



TERRORIST ATTACKS BRING BACK TRAUMATIC MEMORIES

Every person has a date that is forever burned into memory. A date which serves as a haunting reminder that life will never be the same. For many of us, that date is September 11, 2001. For one Green native named Dave that date is February 12, 1967.

“That was the day I witnessed seven of my friends die in Vietnam,” remembers this retired Sergeant in the United States Marine Corps and veteran of the Vietnam War. “They were all riding in front of me in a tank, which had to weigh at least nineteen-and-a-half tons. All of the tanks in the convoy had been ordered to stop and get organized for an ambush, but for some reason our lead tank never stopped. As they kept driving forward we tried to radio them, but it was too late. They drove over a land mine that was planted in the street.”

“After the explosion, I spent the rest of the day gathering what was left of their body parts and placing them in bags,” says Dave, his voice cracking with emotion. “The explosion was so deadly that the biggest piece of the tank we found was about the size of a dinner plate.”

Sporting a camouflage hat and flat-top haircut, Dave seems to have never left the military lifestyle. At first glance, he’s one of the last people you’d expect would ever consider talking about emotions and feelings. Yet this 56 year-old has been receiving counseling for the past nine-and-a-half-years at Portage Path Behavioral Health to help him cope with his experiences in Vietnam.

“There has not been a day since Vietnam that I have not relived that memory at least 100 times,” Dave offers, his eyes fixed with an earnestness. “It’s like having a VCR installed in your head that plays and rewinds your most awful memories over and over.”

The painful flashbacks of combat experienced by Dave and millions of other Vietnam Veterans are one of the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a psychiatric disorder that can occur after a person witnesses or experiences a traumatic event such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or violent personal assaults like rape.

Symptoms of PTSD also include nightmares, depression, the numbing of emotions and feelings of anger, irritability, and distraction. According to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, veterans of war are those most associated with PTSD, which was once referred to as “shell shock” or “battle fatigue.” In fact, The Anxiety Disorders Association of America, reports that an estimated 15 percent to 30 percent of the 3.5 million men and women who served in Vietnam suffer or have suffered from PTSD.

Dave’s symptoms began only a year after returning from Vietnam, which is common for many individuals with PTSD.

“I first started experiencing symptoms in the winter of 1968. I think it all started because I was removed from the war environment. All of the sudden I started having nightmares, flashbacks, and social problems. I even started using alcohol and drugs to cope. I just wish that I could go back and do a lot of things differently. When my children were growing up, I was very difficult to live with, because we didn’t know what was wrong with me at the time.”

The National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder reports that many people with PTSD turn to drugs and alcohol in a desperate attempt to self-medicate themselves. Researchers suggest that 60-80 percent of Vietnam veterans seeking PTSD treatment also have substance abuse problems.

People struggling with PTSD can also experience an exaggerated startle response, sleep difficulties, guilt, agitation and heartbeat sensations. In an effort to remove the traumatic experience from their memory PTSD sufferers are known to avoid individuals, thoughts and situations associated with the traumatic event.

According to Charlie Goold, a licensed independent social worker at Portage Path Behavioral Health and an expert on PTSD in veterans, certain events - such as anniversary dates of the trauma and national holidays like Veteran's Day - may trigger memories of the traumatic event.

For Dave, the horrific memories of war were triggered by watching replays of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

“When I saw the fireball from the second airplane crash into the WTC it triggered a lot of thoughts about the war. Basically, it was like watching my friends get blown up all over again. Through treatment I have learned that it is best to avoid watching the news about the terrorist attacks, along with movies that are really graphic, or that show a lot of injuries.”

According to an article on MSN.com, we may be facing a PTSD crisis, as millions of Americans begin to feel symptoms stemming from the September 11 terrorist attacks. The article talks about how the gruesome images watched during and following the attacks can lead to acute stress, and then post traumatic stress, for those who viewed them. As one physician put it, “You don't have to be at the bottom of the World Trade Center or the Pentagon to experience the symptoms.”

PTSD can be treated effectively by a variety of different therapeutic techniques, such as psychodynamic psychotherapy, exposure therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, pharmacotherapy, inpatient treatment; and a combined PTSD and alcohol/substance abuse treatment.

“Before my friend referred me to Portage Path, I was hopeless. I tried to seek help at the VA, but nothing ever seemed to work.” recalls Dave. “At Portage Path I am involved in my own treatment process. I get a say in what type of medications I want to take, and they let me talk about a variety of things, not just what happened in Vietnam.”

Adds Goold, “The PTSD treatment process is different for everyone. Often times, the severity of the trauma and the supportive environment after the trauma are factors that point toward a favorable treatment.”

Dave states emphatically that his wife has been there for him since the beginning. “She would write me everyday while I was in Vietnam, and she has been there for me every step of the way.”

After years of treatment, Dave considers this to be the first time in his life since the war that he has been able to stay in the moment. “I am now able to read a book and concentrate on one thing at a time,” he says with relief. “I now realize that my memories will be with me forever, and through treatment I am able to learn better ways to cope with them.”

If you or someone you know may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, encourage them to call Portage Path at 330-253-3100, click on the National Center for PTSD web site at www.ncptsd.org, or visit the American Psychiatric Association web site at www.apa.org for information on terrorist-related PTSD.

