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Becoming themselves again

The Community Veterans Project helps veterans and their families coping with post-traumatic stress at an early stage

BY SUSANNE JANSSEN

TOM WALSH'S FAMILY HAD NO MILITARY background at all. However, when his son joined the Navy and volunteered to fight in Iraq and to deploy in Kuwait, they supported his decision. After an emotional meal together at Thanksgiving, his son went off to serve his country. When he was deployed, the contact with his family was limited to short phone calls telling them that he was alive; occasionally there was time for a 20-minute conversation with his son's wife and other family members.

When he came back to the U.S., Tom flew from coast to coast to see his son. Everything was different. His son, talkative and social before Iraq and Kuwait, was now very quiet.

"There were days when he didn't say three words," said Tom. Through a friend, Tom joined a meeting of the Community Veterans Project, since he knew that this could be a sign of post-traumatic stress. He gained valuable insights that helped him deal with the new situation.

"I led by example that it is okay not to speak," he remembers. He asked open-

ended questions, and didn't push his son with questions or an agenda. But most of all, he made no judgments and tried to be a good listener to his son, showing him his unconditional love.

With that approach, there were times when his son opened up to him, sharing moments of the world of war, so distant and contrary to everything his family ever experienced.

With the help of the Community Veterans Project training, Tom learned what was behind this behavior. "In a war situation, the soldier has to see, hear, and react faster, they have a heightened awareness. That leads to changes in the brain."

Stress relief isn't easy. For Tom's son, relief would come in the form of going into remote areas and target shooting to maintain his skills. Tom realized that for his son, being in a city or with a lot of people was difficult.

In all this different behavior, Tom stayed silently by his side. "I prayed for him a lot," he said, remarking that his faith carried him through this tough time. "I had to trust that everything is in God's hands," he said.

Continuing to be a good listener and not asking questions directed to his son, he eventually was invited to meet his son's friends who had served in the military as well. Tom heard them sharing their struggles to readjust to life back home and knew that this was normal for what they experienced. After letting his son initiate most of the conversations, little by little, "he became his old self again."

"We established a trust, a nurtured trust between us," recalled Tom. Things could have been much more difficult for his son and the entire family. Instead, thanks to the training and insights from the CVP, he was prepared to face those difficulties that can challenge a marriage and the unity of a family.

How the Community Veterans Project started

Dave Walker developed post-traumatic stress himself twice — from two tours in Vietnam and following his exposure as a military chaplain to first responders at Ground Zero just after 9/11. Working as a police chaplain, he was called to several

Advice from veterans to their families:

- When a veteran returns to the civilian world, they no longer are surrounded by their trusted group of service members. Post-traumatic stress makes that sense of loss feel stronger to us. A family member or a friend builds trust by carefully listening.
- Be heartfelt in your interactions with us — otherwise, we will withdraw from you. Be empathetic by listening to us, not asking us war-related questions. Let us decide if we want to talk about our experiences. Keep the conversation light and very in the moment, “Would you like anything special for dinner?”
- Civilians think they know what battle is like, but veterans know they have no clue as to what the war experience is really like
- We’ll avoid so-called friends and acquaintances who show their insincerity by asking flippant questions such as: Did you see any action, like in the papers? Did you kill anyone? Did you enjoy killing? What was that like? Wanting to know everything a veteran observed during deployment is very, very personal to us.

*Excerpt from a booklet
of the Community Veterans Project*

tragedies that occurred as a result of veterans struggling with diagnosed and undiagnosed post-traumatic stress. When a veteran killed his sister and himself in Gilroy, California, Walker understood that he had to broaden his efforts to raise awareness of the struggles veterans face. He felt that others shouldn’t have to suffer as much as he and other veterans did.

“When I came back from Vietnam, we weren’t treated well at all,” he said. Haunted by the horrifying pictures of the battlefields in his head, he was not able to keep a job. He was homeless until someone helped him to admit that he needed professional help. Then, over time Walker began to be a mentor to veterans in crisis and help them obtain treatment and medical services through the Veterans Administration or other healthcare professionals.

He wondered what could happen if families, friends, coworkers, and first responders knew how to recognize post-traumatic stress symptoms, and whether that awareness would improve some situations. Walker turned to a newly retired police captain Dave Rauschhuber, with whom he had worked in Campbell, California, and who had seen many times how difficult it is for veterans to turn things around when unemployment, debt and crime take over one’s life.

Together they began to explore the vision of what could be different for veterans and their families if each of them recognized the onset of post-traumatic stress and sought effective treatment before the behavior became acute. The idea of the Community Veterans Project

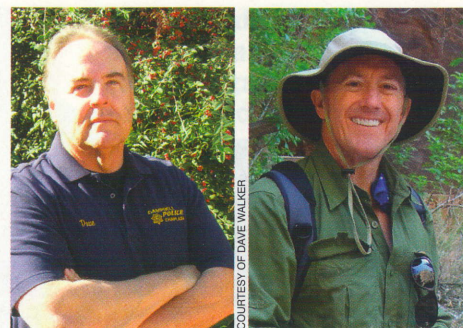
was born, because “it needs a community to help, and it involves the whole community.”

Both were convinced that with the right training and awareness, parents, spouses, children, friends and co-workers might be able to recognize and alter the downhill road that untreated post-traumatic stress leads to in many cases. Of all the veterans who got arrested, 70% would end up behind bars again. However, of those who were treated, 90% later remained drug free, alcohol free and out of prison. The need to start training families earlier to recognize the first warning signs was urgent. It was essential to educate police officers to ask the right questions when called to an incident, and to inform judges that community service and help sometimes does more good than jail time.

“We have a social responsibility,” says Walker, who is now a police chaplain; “You have to live your faith out on the street,” is his motto. “Won’t Jesus ask us in the Final Judgment, ‘I was in prison, and you visited me?’ We may practice our religious faith differently, but our core values are the same,” he said.

In 2012 CVP volunteers began a two-year research project. The idea was that if veterans and their families knew what onset symptoms looked like and had the proper training, the veterans were more likely to be guided toward treatment.

The two men looked at some subtle signs: a son comes back from war; he opens the fridge to fix a sandwich and forgets what he wants to do. “This is not usual for a twenty-something,” Rauschhuber says. A veteran might be



Helping hands. Dave Walker and Dave Rauschhuber wanted to help veterans before the situation became acute

less talkative than before. He (or she) doesn’t want to hug family members anymore or show affection. The TV sound is turned up — it is because the veteran is trying to focus on what is being said. Often trivial arguments turn into matters of life and death.

A lot of veterans’ relatives find these situations in their daily life. Understanding that these could be signs of post-traumatic stress can help to react in the right way. Walker and Rauschhuber asked veterans to share their stories and thoughts on coping, with the simple question, “If you knew then what you know now, what would you tell others who are beginning those same challenges today?” This helps other veterans and non-veterans understand why it is difficult to get back to a normal life.

Walker and Rauschhuber started their program locally, but they have been asked to help others get a similar program started in their area. Now they are planning DVDs to train people all over the U.S. People have stepped forward both anonymously and on the record to share important themes, like Charilyn, a Blue Star mother. “The military trained our sons and daughters to be superior warriors. Now, they also need to spend, as necessary, the same amount of effort to un-train them so they can better adjust to civilian life.”

Many parents, wives and husbands are grateful, because they’ve noticed that they can avoid reacting in an unhelpful way. Stories of those like Tom Walsh’s son, who overcame his difficulties, can give families hope that their loved one is not lost.

communityvetsproject.org



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