

War, depression, suicide: American veterans are finding help

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Roger King was 19 when he enlisted in the US Marine Corps in 2005. He left four years later after two deployments in Iraq, where a sniper's bullet nearly cost him his life.

Once home, he faced a new set of problems in his return to civilian life on New York's Long Island, including a suffocating sense of anxiety and difficulty being in group situations.

King was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and a traumatic brain injury (TBI)—two afflictions sadly common among veterans of the largest army in the world, bogged down in seemingly endless conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Increasingly depressed by the challenges of his new life, King began drinking.

This solidly built 33-year-old man quietly confides that he attempted suicide—twice.

Russell Keyzer—another New Yorker—joined the National Guard shortly after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.

Now 42, he suffers from flashbacks, insomnia, panic attacks and other PTSD symptoms following two years with NATO's multinational force in Kosovo, where periods of relative stability alternated with violent outbursts.

After returning home in 2008, Keyzer sank into a life of drinking and depression. His marriage came crashing down and he found himself homeless. On no fewer than seven occasions, he says, he attempted to kill himself.

Today, King and Keyzer say they are doing much better, thanks in large part to an aid group for veterans, the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Project, a non-profit organization created in 2012 in tribute to an army medic who killed himself in 2008 after returning home from Iraq.

'More needs to be done'

King and Keyzer spoke about their darker times at a recent "Wellness Day" organized by the association at a park in the coastal village of Center Moriches.

Veterans enjoyed a picnic, a salute to the US flag, yoga, meditation and kayaking—all activities intended to foster a sense of security and camaraderie.

Some 20 organizations also set up stands to offer assistance.

"More needs to be done," King said. Groups like the Dwyer Project "should have been done in World War I, World War II, Vietnam."

He now leads a group of a dozen veterans for the project. They meet weekly.

"We thought of AA, NA," he said, referring to Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, but "it's like you never really thought maybe this might help for veterans."

Now, King added, "the compassion and the caring is getting there."

Keyzer agreed.

"If the proper resources were there when we came home, we would not be in this position ... We would not have turned to drugs, we would not have turned to alcoholism," he said.

But he added: "Things are slowly changing for the better every day. There are more and more veterans' programs out there."

Peer support

Psychological support groups like the Dwyer Project have indeed been multiplying across the United States, as the world's leading superpower struggles to help its 20 million veterans—nearly 10 percent of the adult population—overcome their challenges and thoughts of suicide.

Many recent veterans are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the proud and smiling men and women who assembled in Normandy last week to mark the 75th anniversary of the D-Day invasion during World War II.

More than 6,000 veterans—many of them gun owners—killed themselves each year from 2008 to 2016, according to a report published late last year by the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

By comparison, a total of 6,951 American troops died in major war zones between 2001 and 2018, according to an analysis from Brown University.

Faced with those sobering statistics, the VA—which administers some 1,200 hospitals and clinics—has made suicide prevention a priority,

establishing a hotline for troubled veterans that is among the most heavily used in the world.

Increasing awareness

The Veterans Crisis Line was launched in 2007 with a staff of 14; it now has more than 900 employees, with three call centers across the country including one in upstate New York, director Matt Miller told AFP.

The number of incoming calls has grown steadily, now totaling some 650,000 a year, he said.

"We are all increasing in our awareness" of suicide, he said, not just among veterans but among all civilians, where the rate—while lower than among veterans—has been climbing.

Fifty years after the hell of Vietnam and more than 17 years after US troops first intervened in Afghanistan, "there is a lot more awareness" about veterans' needs, said Marcelle Leis, who heads the Dwyer Project after 20 years in the Air National Guard.

But she quickly adds: "We have a lot of work to do."

Unlike the norm during the Korean and Vietnam wars, she said, troops sent to Iraq or Afghanistan often serve "multiple tours" and struggle while "going back and forth in this constant state of hyper-vigilance."

As they cope with the difficult return to civilian life, veterans have an added handicap: in their former military culture, asking for help could be seen as showing weakness.

"A lot of what we do is education to ask for help and garner support—and learn that that's a sign of strength," Leis said.

She is cheered by the fact that many Vietnam veterans, even as they battle their own demons, have been quick to join support groups to help younger veterans.

"It is giving them a new sense of purpose, and helping them heal," Leis said.

'My blood is pumping'

King credits a Vietnam veteran as the first person to encourage him to seek psychotherapy, a crucial step on the road to healing.

While he admits to still having difficult moments, the former Marine, now married and the father of a three-month-old, has plans for the future: with a newly earned history degree, he hopes to work as a high school teacher.

And while he still misses the adrenaline rushes of combat, his weekend job as a firefighter helps make up for it.

"The alarm goes off, my blood is pumping (and) I'm going out to save somebody," King says with a smile.

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