

 **Mind Matters**

articles on mental health from experts in the field

Supporting Military Families

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In preparation for writing this column, I obtained the assistance of a young high school student named Cris who is 22 years my junior. Together we surfed the World Wide Web. We found an incredible amount of information on United States soldiers continuing to serve in the war overseas.

Despite the fact that the war has been going on for more than six years, Cris and I were surprised by things we learned about the bravery and sacrifice of our fellow Americans and their families. And although from different generations, we were surprised by the same things. We learned that many U.S. military personnel are returning from five or six tours of duty to Iraq and Afghanistan. Most estimates, including those of CNN, report well over 4,200 casualties and at least 31,000 war-related injuries.

These statistics do not reflect the emotional and mental health toll on soldiers who return to resume a supposedly “normal” life. The effects of the war on society are profound and far-reaching. It’s not just the service men and women who are affected – both while away and when they return, but also their families and loved ones. If the emotional impact of the war is difficult to detect in our returning veterans, it can be downright invisible in the families who sacrifice the presence, health, or life of loved ones to the war.

We owe a lot to those who sacrifice so much for our freedom. We cannot let them down. Even though we are a nation struggling to recover from financial setbacks, we cannot afford to overlook the mental health needs of our veterans and their families. The following discussion points provide a good start for supporting those that serve us, as well as their families.

- Support of mental health services and agencies that work to decrease homelessness and suicide rates is critical. These services are even more essential during times of war. Disproportionate percentages of veterans who return from military service attempt, or follow through, with suicide. A number of veterans from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan are currently homeless in our nation.
- We must advocate to destigmatize mental health issues. Support for those needing and/or seeking mental health support is crucial. We know that mental illness is a biologically based brain disorder and is not due to personal failure. And sometimes, how we are raised,

our life experiences and how we develop coping strategies, play a role in the problem. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the most commonly diagnosed mental illness amongst returning vets, is directly caused or exacerbated by required duties of military service. It should not be associated with shame.

- Mental health services for family members of active-duty and returning military individuals should not be overlooked. Family members can also experience PTSD-like symptoms during a loved one's absence or even upon his or her return.
- As members of society, your support is critical. When family members are left behind as loved ones serve in the military, the experience can be isolating. These families can be "adopted" by others for holidays, meals, and other family activities. The bonds that are formed when separate families come together are often mutually beneficial. Family adoption is easy; it starts with a mere invitation.
- Appreciation can make a huge difference. Any means that are available to express appreciation to military families for their many sacrifices can initiate widespread positive change within our communities.
- Donate time and resources to local agencies benefitting veterans and their families. Many opportunities to volunteer for military families exist in our communities and can be found online, in local libraries, through religious/spiritual organizations, through local media, and by word-of-mouth.

I recently offered to donate a few hours of my time to provide free therapy services to military veterans and their families through www.giveanhour.org. Cris discovered that one of the many ways he could donate his time would be through offering free yard maintenance and landscaping to local families who have a member in the military.

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