

Understanding combat trauma years after Vietnam

Father Bob: My name is Father Bob and I'm former United States Marine Corps. Served in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966 and part of 67. I ended up at First Recon Battalion in the beautiful area called Chu Lai and we experienced some very, very difficult things. Everything that was taught to you is so that you can be a protector of the personnel underneath you and sometimes that's possible to be done and other times it just isn't.

My first experience with combat fatigue, whatever it was because it was ill-defined, in fact it was not defined, was going to my parents' place and visiting them. And it was over the Fourth of July weekend and firecrackers went off and I happened to be resting. And the first thought when I gained consciousness frankly, I was screaming, "Incoming, incoming" and had my hands over my neck, face down, and that trauma type, those triggers stayed with me for 35 years. Nothing was understood. So, you had to suck up and just cope with what you had thinking there's something wrong with you personally.

I sought ways to obliterate or mask this angst, the sweats, the screaming, to the point that my wife had to sleep in another room. I tried to mask it with drink and in retrospect I will say that I was a functioning alcoholic.

My first contact and serious contact with reaching out was with the Vet Center. My oh my, there was a Counselor there and he kinda took me under his wing. We chatted for a number of sessions as I was progressing. So, part of the process in going through this was of course an evaluation, physically as well as mentally, and it was determined that I did indeed suffer from this thing called PTSD.

For the longest time I had trouble with that acronym because I just didn't, I guess want to accept it. It took some years for things to start coming out. A few sessions my wife attended, and she vocalized her problem with my drinking. That is when it really struck me that, "Hey wait a minute, look who you're hurting." We've had a better marriage since that reality struck home than we've had since the week after we were married.

So, it's been a very humbling experience and over the course of time I was able to dissipate the sweats. I was able to dissipate the screaming nightmares. I was able to dissipate to some degree okay, the shock that comes with loud triggers. So, the counseling helped in a very, very major way. But it was a combination of the counseling and the medications.

The counseling gave me a better strength of character for myself, made me feel better about myself and in many respects, engaged me to reach out to others. People are starting to realize they're not alone and I don't mean, not "Alone, alone" but not alone in this phenomenon happening to them. There are others that are just in the same situation as they. There're organizations that are there to help. There are people there that want to help.



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