

# Transitioning From the War Zone: Information for Veterans and Those Who Care<sup>1</sup>

Coming home from a war zone is great, and it should be a happy time for all. However, it is not always easy to make the transition home. Many things may have changed during deployment for both veterans and those at home. It is important to realize that some things won't just go back to the way they were. Coming home will usually require a period of readjustment as relationships are re-established. There are three sources of stress that can complicate how quickly you get through this process.

**Being Away:** Even if the veteran had been away for training or somewhere other than a war zone for a period of time, things change as people go about the process of everyday life. Things like taking out the trash, paying bills, balancing the checkbook, socializing, making decisions, and disciplining children will change during the deployment and will have to change again upon return. Dealing with this may cause some stress but people usually work this out on their own.

**Being in a War Zone:** To survive and function in a war zone, veterans may have acquired a number of skills that have become very powerful. They have lived in a different world and have established many routines and behaviors that served them well in the war zone. These skills have become firmly established due to the life and death intensity of the war zone. Some of these same skills may get in the way of good relationships and communication at home. These are not always easy to identify, and they do not just go away upon leaving the war zone. Working out this kind of adjustment requires learning specific information about what war zone skills are and how they may be influencing relationships at home. Additional knowledge or help in these areas can be very useful. This is the main purpose of this booklet.

**Being in Extremely Intense Situations:** Being in a war zone can clearly be dangerous but events can also be horrible and overwhelming even for well trained and experienced veterans. Some events can have a powerful effect on a veteran's beliefs about the nature of the world and mankind. Such experiences can severely disrupt the ability to readjust and may require professional help. These experiences cannot be dealt with alone.

Most veterans handle even difficult stress and make successful readjustments. The most likely problems with readjustment will be in transitioning the war zone skills into home skills to build good relationships. The VA and Vet Centers are there to provide information, support, and professional help if needed. This booklet will address the transitioning of war zone skills and identifying when more professional help is needed.

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The unique conditions of the war zone require a set of skills and ways of thinking that are very different from those at home. *War zone skills* are learned during military training but become more firmly established by the intense environment of life and death experiences. The veterans' survival depends on learning these skills well, and because of this, those skills do not go away just because they have left the war zone. After surviving the war zone, things are never quite the same. Each veteran is unique in responding to the experiences he or she has endured. The intensity and duration of exposure to war zone stress is directly related to how difficult it may be to transition back to *home skills*. The same skills that are highly effective in the war zone can be disruptive to adjustment at home, both in work environments and in relationships. Veterans need two sets of skills for life, one for the war zone and the possibility of redeployment, and one for home life.

The transition from a war zone is not easy for either the veteran or those at home. Often those at home notice that the veteran is not the same. Something is changed about him or her. It is not always easy to identify what these changes are, but it is likely they are related to the different skills necessary for survival. For the veteran, it is not easy to identify these changes because they have become deeply ingrained in his or her everyday life. What has become normal behavior for him or her may seem quite strange to those at home. **What is crucially important is to realize that the rules of the war zone do not automatically change when service members come home.** A successful transition to home requires an understanding of how war zone skills and beliefs are influencing the home environment. This booklet is designed to identify the skills and beliefs necessary for survival in a war zone and how they differ from the skills and beliefs necessary for a thriving home life.

The objective is to help veterans and those who care for them to understand the issues of readjustment and develop ways to ease the process. It is sometimes useful to get help in addition to this because of the powerful changes that can take place. Beyond the usual difficulties of readjustment, war zone experiences can also lead to anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), for which more extensive support is important. Most soldiers will make a successful transition to home life, but understanding some of the normal difficulties can speed up the process. If some of these war zone skills do not begin to diminish after a period of time, it is an important sign that more help is needed.

This booklet identifies 14 separate skill areas. In reality there is quite a bit of overlap among them. Each area has useful applications as well as potentially disruptive outcomes. Each veteran will be different in how these areas apply to them. The best use of this information is through discussion and agreement about what areas may be disrupting readjustment. Then veterans and those who care for them can begin the process of creating new skills together to give them more choices to improve their relationships and their lives.

