The War Experience

Although U.S. military personnel receive extensive pre-combat training, war-zone experiences tax soldiers physically and emotionally in ways for which no training program can adequately prepare them. The horrors of war to which soldiers are exposed include:

- Reality-based fear of their own imminent death.
- Having to kill.
- Experiencing the sight, sound, and smell of dead or dying people (e.g., friends, civilians, enemy soldiers) with no opportunity to adequately grieve.
- Handling dead bodies and body parts.
- Observing devastated homes and communities and homeless refugees.

Even soldiers who have not been exposed to such traumatic experiences have endured daily, lower-magnitude events and circumstances which commonly exacerbate stress in war zones. Among these are:

- Spartan, cramped living conditions.
- Heavy physical demands and long work days.
- Sleep deprivation.
- Undesirable food.
- Harsh climate.
- Separation from loved ones and missing significant family events (birthdays, weddings, funerals).
- Career-related concerns (e.g., delayed graduation from college, losing a job, being denied a promotion).
- Sexual, gender, or racial harassment (e.g., unwanted comments or sexual touching from other soldiers, gossip and rumors directed toward individuals, sabotaging of work and/or reputation, racist remarks).

While these experiences and conditions many not be as traumatizing as those listed in the first series of bullets, these day-to-day irritations and pressures further tax soldiers' available coping resources and may increase their chances of developing physical and psychological problems.

Normal Feelings about an Abnormal Experience

As a result of the acute traumas and general stress that characterize life in a war zone, soldiers frequently experience an array of symptoms and reactions during the transition back to their homes and civilian life. Caused by psychobiological reactions to extreme stress, these are normal, expected responses to soldiers' experience of highly abnormal war-time events and are in no way a sign of personal weakness or inadequacy. Further, with the passage time and the opportunity to live in a more tranquil environment, these symptoms and reactions typically diminish. Common symptoms and reactions experienced by returning war veterans include:

- Insomnia.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Recurring thoughts and memories of war experiences.
- Hyper-alertness (i.e., difficulty relaxing or feeling safe even in an unthreatening environment) and startle reactions.
- Grief and sadness over losses.
- Guilt (e.g., over actions and/or inactions, surviving when others died).
- Anger (e.g., over command decisions, not being adequately trained, not having necessary equipment, acts committed by the enemy).
- Impatience and low tolerance for frustrations (e.g., civilian rules may seem irrelevant or meaningless).
- Difficulty connecting with and trusting others, especially those without war-zone experience.
- Anxiety about being redeployed.

Again, the bulleted items above are all normal responses to the very abnormal events and conditions experience in war, and they usually diminish over time.
Challenges Transitioning to Civilian Life

The U.S. military spends enormous amounts of time and money preparing soldiers for war but correspondingly very little of these resources preparing them to return to civilian life. When military personnel finish their tour of duty and return home, among the transitions that they must negotiate include:

- Soldier to civilian
- Danger to safety
- Discomfort to comfort
- Camaraderie to solitude
- Mistrust to trust
- Chaos to order
- Lawlessness to law

As much as soldiers eagerly anticipate this transformation, negotiating the change is not always easy. The sheer number of transitions from war to peace makes the hope of quickly reassuming a normal lifestyle somewhat unrealistic, and for many, a successful change in role takes considerable effort and time. A particular challenge facing a returning war veteran is the need to put aside the 'survival mode' which was critical in the war zone and may have become a central feature of the soldier's identity. Among the perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors that are highly valued in combat are:

- Heightened arousal.
- Being on constant alert for danger.
- Narrowed attention and focus.
- A hostile appraisal of events.
- Not trusting people.
- Making quick, unilateral decisions.
- Expecting others to obey directives without question.
- Sticking to a "mission" no matter what.
- Reacting quickly and asking questions later.
- Keeping emotions sealed off.

While having obvious survival value in combat, this 'battle-mind' style is typically highly maladaptive and self-defeating when applied to civilian life. For example, aggressive, split-second decision-making and action are vital in a firefight, but similar actions back home can easily fall under the categories of disorderly conduct, assault, and domestic abuse. At the same time, war veterans have a hard time letting go of these habits that once served to keep them alive and unharmed.

Moving from War to Academic Zones

The transition of a veteran from combat to a college environment produces a unique set of challenges and stresses. Some of these are observable and apparent: a 'ruck-sac' is exchanged for a book bag, a 'mess-tent' is replaced by a dining hall, and camouflage gives way to school colors. Most transitional issues, however, are far more subtle and complex. The challenges faced by veterans who transition to academic settings include:

- Developing a primary identity other than as a soldier.
- Difficulty relating to and connecting with traditional college students. Age differences and the experience of combat (e.g., bullets whizzing by, mortar attacks, roadside bombs) frequently cause veterans to feel different than, and alienated from, traditional college students. Typical student concerns like grades, parties, and joining organizations seldom have the same significance to veterans, who often voice a sense of greater maturity and seriousness than traditional students. The felt alienation can be exacerbated on politically charged campuses where antiwar protests occur.
- Finding importance and meaning in experiences and ideas that are not life-or-death. Campus life and concerns may seem trivial compared to those found in combat.
- Negotiating the structural and procedural differences between the military and higher education bureaucracies (e.g., knowing the rules and mores of the campus, where to go to get things done, how to address professors and others in positions of authority).
Making a much greater number of decisions in a far more complex world. While the potential consequences of a combat soldier's decisions are staggering, the total number of autonomous daily decisions is quite small when compared to college life.

