End of Life Care with Traumatized Vietnam Veterans

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Objectives

- Increase understanding of the influence of military service on end of life care
- Improve understanding of differences between Vietnam veterans and other veterans
- Discuss the presentation of trauma at end of life
- Provide some considerations for providing care at end of life and promoting life review
The Effect of Military Service

• Lifespan perspective – critical period of development - search for meaning/purpose and formation of identity

• On the Vietnam Wall, there are around 58,000 names
  • 39,996 of the soldiers listed (about \(\frac{2}{3}\)) were 22 years old or younger
  • 33,103 were 18 years old
The Effect of Military Service

- Group identity - basic training breaks down individual identities and reconstructs a group identity (“an army of one”)
- Each individual is insignificant
- Don’t ask questions, do what you’re told
- Perfectionism down to the smallest detail
- “The stoic soldier” — stoicism vs. courage
- Anger at the enemy — “kill or be killed”
Enlisted men wanted to be “war heroes” like their father’s generation who fought in WWII or the Korean War.

Sometimes they were encouraged by their veteran fathers to enlist.

But this was a different type of war in many ways.
A Different Kind of War

• Limited combat preparedness
• Challenge of the terrain/environment
  • Skin breakdown
  • Bacterial infections
• First U.S. war with guerrilla warfare – lack of “safezones” – constant vigilance
• Reception by the general Vietnamese population was not welcoming
• Vietnamese quest for independence / resistance against invasion by foreigners
A Different Kind of War

- First televised war — presence of journalists, lack of military censorship
- Draft - ambivalence
- One year tour diminished camaraderie
- Longest U.S. war to date
- Feelings of hopelessness — “useless war”
A Different Kind of War

- Lack of clear objectives — war of attrition — “the crossover point” where “success” was measured in number of “enemy” bodies
- Encouraged destruction of villages/hamlets, women and children affected
- Rapid evacuation and semi-permanent hospitals increased rate of survival for the wounded
- Lack of debriefing before return to civilian population
The Vietnam War - Casualties

- Around 58,000 were killed
- Approximately 300,000 wounded
- An estimated 800,000 were said to have significant problems with “readjustment” upon homecoming
The Homecoming Experience

Q. And babies?
A. And babies.
“All that for nothing. My buddies killed for nothing. The government duped us. It was all just politics and money. Our nation is sinful.”
– Grassman, Peace at Last
Does your spirit know/that by killing you/
I also killed/a part of myself?
— Looming, Karl Michaud

• “Some were asked to do things that under normal circumstances would be morally unconscionable.” — Bill Douglas, Crossroads Hospice

• “If they told me to kill a whole village, that’s what I’d do.”

• “90% of me died in that war.”
Guilt and Conscience

• Guilt can come from many sources
  • survival guilt
  • moral injury of killing or guilt of NOT killing
  • guilt of being injured and removed from combat
  • guilt about not seeing combat or not being in Vietnam
  • guilt of nurses and medics
Soldiers’ stories were bottled up and hidden like dirty secrets with nowhere to go for years.
PTSD
PTSD

• Correlation with:
  • increased medical diagnoses (circulatory and musculoskeletal problems)
  • greater pain intensity
  • greater interference of pain on quality of life
• Approximately 30% of combat veterans receive this diagnosis
• About ½ of all Vietnam Veterans have a PTSD diagnosis
  (EPEC for Veterans)
PTSD risk factors

- Childhood trauma
- Lack of family cohesion
- Young age at entry into military
- Combat exposure
- Lack of unit cohesion
- Lack of combat preparedness
- Negative homecoming experience
- Lack of social support upon homecoming

-Spiro et al, 2016
PTSD at end of life

- Increased anger/irritability
- Lack of trust / difficulty establishing rapport, especially in the face of vulnerability (dependency on caretakers, lack of clothing, being touched)
- Desire to be in control and alert – possible avoidance of pain medication
PTSD at end of life

