

## **WHAT IS PTSD?**

PTSD is an acronym for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It is a word formed from the initial letters of a name or combining initial letters of a series of words to form an application of something; like WAC for Women's Army Corps or RADAR for Radio Detecting And Ranging; so this is what the PTSD letters stand for, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Now that you know what PTSD stands for, let's move on to what it is!

If you happened to read my overview on "Filing A Claim" then sit back and read with interest what I have to say here. I have no acronyms after my name like, BS...MS...or PhD. But have learned about PTSD through a self taught course by experiencing PTSD, going through PTSD counseling, and learning about something I didn't know I had for nearly four (4) decades. I knew something was wrong with me for forty years, but I didn't know exactly what or why. In all that time I never made the connection, never connected the dots, between what I experienced in Vietnam under combat and what the hell my behavior had to do with it during the next forty (40) years. So as far as PTSD goes, I did not come out of some school for social workers doing my master's degree in PTSD counseling; I came out of a combat situation over forty years ago with the infection and medical condition of PTSD and have had to learn to live with it. And you can live with it and manage it whether you are the last surviving member of World War I or a new veteran experiencing PTSD for the first time. There is hope and you can get through this.

Now this section is specifically for and about Combat PTSD in veterans. That is where my experience comes from, but in a larger sense there are a lot of similarities and symptoms that cross over into other areas of the trauma experience. So let's take the common sense approach in trying to explain PTSD as I see it; and hopefully give you, the visitor to this website, some enlightenment for yourself and your families.

## **HOW DID I GET PTSD?**

I guess if you are a combat veteran you already have a good idea about this question. Well, it didn't come from a toilet seat, it wasn't something you ate, and it wasn't your fault for getting it. As my old Drill instructor used to say: "Did you hear what I said soldier?" Getting PTSD is not your fault. No body that I know ever wanted to have it or have to deal with its effects and symptoms in their life. But the larger more important question should really be: "How do I deal with PTSD?" Well, if you stick with me on this, I'll try to give you the best suggestions and understanding I can about that question further in this study course of PTSD 102.

From this point forward I want it understood that this is my understanding of PTSD, what it is, what happened in the process of getting it, why it is a treatable medical condition, and how you, yes, you the individual with combat PTSD, can take a pro-active approach in dealing with PTSD symptoms and effects in your life. PTSD is a medical condition. You have to educate yourself and understand what you are dealing with and why? So let's go through the nickel tour of understanding the foundational principles of PTSD. Remember, I am a foxhole soldier talking from my own experiences.

Now pay attention, this is the Cerebral part of our course on PTSD and you may have to read this part or section over more than once to absorb it, but heck you're a veteran you can take it. Just consider this your reading assignment.

The first thing is that PTSD is about your brain. Your brain is like the engine in a car. The engine makes the car move and function. Your brain makes you move and function. Thoughts are things. When you think you eventually form concepts. These concepts are then interpreted into action, doing something; non-action, not doing anything; or neutral not committing, but thinking about whether to act or not act until you have enough information to form a concept, and thus to act or not act. So as we grow and make mistakes and gain experience we begin to know and understand what works for us and what doesn't and generally some form of moral conduct is established within us to help guide us in the right direction. Add to this a veteran's emotional make

up while he or she is maturing and learning and then throw in a person's needs, wants and desires, and the brain begins to take on a pretty complicated set of calculations that guide a person through life. When we were growing up, things like issues were pretty much in Black and White terms. As we grew older like in our twenties we found out that Black and White now more often than not came in shades of Gray. So in combat learning shades of gray comes a little earlier for us and it becomes confusing at times to deal with the situations. Why? Because they are life and death issues now, and you are not back at the local Drive-In in Podunk, Somewhere.

Simply put, trauma, and especially long term combat trauma, starts screwing up this normal process in the brain so that a whole new set of elements is mixed in and causes the brain to function differently. This is where PTSD comes in. I have come to think of PTSD as the body's way of protecting you and helping you to survive horrible situations and circumstances in combat.

So here is what THEY know from research and study. That there are brain structures in human beings responsible for aggressive behavior. Normally during our socialization process, our growing up years, we are taught to refrain from using these aggressive brain structures.