The discussion points following each section can be used by both the veterans and those who care. They are intended to promote understanding.

## Safety

Living in a war zone requires being on constant alert for survival. In an environment where people are trying to kill you, vigilance pays off. Veterans have usually learned quickly, either by direct experience or by hearing about it that letting your guard down can result in severe injury or death. Even places or times that seem relatively safe can become dangerous. The enemy may deliberately target situations that are regarded as safe to further terrorize them. The enemy may infiltrate bases. Those who are hired and trusted may plot or carry out attacks. Terrible consequences can also come from accidents, confusion, or people who do not do their jobs. Safety can be compromised by orders from those that are uninformed or inexperienced with the actual situations.

Once veterans are confronted with the full impact of the chances of injury and death, their sense of safety in the world may never be the same. They reorient themselves to be constantly on the lookout for danger and to never become too relaxed. Loud noises may trigger a strong response that causes them to jump for cover. This is very adaptive in a war zone, but may be very embarrassing at home.

The lessons learned from these experiences do not just stop when the soldier is at home. **Any situations that remind him or her of war zone dangers may trigger survival habits that have become automatic.** For example, certain landscapes or building configurations may suggest an ambush site. A traffic jam may trigger a sense of vulnerability or imminent danger. Something out of place or unexpected, might look like an explosive device. He or she may feel a need to check locks and patrol the home at night. They may become very uncomfortable in crowds because they cannot keep track of everyone. They may need to sit with their back to the wall in a restaurant to watch everyone. They may always be looking for exits and escape routes, and may get very upset if they are confined or unable to move. Veterans may also become more nervous and alert when others around them are relaxed and having fun, thinking that no one else is tuned to potential danger. They may be overprotective of others.

The veteran may or may not be aware of the connection between these reactions at home and war zone skills. Survival skills are learned deeply. Every day events and the news may heighten the need to pay attention to safety.

Family and friends will not usually understand these habits because they have not lived in a war zone. They may tell the soldier to just relax or point out that there is nothing dangerous to be concerned about. This may only cause the veteran to be more alert to compensate for others who do not understand danger. Having a heightened sense of safety can be helpful in many situations, but it can restrict the soldier's ability to enjoy life and relationships at home. The veteran may avoid every day activities and go out only when necessary. It is difficult for others to understand the reality of this sense of danger and threat.

## **Discussion Points on Safety**

1. Is the world a safe place?
2. What situations are war zone reminders?
3. What situations does the veteran find uncomfortable?
4. What situations does the veteran avoid?
5. How can others understand the sense of danger?
6. What do others do that might make them unsafe?
7. How much news should be watched?
8. When does safety become a problematic issue?
9. What reactions do others have a hard time understanding?
10. What strategies can be used by veterans and their loved ones to increase the sense of safety?

# Trust

Veterans must adjust their sense of trust in a war zone. Relying on the good intentions of others can get you killed. In situations where the enemy is among the population, **veterans quickly learn not to trust people**. Witnessing the horrible things human beings can do to each other can severely damage the veteran's ability to trust in the nature of mankind. It may become safer to assume everyone is the enemy until proven friendly. When people are trying to kill each other and deception is a weapon, trusting behavior can be dangerous. Veterans may narrow down the number of people they can trust to a very few. Trust is given only to those who are well known and who prove themselves under extreme conditions.

At home, trust is crucial for good relationships and a successful readjustment. Veterans who were trusting prior to the war may learn to be suspicious of everyone. They may test people and require that they earn trust. They may even test those who are the most close to them. Testing may reassure the veteran, but it will also push people away. They may pounce on very minor or insignificant behaviors of others to label them as untrustworthy. Someone who is being friendly or helpful may be seen as being manipulative. Veterans may have a difficult time asking for or receiving help because they can't trust people. The returning veteran's circle of trusted friends and family may shrink rapidly. He or she may also be very reserved about meeting anyone new. Trust is necessary to build good relationships at home and at work. Veterans who do not address their abilities to rebuild trust will be at a disadvantage.