- Fear of being alone/being in the dark
- Increased intrusive memories
- Emergence of guilt/shame/self-criticism and desire for forgiveness
- Hallucinations
“You Know He Ain’t Gonna Die”

“Ain’t found a way to kill me yet... Here they come to snuff the rooster... you know he ain’t gonna die...”
– Alice in Chains, Rooster

“Their ‘fight to the bitter end’ attitudes sometimes meant just that – fighting to bitter deaths. ‘Attack and defend’ instincts made death the enemy and dying a battle. Survival mode mentality interfered with ‘letting go.’ When backed into a corner, soldiers weren’t conditioned to surrender. They were conditioned to fight.”
– Deborah Grassman, Wounded Warriors
Treatment

“I can’t fix them, but I can be with them. My heart is willing to suffer their sufferings. I’m willing to confront the stoic wall they hide behind. I’m willing to learn how to walk in the woods with the wounded warrior.”

—Grassman, Peace at Last
Treatment for PTSD at End of Life

- Therapy!
  - Psychoeducation
  - Family involvement and healing
  - Breaking through stoicism to access feelings
  - Teaching new coping skills
  - Accessing guilt, promoting forgiveness
  - Achieving a different understanding of trauma, reintegrating traumatic memories
Treatment for PTSD at End of Life

- Anxiety Management
  - Deep breathing
  - Meditation/guided imagery
  - Aromatherapy
- Treatment for insomnia
  - Relaxation strategies
  - Sleep hygiene
  - CBT-I
  - Imagery rehearsal therapy for PTSD nightmares
- Medication (SSRIs, not benzodiazepines)
  - Prazosin, Trazodone, Paroxetine, Sertraline
Considerations

- Can’t take a one-size-fits-all approach as each veteran’s experiences and feelings are different
  
  “Thank you for your service” – pleasant and meaningful for some, triggering/traumatic/angering for others
  
  “Thanks for what?” one veteran asked me. “Shooting people? Cowering in my foxhole unable to move? Burning peoples’ homes?”
  
  —Grassman, Peace at Last

- Provide the space for someone to discuss their experiences without prying — some will not want to discuss their experiences in depth
“Surrender isn’t good on a battlefield,” I acknowledged. “But this isn’t a battlefield… death is a natural part of life. It’s a very important part of life. You don’t have many days left, so every day is precious. You may not want to waste one by hiding, fighting, or pretending. I know your instincts are to fight. But relaxing and letting go might help you have a peaceful death.”

– Grassman, Wounded Warriors
Victor Frankl – finding meaning in suffering, changing our attitude toward suffering

“When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer... he will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden.” — Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning

• Questions to help change attitudes toward suffering:
  • How did the suffering change the way you lived your life?
  • How did your experiences make you grow?
  • How did this change the way you connected with others?
Dealing with Guilt

- Tempting to soothe guilt with rationalization ("That was a long time ago, you were just following orders")

- Guilt serves a purpose, needs to be acknowledged and accepted to move toward forgiveness (Grassman)
Forgiveness

- Forgiveness of “the enemy”, letting go of anger
- Forgiveness of the American public for negative homecoming experience
- Forgiveness of the U.S. government for lack of transparency
- Forgiveness of the world for being unfair and cruel
- Forgiveness of self -
  “What would it take for you to forgive yourself?”
Life Review

• What are some positive experiences you’ve had that you would want your family to know about?
• What would you like your family to know or remember about you?
• What are your most important accomplishments? What are you proud of?
The Role of Ceremonies

- West Haven Connecticut VA – Native American purification rites for returning warriors
  - Long hike, welcomed back by friends and family
  - Light a ceremonial fire releasing their burden and freeing new energy and hope for the future
  - Plant fir trees symbolizing transformation of the wounded self through rebirth
  - Friends and family write a collective letter to the veteran that is read to them
References

- Education in Palliative and End-of-life Care (EPEC) for Veterans