

OVERVIEW

Two popular misconceptions exist in this country about the impact of the Vietnam war on American veterans and their families. One is that it ended in 1975. The other is that only veterans suffered, and for only a short period of time. Most Vietnam veterans have adjusted well to life since the war; however, a large number of veterans are still struggling with various problems. There are 58,183 names on the Vietnam Memorial Wall of people killed in action. As of 1979, more veterans had died by their own hands than were killed in combat. It is important for those who may be working with Vietnam veterans and their families to be aware of potential problem areas in order to provide assistance and referral for appropriate follow-up.

There are three primary areas of impact for veterans and their families: post traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, and agent orange.



POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) include depression, isolation, rage, avoidance of feelings/alienation, survival guilt, anxiety reaction, sleep disturbances or nightmares, and intrusive thoughts. Not dealt with, PTSD can obviously have an effect on more than just the veteran.

The Vietnam war differed from previous wars in several ways that exacerbated the problems associated with PTSD. First the average age of a soldier was close to 20, making many people involved in the war barely out of their formative adolescent years. Second, there was a system in place which limited the amount of time that soldiers spent in combat to approximately 12 months. While this system had some obvious advantages, it did not allow for development of the strong camaraderie and relationships that could provide emotional support. Tours in Vietnam were, therefore, perceived as solitary, individual episodes. Finally, the overwhelmingly negative response to the war by many Americans made adjustment to life after coming home very difficult.

ALCOHOLISM

Recent research has shown that Vietnam veterans are an at-risk group for alcoholism and substance abuse. The rate of alcohol abuse among veterans is two and a half times that of the general population. Self-medication was an easily learned coping response during Vietnam and alcohol still appears to be the primary drug of choice for veterans today.

Alcoholism not only affects the individual but also can involve family members, significant others, and employers who must deal with the erratic behavior of the person who is drinking.

AGENT ORANGE

Agent Orange is the nickname given to the defoliant used in Southeast Asia because it was shipped to the country in 55-gallon drums marked with orange stripes. This dioxin-loaded chemical was used widely in Vietnam from 1962 to 1971. Therefore, anyone who served in Vietnam was exposed via the water supply or food chain, even if he/she did not handle the product directly.

Although research has varied on the topic, there is no disputing the disproportionately high rate of cancer in Vietnam veterans, as well as birth defects and learning disabilities in their children.

HOW DOES VETERAN STATUS AFFECT FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN WHO HAVE DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES?

Psychological problems, violence, divorce, suicide, alcoholism and other drug abuse, antisocial behavior, and difficulty keeping jobs are some of the characteristics of veterans struggling to recover from military experiences. Unexplained health and behavioral problems of veterans or developmental disabilities in their children may be linked to an individual's military service in Vietnam.

Often the families of veterans, and those around them, fail to recognize a connection between the behavior or health problems of veterans, their status as veterans, and the dysfunctions within the families. Also, problems with readjustment may surface immediately after military service, but some--such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or Agent Orange related illness or disabilities--may remain hidden for years. Problems may resurface after a long period of time based on unpredictable triggers. Families and service providers may need to be prepared to deal with latent issues that arise.

HOW DOES HAVING A CHILD WITH A DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY AFFECT FAMILIES?

Having a child born with a birth defect or birth injury is a terrible shock. It frequently defies the existing coping mechanisms employed by a family. The disability is always present and may involve a myriad of doctors appointments, psychological test, and problems with school placement. Money and health care coverage may always be an issue. It never goes away, and, as the child grows older, there are concerns about living independently vs. long term care facilities. Any of these encounters may be a trigger for a Vietnam veteran.

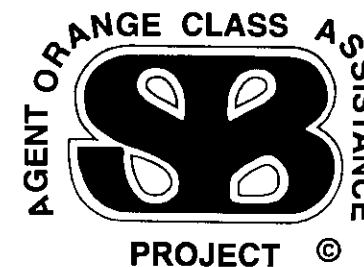
IF YOU WORK WITH FAMILIES HAVING A CHILD WITH A DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY:

1. Revise your intake or assessment form to ask if any member of the family served in Vietnam.
2. Contact the PTSD clinic at your local VA hospital, Vet Centers, or local veterans group for speakers to come and speak more about PTSD treatment, and Vietnam veteran programs and services.
3. Contact the state Division of Veteran's affairs for information about referring for benefits counseling and advocacy.
4. Contact the National Information Systems (NIS) at the University of South Carolina to ascertain if there is a local Agent Orange Class Assistance Program located in your area. Their number is 1-800-922-9234

IF YOU WORK WITH VIETNAM VETERANS:

1. On your intake form or initial assessment ask if the veteran has any children with developmental problems or chronic illnesses. Find out if and where medical treatment or other programs are being provided, and if there is medical coverage available.
2. Contact the social workers at the program facility where services are being provided to network, refer the child/family for financial counseling if needed, or to obtain adequate information regarding the type of condition the child has.
3. If you have questions about available services contact the National Information Systems at the University of South Carolina. They offer a national information and referral system which helps Vietnam veterans and their family members in need of services for a child with a developmental disability connect with service providers. Their number is 1-800-922-9234.

Working with Families of Vietnam Veterans who have Children with Developmental Disabilities



Spina Bifida Association of America