## Discussion Points on Trust

1. Who can be trusted?
2. Is the veteran suspicious of others and their motives?
3. Does the veteran tend to do things alone and resist getting help?
4. Does the veteran test the trustworthiness of others?
5. Are people judged by how they would respond in the war zone?
6. When would it be useful to be more trusting?
7. Who are the people it would help to build trust with?
8. What can others do to make themselves more trustworthy?
9. What might veterans do to make themselves more trustworthy?
10. What might make it easier to build trust?

# Anger

Anger can be a very useful emotion in a war zone. Survival often depends on a swift and aggressive response. Training experiences often generate anger and channel it into combat responses. Many of the emotions a veteran experiences in the war zone can be turned into anger and directed at the enemy. Anger and aggression are often the best defense. Anger enhances the ability to use force effectively in the violent confrontations of war. **Anger may become a best friend in the war zone.**

Because of effectiveness of anger as a survival skill, it is not easy to contain this response when at home. Veterans may respond to the everyday experience of being cut off in traffic as an aggressive act that requires forceful retaliation. Veterans may have strong defensive or aggressive reactions to a disagreement in a fairly simple conversation. It may seem like they go from perfectly calm to enrage with no warning. They might react to a child cutting across their property as an invasion of their defensive perimeter. These common events may reinforce the veteran's sense of needing to be constantly vigilant and ready to react even though the extent of his or her reaction is unnecessary. Those close to the veteran may complain that he or she is irritable and defensive. Others may say the soldier has a quick temper. Anger will tend to push people away and leave the veteran feeling isolated. It may also lead to getting into fights or getting fired from jobs. A lack of trust can feed anger. The anger is there for a good reason, but it can easily get in the way of transitioning home.

## Discussion Points on Anger

1. Under what conditions is anger useful?
2. Under what conditions does anger become a problem?
3. Does the veteran get irritable?
4. Do others think the veteran has a quick temper?
5. Does the veteran get into arguments or yell a lot?
6. Does the veteran experience road rage?
7. What strategies can others use to avoid triggering anger?
8. How can others better understand the function of anger?
9. What are some ways to engage an angry veteran?
10. What strategies can be used to calm anger when it flares?

## Predictability

**When in a war zone, one of the things that make people most vulnerable is being predictable.** If the enemy can predict your location or movements they can attack you. Veterans learn very quickly to vary their routes or routines and to mislead as to their location or intentions. When driving, they might swerve going under a bridge to avoid coming out where they might be expected to. They may avoid places where the enemy might expect them to be. If the enemy knows troops will be relaxing on a holiday, they might choose that as a good time to launch an offensive. They must also keep a low profile and not stand out or gather in groups where they might be an easy target.

The same tactics at home can make the veteran difficult to get along with. Many veterans may go out of their way to break up patterns of behavior or to not be where they are expected to be. They may show up late or early for meeting times or may show up for things unexpectedly. They might get into an argument to avoid attending a planned event. They may take very round about routes to get to familiar places. Appointments may be difficult to make or keep. To those who expect regularity in everyday life, these habits can be very strange and annoying. It is unlikely the veteran will explain such behaviors and they may not even be aware they are doing them because this has become so automatic. Others will tend to interpret such behavior as the veteran being lazy, not caring, or even deceptive. People at home expect regularity and predictability as a common part of their everyday life. Predictability at home is necessary for adjusting and building relationships.

### Discussion Points on Predictability

1. What are the advantages of being unpredictable?
2. What are the advantages of being predictable?
3. Under what conditions would it be good to be unpredictable?
4. Under what conditions would it be good to be predictable?
5. What are the important things for people to know about each other?
6. Who should know about someone's intentions and whereabouts?
7. When might others have a problem with one's unpredictability?
8. When is it ok to make and share plans for future events?
9. When would it be safe to be predictable?
10. Who should you keep informed about where you are?

