

# **Effects of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder On Vietnam Veterans**

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Very impressive  
piece of work and  
an important step for yourself  
Good job!

by

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## Term Paper

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## Abstract

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a relative new diagnosis in the DSM IV and psychological field. It goes back in history to Shakespeare but, it was not until 1980 that it was added to the DSM III. It effects many peoples lives in our country but, because it is research of the Vietnam veteran that opened the eyes of the psychological community, we will explore the effects it has on the Vietnam veteran.

The stressors which are the manifestation of the core problem are intrusive thoughts, avoidance, hyperarousal, are all symptoms of PTSD. PTSD can play a significant role on the effect of the social, employment, and daily life of Vietnam veterans.

Dual diagnosis of addition and PTSD is common in Vietnam veterans. Treatment is available through the Veterans Administration for these veterans. There is still a great deal to research about PTSD to thoroughly understand it.

## INTRODUCTION

Post-traumatic stress disorder effects numerous people in the United States today. Survivors of traumatic events such as natural distress, automobile accidents, torture, rape, child abuse, and war become victims of PTSD. Many of our firemen and policemen become victimized through their constant exposure to traumatic experiences. As you can imaging in our violent society, PTSD is relatively common. The effects of PTSD on Vietnam veterans is worthy of an investigative research to explore .

The evolution of PTSD goes back in time to Shakespeare who described its symptoms. Current studies on PTSD's effect in war begins with World War I. In World War I with the protracted artillery barrages common, the concept that high air pressure of exploding shells caused actual physiological injury, precipitating the abundant symptoms that were afterward labeled "shell shock". Toward the end of the War, further natural adaptation accounted for the syndrome being labeled a "war neurosis".

During World War II, psychiatric casualties increased some ; we see a 300 percent when compared to World War I. Of World War II evacuations, 23 percent were for psychiatric reasons. In Korea, psychiatric evacuations dropped to six percent. It finally became evident that the whole complex stressors of the combatant were primary factors leading to the injuries.

Surprisingly with United States involvement in the Vietnam War, psychological battlefield injuries evolved in a new direction. What was expected did not occur. Battlefield psychological breakdown was at it's lowest level. It seemed that preventive measures had been effective at lowering the psychological battlefield losses.

As the war continued appearances of symptoms began to be noticed. Accusation of common symptoms including nightmares, intense anxiety, depression, explosive behavior, and problems with interpersonal relationships, to name a few.

What was unusual was the large numbers of veterans being effected after Vietnam. In previous wars the number of cases increased as the fighting escalated. It was not until the early 1970's, when the war was winding down, that neuropsychiatric disorders began to increase. With the end of troop involvement in January 1973, the number of veterans showing neuropsychiatric disorders began to increase tremendously (President's Commission on Mental Health, 1978).

Finally after immense research on the effects of traumatic events on people, DSMIII (1980) was published with a new category: post-traumatic stress disorder, acute, chronic, and/or delayed.

During (August 4, 1964 until January 27, 1973) 4,368,000 personnel served as support in the Vietnam war and of those 2,586,152 men and 7,848 women served inside the country of South Vietnam. The government has conservatively estimated that approximately 800,000 Vietnam war veterans are suffering from various degrees of post-traumatic stress disorders, disorders that are significantly intrusive enough to rob their lives of fulfillment and joy. If this conservative figure is correct, this is 31 percent of the total of all forces that served In-country that suffer from PTSD.

To answer why there was such an increase in these statistics, we should look at how the Vietnam war was different from other wars. The average age of the soldier in Vietnam was 19.2 years old. While in World War II the average age was 26. Upon returning home veterans had to explain their reasons for serving in Vietnam. Many chose to not divulge that they had served in Vietnam

upon return. Unlike World War II their were no parades for veterans on return. The war and those who served in Vietnam were generally criticised. There were no clear combat zones or fronts in Vietnam. Casualties far exceeded those of World War II. The tour of duty was 12 months, generally the soldier was sent to Vietnam by himself and he was returned by himself. There was no emotional support or debriefings once the soldier returned home, virtually he was hung out to dry from the monsoons of Vietnam.