- Developing a sense of safety on campus (e.g., choosing classroom seats that allow for monitoring of others and rapid escape, such as sitting with their back to the wall and near a door).
- Boredom (e.g., missing the adrenaline rush experienced in the 'high' of battle)
- Having difficulty returning to their role as children of their parents. The maturing process of serving in combat may cause younger veterans to be less accommodating to parental expectations and demands.

These issues, when coupled with the challenges related to returning to general civilian life, place returning veteran students at a significantly higher risk of dropping out.

Suggestions for a Successful Transition
Fortunately, there are a number of steps that veterans can take to put their military experience into perspective and regain a sense of control and normalcy. Among the recommendations to facilitate a successful transition to civilian and academic lives are:

- **Establish and maintain relationships with fellow students and college faculty/staff.** Combat experiences often leave veterans feeling alienated from others, and they must make intentional, active efforts to connect with others on campus. Getting involved with clubs and organized activities can break down walls and connect the veteran with others having similar interests.

- **Work to reestablish relationships and renegotiate roles with family members.** Deployment causes a void within the family system that is typically filled by others adopting new roles and taking on new responsibilities. While both returning veterans and family members eagerly anticipate their reunion, changes in the family structure that have occurred during the deployment period often lead to unanticipated stresses and challenges. Veterans and family members must reexamine how responsibilities will now be divided and communicate openly about roles they want or do not want to play.

- **Understand that emotional control requires both holding in and expressing emotions.** Contrary to norms on the battlefield, articulating and showing emotions does not indicate weakness and is critical to sustaining meaningful personal relationships in civilian life.

- **Reestablish or find a meaning and purpose in life apart from military service.** The clear meaning and purpose that characterize a war zone is lost in civilian life. Make an effort to identify important values and passions and consider how they might guide daily choices and commitments. Seek spiritual fulfillment through prayer, meditation, religious practice, volunteer work, etc. Faith practices are often an important source of strength and resilience. There are numerous volunteer opportunities here in Genesee county. The following website may be a good tool: [http://www.rescen.org/volunteer-opportunities/](http://www.rescen.org/volunteer-opportunities/)

- **Develop good academic habits.** Start with a manageable course load and set reasonable goals. Go to class and take comprehensive notes to improve focus on course materials and lectures. Establish a daily schedule to maximize organization.

- **Take advantage of academic and personal services available to UM-Flint students.** Among the departments that provide services related to the common needs of veteran students are:
  - Counseling & Student Development Center: [http://www.umflint.edu/studentdevelopment/counseling_services.htm](http://www.umflint.edu/studentdevelopment/counseling_services.htm)
  - Health Center: [http://www.umflint.edu/shps/uhwc/](http://www.umflint.edu/shps/uhwc/)

- **Pay attention to physical well-being.** Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest, and build physical activity into daily life.

- **Seek balance in life.** The experience of combat can make veterans jaded and pessimistic. Balance that viewpoint by focusing on people and events which are meaningful, comforting, and encouraging.
• **Limit use of alcohol and illegal substances.** Use of these substances increases the likelihood of depression, insomnia, relationship problems, academic difficulties, legal troubles and a host of other negative issues.

• **Appreciate a sense of humor in yourself and others.** Humor relieves stress, produces body chemicals that improve mood, and helps us to gain a more balanced perspective. Do not postpone joy and laughter should they come your way.

• **Limit exposure to war-related news reports (e.g., news channels, newspapers, Web sites, etc.).** While keeping informed of developments is important, the 24/7 media machine typically ignores stories of heroism, resilience, and sacrifice and instead focuses on the most horrific images and troubling accounts. If your looking for a positive spin on today's news, the following website may deliver what you require: [http://www.positivenews.org.uk/cgi-bin/Positive_News/welcome.cgi](http://www.positivenews.org.uk/cgi-bin/Positive_News/welcome.cgi)

• **Prepare an answer to questions about your war experience.** Most veterans have some difficulty sharing what happened in combat and the toll that those experiences had on them. Prepare a brief response for acquaintances and a lengthier answer for close family members and friends.

• **Connect with other veterans.** Veterans often report that the friendship and support of other veterans is critical to effectively transitioning to civilian life. Other veterans have an intuitive understanding of the experience and impact of being in combat and of the additional challenges that veteran students face on college campuses.

• **Grieve for and honor those who did not make it back.** It is important for veterans to grieve the loss of friends and to experience and work through the emotions that are understandably attached to these losses. Work to live a life worthy of the ultimate sacrifice made by fallen comrades.