# Intelligence

Veterans have learned to be constantly vigilant about giving out any information that might allow the enemy to find out what they are planning. Any information can potentially be used by the enemy to anticipate and counteract strategies or stage attacks. Following good operational security, veterans learn to restrict any information that might be used against them. **Since even what might seem like unimportant information can be put together and used as intelligence by the enemy, veterans may be very sensitive about giving out any information.** Casual conversation can compromise a mission and get people killed. This is reflected in an old World War II saying that “Loose lips sink ships”.

Veterans may avoid talking to others or keep to themselves. They may consider social chatter frivolous or even dangerous and this will restrict their ability to socialize. They may also keep very much to themselves even in close relationships. Those who care may find it difficult to find out what the veteran is thinking or feeling. Others may find themselves guessing about what the veteran likes or dislikes. Giving little information leads others to guess at what the veteran wants. The less information the veteran gives, the more likely the guesses of others will be wrong. Others may also interpret the reluctance to give information as deceitful, and the less information other people get, the more they may try to get information. The useful war zone tactics of predictability and intelligence can be very disruptive to close relationships. When a veteran is going out and someone who is close asks where he or she is going or when he or she is returning, the veteran may automatically not give this information. Others may see this as the veteran not caring or not being committed to the relationship.

## Discussion Points on Intelligence

1. When is it best to keep things to yourself?
2. When is it useful to give information to others?
3. What type of information should only be shared on a “need to know” basis?
4. What type of information can be shared on an “ok to know” basis?
5. Who is it useful to share information with?
6. What information is useful to share?
7. What information should you not share?
8. How do you decide what information to give or withhold?
9. What does sharing or not sharing information mean in a relationship?

## Mission Orientation

The primary task of the military is to complete the mission it is assigned. This way of thinking runs all through the organization from the highest commander to the lowest private. A mission is assigned from higher up and soldiers rarely have any choice about it. Once a mission is assigned all other non-related tasks are unimportant. **Accomplishing the mission requires intense focus of concentration and resources and nothing is allowed to interfere.** It is understood that soldiers may die while attempting to complete the mission. When the mission is completed, the service member rests and prepares for the next mission.

The same focus of concentration and resources can be problematic in everyday life where there are many competing goals and tasks but no one clear mission. Veterans who cannot switch out of mission thinking may not initiate their own actions because they are conserving their energy and resources in anticipation of the next assignment. Anticipating a mission may interfere with the ability to plan for the future. Veterans may avoid or ignore getting everyday things done because they do not seem important. They may wait until those everyday things reach the level of an emergency. Then they can muster great energy responding to what needs to be done. Once the emergency is resolved they will be exhausted and will withdraw and once again avoid tasks while conserving energy. They may switch between period of great energy and doing nothing. Veterans can be great responding to emergencies. To get everyday things done the veteran may have to make it a mission and become unable to stop until it is completed. They may also get angry with anybody who gets in the way. Veterans may also become very irritated with people who are late because they see this as interfering with the mission with maybe deadly consequences. This way of operating may feel very normal for the veteran but it may be confusing and frustrating for others. They will perceive the veteran as over reacting in some situations and being lazy for ignoring other important situations. Others may end up pushing the veteran to do things.

### Discussion Points on Mission Orientation

1. What are the advantages of the mission orientation?
2. What are the advantages of spreading energies out on many tasks?
3. What are important things that need attention?
4. What emergencies need to be planned for?
5. What are good guidelines to regulate working and resting?
6. How do you come to agreement about what things need to be done?
7. How can you come to agreement about the way things can be done?

## Decision making

Decision making in the military is very clearly organized. The primary system is the chain of command. Those with higher rank give orders and those of lower rank carry them out and do not ask questions. In war, decisions must be made quickly and clearly. There may be little or no time to question or discuss the accuracy of decisions. The system works well under the extreme conditions of war. Survival and completion of the mission depends on good decisions, clear orders, and people who carry them out immediately and efficiently.

At home, decision-making is usually very different. A veteran who expects others at home to follow his or her orders without questions may quickly become frustrated. At home, people often question decisions and want to discuss options. They may question that the veteran or others have the authority to make some decisions. They may also want to put off decisions until they have more information to base them on. Veterans may get angry or irritated with these tactics because in the war zone people could be killed because of indecision. At home, there is usually time for this, and the need for immediate decisions is limited. It is often more productive to do cooperative decision-making, which takes longer but leads to better outcomes. Veterans may also avoid making decisions because they have become accustomed to following orders or because they have had to make decisions in the war zone, which had life and death consequences.