### STRESSOR

PTSD's effect on Vietnam veterans is unique because their symptoms are perceptions of war. All recollect similar experiences yet these experiences are unique to each individual. Vietnam veterans stressors are primarily creations of life threatening situations, guilt, of surviving, and acts precipitated in war that are perceived by society as immoral. Invision sitting by a college friend.,,turn your head as quickly as you can and return your eyes to your friend. He is no longer there instead he has been killed. This was a common experience in Vietnam except it was normally more traumatic. Many Vietnam veterans suffer server guilt because another took their place one day on patrol or in the seat of a helicopter, not to return. For the nineteen year old mind the reality of war was a constant battel within himself of survival verses social valves which had a gigantic psychological effect on them.

### INTRUSIVE RECOLLECTIONS

Vietnam veterans that suffer from PTSD have recollections of the stressors that occurred to them in Vietnam. Many times not understanding the triggers that stimulate these thoughts. The recollections can be brought to life by the playing of The Star Spangled Banner or a helicopter

flying over. What is obvious to the veteran is that all of a sudden it as if he were back in Vietnam wanting to forget what he is experiencing but, unable to change the brains direction. Often these recollections manifest themselves repeatedly like a broken record.

### AVOIDANCE / NUMBING

It is not unusual that veterans do not enjoy the repetition of their stressors in their minds. They begin to avoid things that remind them of Vietnam. Holidays like Veterans Day, Memorial Day, and dates of severe combat for the veteran are despised because of the knowledge that his recollections will increase. This author would not discuss Vietnam for over twenty-five years because of his fears of activating additional thoughts of his experiences. We find Vietnam veterans have had problematic relationships and marriages. This effect is understandable considering the losses most incurred in Vietnam. The Vietnam Veteran does not easily form relationships nor friendships because of the fear of losing this if it is obtained. Trust becomes an issue with these veterans because they fell that the government hung them out to dry. Isolation becomes commonplace in an effort of avoidance.

### HYPERAROSAL

The 4<sup>th</sup> of July (Independence Day) is trying for most Vietnam veterans. The explosive fireworks return memories of incoming which they relate to as life threatening. Another hyperarosal effect is coming up behind a Veteran which more often than not will trigger a reflex that is uncontrollable. You can always find the Vietnam veteran in a crowd when a car backfires...He's the one on the ground. Humorous to many but perceived as life threatening to the Vietnam veteran.

## DURATION

The duration of these battlefield scares varies from individual to individual. Numerous casualties of psychological injuries occurred in Vietnam. Envision a nineteen year old being escorted home with someone one each arm. He is wounded...his nerves have been shot! I've nicknamed him "Earthquake". Not all succumbed to the pressures in a relative short period of time like Earthquake. Instead many attempted to regain their lives as they had left them prior to their journey to Vietnam and have been successful in doing so. Others not as fortunate have gone years getting by and all of a sudden they are overcome with emotions that they are not prepared to endure. What is obvious to the psychiatric community that at the present time there is no cure for PTSD.

## SIGNIFICANT EFFECT

Not all Vietnam veterans suffer from the social, employment, and daily life effects of PTSD. The stressor and how it is perceived plays a significant roll in these effects. We have a heard the classical example of this effect, the Vietnam postal worker goes to work and begins shooting co-workers for no obvious reason. To many there is no reason for this but, others know that this type action could have possibly been avoided with proper education of PTSD and its effects.

## CO-MORBID DIAGNOSIS

It is not unusual for Vietnam veterans diagnosed with PTSD to also be diagnosed with substance (drug and alcohol) addition. This is caused many times because of the isolation and the veterans attempt to self medicate.

## TREATMENT

In 1989 the Veterans Administration established the National PTSD Center for clinical research, training, and information on PTSD. Presently the Veterans Administration operates 24 specialized inpatient treatment centers in the United States. The closest to our area is the Veterans Administration Medical Center, Lyons, New Jersey which is ranked number two in the United States for treatment efficiency.

## CONCLUSION

The effects of Post-traumatic stress disorder on Vietnam veterans remains to be explored. What is known is that PTSD is a deadly mental disorder if untreated. There are no guarantees that treatment can or will prevent suicides which are prevalent among Vietnam veterans. We should hope that the psychiatric community and the government will move swiftly into further exploration of the causes and effects of PTSD. Especially since the majority of those afflicted are Vietnam veterans that fought for our freedom.

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