The problem with Combat PTSD, and long term exposure to trauma situations, is that we have found out that the primitive or aggressive brain structures undergo *chemical changes in how the brain works*, which in turn influences behavior in certain social situations. In other words, the combat trauma you experienced produced chemicals in your body that made permanent changes in your brain and your body. Simply what this means is that when you are in a stressful situation it makes you extremely uncomfortable.

Research has also shown, especially in combat veterans' with extended traumatic exposures, that it can damage parts of the brain responsible for holding information in short term memory and increases the use of that part of the brain which lacks language ability. The bottom line is that because of the specific damage that combat veterans experience they often have problems with short term memory loss, attention and concentration problems, mood swings and sleep disorders. Is this starting to make sense to you? So what does this mean? It simply means that in combat veterans with PTSD the parts of your brain which are responsible for anger, rage and fear, begin to take charge in your life and rule your behavior. And to the combat veteran, and others close to them, their actions many times have no connection to what is going on in civilian life. They simply don't recognize the connection between the combat trauma experiences, years or even decades later and now in everyday life. They just know something has set you off. They simply can't say this is what I am experiencing and this is how it affects me. The combat veteran and the family members don't have a clue. Counseling gives you the clues, what to recognize and how to connect the dots.

Now lean closer to the screen and pay close attention. *There is a specific part of the brain that has the responsibility for storing or holding short term memory information called the hippocampus*. It becomes damaged when the individual is in, or exposed to, prolonged traumatic stressful environments. For combat veterans, as a prime example, under prolonged stress the hippocampus can be reduced in size as much as *twenty percent*. The hippocampus has the added responsibility of not only storing or holding short term memory information but of projecting that information into the higher cortex or smart part of the brain for processing. The higher cortex is the debriefing part of the brain that filters the incoming reports from the front line brain cells.

Now here is where it gets a little more interesting. The hippocampus is your working memory. Short term memory. I guess you could compare it to the RAM portion in a computer. The *Hippocampus* can hold so many bits of short term memory information. Through damage, like traumatic stress, it develops the inability to hold

as many bits of information. Then a competing sub cortical structure in the brain called the Amygdala, responsible for rage and fear in the survival mode function of fight or flight, orders the body to produce adrenaline or other chemicals. When this occurs the higher cortex, or smart part of the brain, is overwhelmed by the lower, more primitive psychological processes. Sort of intellectual vs. survivalists brain cells. To put it another way, its like a bunch of front line soldiers telling the Commanding General they are taking over what needs to be done and the General is no longer in command because they are getting their asses shot off and they are being overrun; and the General is back in some nice bunker sipping cold beer.

Your brain has two thinking protectors for you. One the hippocampus and the other the Amygdala. Both have your best interests at heart. When information comes into your working brain both of these parts of your brain process the information. The hippocampus sends this information to your higher smart brain for sorting and sifting until the incoming stimuli is identified and then the smart brain sends back information on how to properly deal with that stimuli. In your life experiences certain sights, sounds, smells, and situations become triggers of arousal. In combat trauma these experiences are very strongly imprinted in the brain. If the Amygdala has learned that these triggers are signs of danger then it immediately takes over in a sort of survival mode. The hippocampus then becomes overwhelmed and unable to activate or get the stimuli information to the higher cognitive or thinking process. I guess you might say it just freezes up. When this occurs the Amygdala rules. Unfortunately, what you learned and experienced in combat is now attached to you for the rest of your life. So when you act or react as though you were still in a war zone, and think in terms of danger and self survival for you and others, but it is now in a back home environment, your actions and reactions are now inappropriate in a “civilized society”, your behavior is then unacceptable.

Trauma comes from a Greek word meaning wounding. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is mental wounding. Rather than having a physical wound where you see a bullet hole, or shrapnel with blood, you have psychological wounds. It can't be seen with the naked eye but combat veterans' feel its effects inside themselves all the time. Almost seventy percent of combat veterans with combat PTSD can also be identified with other diagnosable health problems. The most recognizable are what is known as “affective disorder”, or mood disorder, and substance abuse with some form of drug or alcohol--a way of numbing yourself to the realities of the world. If you are a combat veteran reading this, does this make sense to you?