**Readjustment to home life requires a range of options for making decisions that may be very different from those that were useful in the war zone.** It may be very difficult, at first, for the veteran to engage in the murky and slow process of cooperative decisions.

### Discussion Points on Decision Making

1. Under what conditions are chain of command decisions called for?
2. Under what conditions are cooperative decisions called for?
3. When should quick decision be made?
4. When is it best to delay decisions and gather information?
5. When should decisions be questioned?
6. When should the consequences of decisions be discussed?
7. What kinds of decisions need to be discussed?
8. Who should be talked to about making decisions?
9. How do you decide when there is disagreement?

## Response tactics

The conditions of the war zone require response tactics that are based on survival and completion of the mission. Military training and experience prepares the veteran to respond automatically in effective ways. In many situations, it is important to act first and think later. Hesitating to consider the situation may be dangerous or even deadly. Because of the potential danger, it is often useful to over respond and use a maximum application of force or resources. To be prepared, equipment must be checked and anything that might be needed must be in its proper place and ready to go. Veterans have learned the importance of responding quickly and forcefully to threats. It is very useful to have the enemy intimidated and frightened of your responses.

**While “act first, think later”, may be the best response in a war zone, most responses at home are better approached with a “think first, act later” strategy.** Hesitating or weighing responses at home may feel uncomfortable or dangerous for the veteran. Veterans may have to relearn how to regulate responses. Veterans need to establish a delay so they can choose how they want to respond. The importance of being prepared to respond in the war zone may translate into sensitivity at home to everything being in the “right” place. The veteran may insist that things not be out of place. A veteran may become very disturbed by unwashed dishes or messy rooms at home. Veterans may also present to others as threatening and potentially violent although they may see themselves as responding very mildly. Intimidation and fear are not useful with people the veteran cares about at home. Veterans may also find themselves training those they care about to be prepared to survive in a war zone. Veterans may be very intolerant of incompetence.

### Discussion Points on Response Tactics

1. Under what conditions is an “act first, think later” response tactic useful?
2. Under what conditions is a “think first, act later” response tactic useful?
3. When is being prepared important and when is it wasteful?
4. When is it important for things to be in order?
5. When is it alright for things to be messy?
6. When is fear and intimidation useful?
7. When is fear and intimidation a problem?
8. What tactics promote feelings of safety and trust?
9. How can you choose response tactics that are right for the situation?

# The Enemy

In a war zone, knowing the enemy is crucial to survival. It is very useful to quickly divide people into allies or enemies and if any errors are to be made, they should be in favor of assuming people are enemies. Even those who are supposed to be friendly can be plotting or gathering intelligence for later attacks. **When the enemy blends in with the population, everybody is viewed as suspicious.** Everything is experienced in terms of what the enemy is doing and your survival depends on getting it right. Planning for the future is necessary but of limited use in that you must be constantly ready to respond to the enemy. Being prepared to respond is highly valued. You must be constantly alert for danger and you should never let your guard down.

Back at home, the veteran may continue to regard everyone as a potential enemy. This will leave the veteran at a disadvantage. It hinders social relationships and limits job opportunities. It leaves the veteran isolated and separate from the world he or she needs to return to. The veteran may tend to be uncomfortable around crowds or celebrations. Veterans may continue to be suspicious and questioning of the motives of others. They may see everything in a negative light so they can be prepared. If everyone is evaluated in terms of being an ally or enemy, very few will pass the test of whether they can be relied on in a war zone. Suspiciousness can severely damage the most important relationships and lead to disrupted families and divorce. Staying vigilant for the enemy at home can leave soldiers very alone.

