



(Alive & Free column from Hazelden for the week of May 12, 2008; contact editor Marty Duda with questions at 651-213-4455)

Veterans practice the healing benefits of telling their stories

As millions of recovering Twelve Step members worldwide have discovered since Alcoholics Anonymous was launched 73 years ago, healing often begins when you share your story with others who can listen with attentive ears and understanding hearts. As someone once said, "A burden shared is a burden halved." Verbalizing experiences, pain and flaws can lessen anguish and increase a sense of accountability and humility. It also helps keep you sober.

Hundreds of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and servicemen and women gathered near Washington, D.C., in March to speak and listen to war stories at an event called "Winter Soldier." Although the event was sponsored by Iraq Veterans Against the War, the trauma described in the vetted accounts is a burden that many veterans and soldiers carry, regardless of their age, their war, or their politics. The hands of those who spoke were often clenched, and their faces reflected the pain of those who had experienced too much death, fear and destruction.

Jason Washburn served three tours of duty as a marine in Iraq from 2003-2006. He shared a story with the audience. "If the town or the city that we were approaching was a known threat, if the unit that went through the area before we did took a high number of casualties, we were basically allowed to shoot whatever we wanted. . . . I remember one woman was walking by, carrying a huge bag, and she looked like she was heading towards us. So we lit her up with an automatic grenade launcher. And when the dust settled, we realized that the bag was only full of groceries. And, I mean, she had been trying to bring us food, and we blew her to pieces for it."

Some vets like Jeffrey Lucey couldn't speak, so his parents spoke for him. His dad said his marine son came home so haunted by what he had done and witnessed that he drank heavily to anesthetize his pain—a coping strategy mentioned by many of the vets

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who bore witness. His parents said Veterans Affairs (VA) told them they couldn't assess him for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD, a psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of life-threatening events) until he was alcohol free. Although he wouldn't talk about the trauma he experienced, Jeff would ask his dad to hold him on his lap and rock him so he could feel safe. Jeff's dad said the last time he was able to hold his son was when he cut his body down from the rafters at their home where Jeff had hung himself with a hose.

Government statistics reveal that almost one third of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who received care from the VA were diagnosed with mental health and/or psychosocial problems, and one-fifth were diagnosed with substance abuse disorder. Many, like Jeffrey Lucey, have the co-occurring disorders of PTSD and substance abuse disorder. In addition, CBS News called the suicide rate among veterans "epidemic," when their five-month investigation revealed that from 1995-2007 the suicide rate of veterans was twice that of other Americans.

"Telling their story can be extremely healing and empowering for vets, but you have to be careful so they aren't re-traumatized," said Ginny Hughes, a clinical social worker and therapist in the D.C. area who coordinated mental health support at Winter Soldier. Hughes said that precautions were taken so those who testified could do so in a safe and supportive environment. Speakers prepared themselves by practicing their stories beforehand, and mental health professionals were available during and after Winter Soldier for those who needed counseling. "I tell them PTSD is a normal response to an abnormal situation. It's healthy to be able to feel things, and talking about pain is a huge step toward healing," said Hughes.

As recovering people know, sharing one's story can also help those who hear it. An Iraq vet from Minnesota listened intently to the 30 hours of statements, often unconsciously rubbing his arm where the names of 10 of the buddies he had lost in the war were tattooed. "I thought our unit was the only one that had experienced those things," he said afterwards. "I feel more normal now."

This vet encourages families to try to get returning vets to talk with a counselor, "battle buddies," clergy, or their dog. "The point is to talk. In my experience it is the guys

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who don't talk to anyone about their experiences that have the most trouble."

Alive & Free is a health column that offers information to help prevent and address addiction and substance abuse problems. It is provided by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction and recovery. For more resources, call Hazelden at 1-800-257-7800 or check its Web site at www.hazelden.org. For more on Alive & Free, visit www.hazelden.org/aliveandfree. Direct your inquiries to mduda@hazelden.org.