### **The Difference Between You And the Normals:**

Here is a good illustration between you, the combat veteran with PTSD, and the normals... those with out PTSD.

The arousal scale goes from One to One Hundred percent. When the normal person wakes up they are about a five on the arousal scale. When a normal person gets ready for work the arousal scale starts to rise slowly so by the time they are in their car going to work they are now maybe at twelve or fifteen on the arousal scale. Then they have to deal with the ride to work and the other insensitive drivers and now maybe their arousal level is at twenty. First thing that happens when they get to work is their boss calls and tells normal nice person they want to see them in their office immediately. Now another five points is added on the scale for anxiety and expectation. When they see the boss they are told they are being given a new project to work on for the company--and by the way the boss says, “Don't screw up this project like you did the last one.” Normal nice person goes back to their cubical with a now elevated thirty on the arousal scale. As the day progresses more

numbers are added to the arousal scale so that by the time the normal person gets home from work, they are now at maybe fifty or fifty five percent on the arousal scale.

Now, here comes the surprise, the combat veteran with PTSD generally starts their day out at about the fifty percent arousal level on a scale of one to one hundred. When you understand this you begin see that just waking up already puts the combat vet at the arousal level that a normal person ends their day with. Now is this beginning to make any sense to you?

### **Now what do I do?**

First, realize that getting combat PTSD is not your fault. Second, there is something you can do about it! It is manageable if you know and understand what you are dealing with, and then you can decide to direct your PTSD symptoms into positive energy outlets. Third, go to my article on "Filing A Claim" and get started on your claim and follow my directions very carefully.

Fourth, and this is a WARNING with a caution: Find a good PTSD counselor for one-on-one and group treatment of PTSD. One that is fee based paid and you don't pay for the counseling after you file your claim. WHY? Because PTSD is a clinical problem, it deals with the emotional, psychological and physical side of you as a human being. You need to have someone who deals specifically with PTSD issues in combat vets, and can help you get through the beginning stages of discovering your PTSD and how it affects you and your family and friends. You also need a support group and other individuals who know exactly what you are dealing with and going through. You need a support group and a counselor there with you when you deal with this PTSD CRAP. You need to debrief from your combat experiences, sometimes decades down the line, that you have never dealt with before. Remember, you have been wounded as surely as if you had a bullet rip through your body in combat. When you start picking at the PTSD scabs you will find there is a lot of emotional PTSD pus inside you and you need a good PTSD counselor and/or PTSD group to help you work through the things that have been hidden and buried for a long time. In many cases a lot of combat ugly things. How do I know this? I went through this and have personally witnessed over 100 other PTSD veterans go through this process. So do I know what I am talking about, YES I DO! PTSD is TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) in my opinion.

Your brain has been combat damaged by stress chemicals from within your own body as a natural reaction to survival mode you experienced in combat--and it does come under service connected experiences and situations so don't let any one else tell you differently! *Nobody who knows what PTSD is, and is medically qualified, will ever deny this or refute it.* PTSD can not be reversed, as some in the VA would have you believe, but it can be managed. However, it needs you, the combat veteran, to take a proactive approach to learning how to manage this thing called PTSD. And as my old Drill Sergeant use to say: "Are you hearing me soldier?"

### **One last word of Caution:**

Once you are found to be suffering the effects of PTSD, as a combat veteran, by the VA, it usually means some form or type of drug therapy will be prescribed to help you manage your PTSD. There is nothing wrong with taking medication that will help you cope with you PTSD. If you are proscribed any medications by anyone with the VA, or otherwise, make sure that they have a background working with PTSD, and that they have a working knowledge of the symptoms and effects of PTSD. Remember, and always remember, that proper

diagnosis in medicine is the hardest thing to do. Once a proper diagnosis is discovered then proper treatment can be applied. Now again, read this out loud right now as you are reading this screen: Once a proper diagnosis is discovered then proper treatment can be applied.

If you have any questions about medications, please email us and we will try to give you our best thoughts on the matter. We are not doctors or medication specialists, but we do want to know if you suspect improper medical advice has been given to you, it may help another veterans down the line.

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