## Discussion Points on the Enemy

1. What are the advantages of seeing everyone as the enemy?
2. What are the disadvantages of seeing everyone as the enemy?
3. When is it helpful to assume others are plotting against you?
4. When is it harmful to assume others are plotting against you?
5. Who might be gathering information to use against you?
6. Who might be gathering information for good reasons?
7. What kinds of crowds or gatherings is it dangerous to be in?
8. What kinds of crowds or gatherings is it safe to be in?
9. When is it useful to be prepared rather than plan for the future?
10. When is it useful to plan for the future rather than be prepared?

## Emotions

In a war zone emotional reactions can lead to people getting hurt. The normal reaction of fear must be quickly overcome to be able to function and do the job. Veterans have learned to change fear into an ability to react quickly and decisively. Other emotions such as horror, disgust, or grief also tend to deter maximum performance. Veterans who controlled such reactions were better able to function, do their job, and stay alive. Numbing or turning off emotions can screen out distractions so that veterans can concentrate on survival. Showing emotions can be seen as weakness or vulnerability. Those who can turn off emotions and get the job done are trusted and respected by others. Caring about others may become difficult when others are wounded or killed.

**When home, many of the important aspects of relationships depend on being able to identify and appropriately express or respond to emotions. The numbing that veterans have used to improve war zone performance may get in the way of reading emotional signals at home.** Veterans may be unable to tap into their own emotional information and may be insensitive to others. Numbing also restricts the veteran's ability to enjoy positive emotions such as happiness, caring, or love. Veterans may have lost interest in things they used to enjoy. They may often feel as if they are going through the motions of being social with no enjoyment or involvement. Numbing can also result in an inability to get close to those the veteran cares for at home. Loved ones may see the veteran as cold and uncaring. Numbing can leave the veteran feeling bored and uninterested in most aspects of life and can lead to dangerous or thrill seeking behaviors to feel stimulated. Driving cars or motorcycles too fast is an unfortunately common example of how numbing can become disastrous.

### Discussion Points on Emotions

1. When is it useful to try to turn emotions off?
2. When is it useful to experience emotions?
3. When are emotions a weakness?
4. When are emotions a strength?
5. What are the advantages of caring about other people?
6. What are the disadvantages of caring about other people?
7. Why might it be important to understand the feelings of others?
8. Why might it be important for others to understand your feelings?
9. Who needs to know more about how your feelings?

# Authority

The structure of military authority leaves little room for choice. Veterans learned to obey commands even when they were life threatening or if they disagreed with them. The authorities are responsible for the mission as well as the welfare of their men. These are conflicting needs and authorities can seem insensitive to the survival of the veteran. The veteran had very little power to make decisions in his or her own best interests. If veterans did not have trust in leaders they may have felt extremely vulnerable. If a person in authority is incompetent, people may die unnecessarily. Even the best decisions of authority will sometimes lead to injury and death. Veterans who were in authority may have had to make decisions that had devastating consequences.

Attitudes toward authority at home may reflect how the veteran saw authority used in the war zone. Veterans may trust leaders or be highly mistrustful or resentful of authority. They may challenge anyone who tells them what to do or question the competency of anyone in authority. They may be very reluctant to let anyone have authority over them and they may purposely do the opposite of what is expected of them. This may restore their sense of authority over themselves, but such responses may make it very difficult to hold a job or get things accomplished. **Mistrusting authority may lead to unnecessary confrontations and withdrawals.** Veterans may also try to take on authority feeling they do not trust the ability of others to make decisions. In other cases where the veteran has had to exercise authority in difficult situations, he or she may avoid being burdened with any authority and let others make decisions.

## Discussion Points on Authority

1. When is it necessary to obey authorities?
2. When is it necessary to challenge or resist authority?
3. Who can be trusted with authority?
4. How do you judge someone's right to authority?
5. What should the individual have authority over?
6. When is incompetence dangerous?
7. When is incompetence just annoying?
8. When is it in your best interest to assume authority?
9. When is it to your advantage to allow others to take authority?
10. Who should have authority over you?

