid classification of anyone suffering from war trauma as "mentally disordered" is a dangerous mislabeling of normal, deeply human reactions.

It adds to veterans' burdens, making them feel that they should have been "over it" by now. It also drives non-veterans away, because they believe that only psychotherapists can help.

But the WJJHP shows how wrong that is. So do the many reports from the military and VA. They reveal that despite hiring massive numbers of therapists

For More Information

To learn about how to conduct a listening session or to contact the WJJHP, go to listen2veterans.org.

28 five-minute videos about various non-pathologizing ways of helping veterans and their families heal, derived from the Harvard Kennedy School conference, "A Better Welcome Home," are at www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL51E99E866B9D735E

since the post-9/11 wars, the rates of veterans' suicides, substance abuse, family breakdown and homelessness have continued to rise.

This does not mean therapy is not helpful, only that more needs to be done. There is only so much that even an excellent therapist can do. Sitting with a veteran in an office cannot connect that veteran with his or her home community.

For many reasons, veterans are less likely than non-veterans to seek the services of psychotherapists. Veterans often avoid therapists because they rightly object to being diagnosed as "mentally ill."

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

In important ways, veterans are the forward observers for the rest of the populace. They experienced matters literally of life and death, and moral anguish in

which so many have been immersed.

WJJHP listeners say silently listening to a veteran is powerfully transformative for them. From the veteran, they learned much about the veteran's humanity, and thus about their own.

In the course of the sessions, listeners learn how many negative stereotypes about veterans are unfounded.

Veterans report various reasons for choosing to do the listening sessions. A WWII veteran said recently: "This is the first time anyone has given me the chance just to talk, without asking me questions or interrupting or telling me what I'm supposed to feel."

Another vet who served in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia said that despite having attended group sessions with other veterans at a VA facility for many years, it was not satisfying. He told the 90-year-old woman who was his WJJHP listener things he had never disclosed to anyone.

Many veterans say they want to talk with someone who is not a therapist. This is so primarily because some therapists diagnose them as "mentally ill" and prescribe psychiatric drugs.

Like various non-pathologizing approaches—music, arts, education, volunteer work, service animals and political action—WJJHP is about connection. Listening has been proven to be healing.

Still other veterans are glad to be able to talk to someone who is not a family member or close friend. Those relationships are often already burdened by the strains of the veteran's experiences. It's a clash of the two culture shocks of switching from civilian to military life and then back again.

Some veterans participate in the listening sessions as a way to continue to serve. They understand the importance of non-veterans learning about the world of the armed forces whose members serve in the name of all Americans. ☪

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