**Signs That Counseling Might Be Helpful**

While many returning soldiers will make a successful return to civilian life, research suggests that as many as 1 in 3 returning veterans experience a serious psychological problem related to their war zone experience. Combat and its associated horrors can traumatize and devastate soldiers physically, emotionally, spiritually, and morally. Further, there is reason to believe that the nature of the war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq may be fertile breeding grounds for the mental health problems most commonly experienced by soldiers. Among the factors that may elevate the risk of psychological problems for returning veterans are:

- Close-quarters, confusing battle environments with no front lines and no clear sense of who is friend or foe.
- Greater sense of unpredictability and helplessness.
- Soldiers remaining with their units throughout training and deployment. This familiarity develops close bonds and cohesiveness among the personnel in the unit, and the sudden loss of dear, devoted friends is more likely to occur and to negatively impact survivors.
- The tasks required for survival in the war zone taking precedence over acknowledging and grieving the loss of friends.
- Exposure to significant numbers of civilian casualties.
- The existence of psychological problems present before the experience of combat.

The psychobiological reactions to the extreme stress of the war zone environment frequently cause an array of symptoms and reactions in returning veterans. With the passage time and the opportunity to live in a civilian environment, these typically diminish. However, when symptoms and reactions last for more than a month or interfere with daily life and functioning, professional assessment and treatment may be required. Among the signs that a returning veteran is experiencing a significant problem that may require professional counseling assistance are:

- Recurring and intrusive memories and/or dreams of combat.
- Acting or feeling as if a past traumatic event was happening in the moment.
- Intense distress in response to cues that symbolize or resemble some aspect of combat.
- Avoidance of anything associated with war-zone experiences.
- Diminished interest to participate in important or previously enjoyed activities.
- Feeling emotionally distant, detached, and/or estranged from others.
• Difficulty having or expressing a full range of emotions.
• Sense of a foreshortened future (e.g., not expecting to live to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span).
• Difficulty falling or staying asleep.
• Suicidal thoughts, feelings, or behavior.
• Frequent experiences of irritability, anger, and/or rage.
• Difficulty concentrating.
• Hyper-vigilance and being easily startled by noises and movements.
• Abuse of alcohol and drugs.
• Persistent difficulties with authority.
• Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
• Guilt or anger at oneself for being unable to prevent the death of others or committing a perceived error that resulted in harm or death.
• Feelings of paranoia without any real evidence that others have bad motives.

The experience of one or more of the above signs of distress can significantly interfere with academic performance, daily functioning, motivation, relationships, and general enjoyment of life. During the period of their service, soldiers are often reluctant to utilize mental health services for fear of appearing 'weak' and/or negatively impacting their military career (e.g., potential loss of promotions, security clearances, etc.), especially because their confidentiality is not assured.

While returning veterans often feel the continued need to appear resilient and unaffected by their experiences, the earlier they seek professional counseling, the greater the likelihood that their issues will be resolved and that their academic and personal goals will be achieved.

United States Department of Veterans Affairs: The homepage for the VA is http://www.va.gov/. The following sites are parts of the Veterans Affairs main site that may be of special interest to returning veterans.

- Iraq War Clinician Guide: This guide was developed to provide mental health professionals with information about the war-zone experience of soldiers and the stresses and challenges associated with combat. http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/manuals/nc_manual_iwcguide.html However, this site also contains many resources for readjustment to civilian life.
- Stress, Trauma, and Alcohol and Drug Use http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/handouts/iraq_clinician_guide_app_j4.pdf
- Seamless Transition Home: http://www.seamlesstransition.va.gov/
- Transition Assistance Information for Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom Veterans:
  http://www.seamlesstransition.va.gov/transition.asp
- National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD): Affiliated with the VA, the NCPTSD aims to advance the clinical care and social welfare of veterans through research, education and training on PTSD and stress-related disorders. However, this site also contains many resources for readjustment to civilian life. 
  http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/index.jsp
- Readjustment Counseling Services: This Veterans Administration site provides tools to locate nearby veterans centers and service providers. 
  http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/

**Battlemind Training: Transitioning from Combat**
Discusses how attitudes and skills developed in combat can be altered to achieve success and happiness in civilian life. 

**The Road to Resilience:** This article from the American Psychological Association describes resilience and some factors that affect how people deal with hardship. Much of the brochure focuses on developing and using a personal strategy for enhancing resilience. 

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Resources:**
- American Psychiatric Association: A discussion of PTSD symptoms, treatments, and resources. 
  http://www.healthyminds.org/multimedia/ptsd.pdf
- National Institute of Mental Health: A discussion of PTSD symptoms, treatments, and resources. 

**Books of Interest:**
- "Down Range: To Iraq and Back" by Bridget Cantrell, Ph.D. and Chuck Dean (www.heartstowardhome.com)
- "Courage After Fire" by Keith Armstrong, Suzanne Best, and Paula Domenici 
  http://www.courageafterfire.com/