## Closeness

Relationships in a war zone can become very intense. Learning to depend on others for your life in dangerous situations can create a strong bond. It can feel as if those people know everything there is to know about you and that you can depend on them for anything. They may feel closer to you than anyone in your life because of what you have been through together. Such intensity requires the constant danger of war. **War can also cause the injury or death of those who have become so close. When this happens, veterans may learn to avoid closeness to prevent the pain of further losses.**

Relationships at home require a different kind of intimacy. They can generate intense feelings going through crises, but must also provide intimacy through many situations and sustain it over time. Relationships at home need to address the many needs beyond basic survival. Veterans may be so good at survival that they have forgotten how to live. Veterans are geared toward emergencies and the everyday transactions of a relationship at home can be highly confusing. It is a much more complicated process. Veterans who expect the sustained intense level of combat intimacy in their other relationships will have a difficult time. Veterans may also have a difficult time experiencing closeness with those they love the most. The fear of loss may make them push away from loved ones. Those at home may feel the veteran no longer cares about them. Veterans may avoid closeness because they do not know how to talk about the war and they want to protect loved ones from it. Loved ones may feel ignored or left out by the veterans.

### Discussion Points on Closeness

1. When is it safe to get close to people?
2. When is it unsafe to get close to people?
3. What are the advantages of war zone relationships?
4. What are the advantages of home relationships?
5. What are the qualities you look for in a person in the war zone?
6. What are the qualities you look for in a person at home?
7. What do you need from others close to you in an emergency?
8. What do you need from others close to you over time?
9. What parts of closeness are valuable when survival is the issue?
10. What parts of closeness are valuable when living is the issue?

# Loss

During war, loss is a major theme. Loss is inevitable in war, and witnessing death becomes a routine part of the experience. Veterans learned to cope by becoming numb to death and treating it in a “matter of fact” way. There is usually little time to mourn or say goodbye to those that were lost. Some may have been close friends, while others were known only in passing. Regardless, the message to move on is expressed clearly, and feeling anything about these losses may interfere with the mission. There is rarely more than a few minutes for any formal recognition of those lost and bodies are quickly removed and shipped home. Sometimes during war, a loved one from back home dies. Because military culture encourages “moving on” oftentimes, veterans were not allowed to go back home and participate in the family grieving process.

When veterans return home, they may experience a loss of the camaraderie and closeness with the buddies in the unit or platoon who understood and would “watch your back” in times of trouble. Veterans may have difficulty with the customs for mourning losses and taking time to grieve for lost loved ones which are a regular part of civilian life. People will expect the veteran to take the time to mourn a loss and not doing so might be viewed unfavorably. In addition, there are multiple rituals associated with death (funerals, viewings, burials) that are designed to help adjust to loss. **It might be hard for the veterans to feel anything because they were taught to “move on” after deaths in the military.** If a loved one was lost while the veteran was deployed and he or she was not allowed to go home, they don’t get to say goodbye.

## Discussion Points on Loss

1. When is it important to move on after a loss?
2. When is it important to take time to deal with or mourn a loss?
3. What is lost by leaving the war zone?
4. Is it ok to talk about a loss?
5. Is it ok to feel emotional about a loss?
6. Is it necessary to appear strong after a loss?
7. Should losses be dealt with alone or with others?
8. Is it ok to let others know you are hurt by a loss.
9. What are the differences between losses at home and in the war zone?
10. Is there a way to deal with losses without pain?

## Talking

It is sometimes very difficult to talk about the events of war. Many war stories are a form of boasting to establish how one unit or branch is better than another. What is harder to do is talk about what it was really like and the impact of war events on an individual. During the war, there may be little or no time to talk about powerful events that happened. Veterans may have had to numb out and go on with what they had to do. There may be numerous events that are not only emotionally disturbing, but may also challenge the veteran's beliefs about humanity and justice in the world. War can change the veteran's entire view of the world and his or her views about themselves. Because of the importance of the mission and the need to be prepared, opportunities to understand or work out such experiences may be insufficient.

It may be very difficult to talk about the war at home as well. Veterans tend to be more comfortable with other veterans where there is some mutual understanding of what they have been through. **Talking to someone who has not been in a war is difficult because they do not understand the context in which events can happen.** Veterans may feel there is way too much to explain for people to understand. People may ask intrusive questions like, did you kill anyone, did you abuse any prisoners, or what was it really like. If a soldier does start talking realistically about the war people may become quickly overwhelmed and leave or change the subject. It can be extremely helpful for veterans to find people and settings where they can talk without having to protect others or worry about uninformed judgments. Being alone and not able to talk about war can keep the soldier from feeling a part of life at home.

### Discussion Points on Talking

1. What things can veterans talk to veterans about?
2. What things can veterans talk to civilians about?
3. Should others ask about the war and the veteran's experience?
4. Should others avoid asking about the war and the veteran's experience?
5. What kinds of questions is it ok to ask a veteran?
6. What kinds of questions is it not ok to ask a veteran?
7. When is it ok for the veteran to talk?
8. When is it better for the veteran to keep quiet?
9. How will the veteran know what to talk about and to whom?

## When Is More Help Needed?

It is normal for the war zone skills outlined above to carry over into life after deployment. There is no specific timetable for how quickly they should change. Some behaviors may not show up until months after the return. Hopefully the information presented here will assist in identifying how to adapt or replace these skills and give veterans more choices to develop goals and rebuild relationships. For most veterans this transition will work out over time with a reasonable effort. Sometimes these skills do not transition well and the veteran becomes stuck. The same tactics that were successful then become a problem. Relationships at home begin suffer and keeping a job may be difficult. This is not always easy for the veteran to see because the skills have become so automatic. At these times it may be very helpful to seek out help to identify where things are getting stuck.

Sometimes, the events of war are so intense that problems go beyond transitioning skills. Some events or series of events are so overwhelming that the veteran cannot get past them alone. We like to think that time heals all wounds but that is not always true. Telling a veteran to just get over it or get on with life does not work in these instances. These events can disrupt the veteran's entire view of the world. Nothing seems the same anymore and he or she may be unsure how to view themselves or those around them. This is when it is important to get professional help. **Not addressing these issues means the war zone skills get locked in and may begin to cause major disruptions in many aspects of the veteran's life.** Signs that help is needed include:

- \_Memories of the events are intruding into everyday life
- \_Repeating dreams or nightmares of the events
- \_Feeling like the events are happening again
- \_Strong reactions to things that are reminders of the events
- \_Avoidance of anything that is a reminder of the events
- \_Not being able to remember parts of the events
- \_Lost of interest in activities
- \_Feeling detached or isolated from others
- \_Avoiding others or fear of crowds
- \_Having few feelings or not caring about anything
- \_Not caring about the future
- \_Sleep problems, or being overly alert and on guard
- \_Anger, irritability, and trouble concentrating
- \_Being jumpy at noises or surprises
- \_Feeling continuously sad or empty
- \_Feeling worthless or guilty
- \_Thoughts of suicide or death
- \_Restlessness or being easily fatigued
- \_Feeling fearful with pounding heart, shaking, sweating
- \_Fear of losing control or going crazy
- \_Substance abuse

There is no magic number of these signs to check off to determine if you need help or not. Clearly, the more of these that the veteran is experiencing, the more important it is to get help. Perhaps the best way to make the decision is to consider that if you are wondering if you should get help, you probably should. Often it is hard for the veteran to see this. Those who are close to the veteran may see the need for help well before the veteran does. If either the veteran or those close to him or her think that help is needed, it probably is. The earlier that help is sought the better. Waiting will only complicate the transition to home life.

## **The VA and Vet Centers are here to help.**

Zablocki (Milwaukee) VA Medical Center:  
414-384-2000 or 1-888-469-6614 (toll free)  
Catherine Coppolillo, Ph.D. at ext. 42449  
Andrew Hendrickson, R.N. at ext. 42442  
Ashley Tianen, MSW at ext. 41860

Milwaukee Vet Center:  
David Pelis, LSW.  
414-536-1301.

Online resources for readjustment issues:

[www.istss.org](http://www.istss.org) The International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies  
[www.ncptsd.org](http://www.ncptsd.org) The National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder