Commentary Essay – Suicide in the Military

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Mental illness has become a much bigger issue for society over the last few years. More is currently known about conditions like depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than ever before. High-profile suicides like Robin Williams’s created the sort of awareness of depression that has prompted more discussions about the mental health community’s role in helping people with these sorts of issues. There is a deeper, darker side of this issue that has found its way into the news, as well. While mental health issues afflict the population at large, they are especially worrisome among current and former members of the military. The unique constraints of military service create extraordinary mental pressures. In some cases, those pressures are so heavy that service members cannot carry the load. As a veteran and a person with a long family military legacy, I have seen all too well the effects of mental illness on those who serve. The pressures of military service often create problems that may be unfixable, and worse, the lack of focus on providing mental health assistance to veterans at large helps to create a situation where a veteran takes his own life roughly once per hour in the United States today.

Many veterans struggle with depression and anxiety. A soldier’s day-to-day life is a very stressful job. From being deployed in foreign countries in war zones or even doing intense training here in the states. Many veterans’ mental health conditions go unreported but that should never be the case. If there was more help out there for veterans that made them feel comfortable, then we could possibly reduce the suicide rate for our war heroes. The statistics indicate that around once per hour, a veteran commits suicide in the United States. Older veterans – including those older than 60 – commit the highest percentage of suicides. Younger veterans are also committing suicide at a much higher rate. In the middle, there exists a grouping of veterans that does suffer from mental health issues, but these middle-aged veterans commit suicide at lower rates than their older or younger counterparts. Roughly 22 veterans per day commit suicide (Worland, 2014). Looking at the two groups that commit suicide more commonly, there are some instant explanations that come to mind. Older veterans, it seems, are more likely to have been involved in the Vietnam conflict. That conflict was particularly traumatic given the weaponry involved, the length of time that many young men served, and the fact that many of the young men who went to Vietnam were not volunteers. The draft thrust thousands of young Americans into the rice paddies in Vietnam, taking them out of their high school classrooms and putting them into environments where their friends were losing their lives. Having seen the effect that military service can have on a young person, it becomes clear to me that many of the people who went through this period in Vietnam were probably exposed to horrors that they will have a difficult time shaking. In addition, there is one school of thought that believes the people who went to Vietnam were exposed to gasses and other substances that might have harmed their mental health. The most likely scenario is that a combination of factors is responsible for the higher suicide rates among older veterans.

Older veterans have a higher suicide rate but younger veterans are those likely returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. While these young veterans have been exposed to a different kind of warfare, they, too, have lived some of the realities suffered by those who served in Iraq. Younger veterans have been forced to deal with the realities of improvised explosive devices, which might take their life at any time while in Iraq and Afghanistan. Perhaps most important is the fact that re-assimilating to life in the United States can be very difficult for these veterans, just as it has been for older veterans. Those returning home from Vietnam often had to deal with the nasty comments from people who did not support the war. While some media images of anti-soldier activity are overdone, it is clear that there was not a supportive atmosphere for those young men who were trying to make a life after coming back from the war. While Americans today are much more supportive of the military, and of military personnel, than they were during the 1970s, young veterans can still struggle to find their place. Often, they struggle with substance abuse and with finding employment. Many young veterans have learned skills in the field of battle that might be transferrable to the workplace, but much of what they do in the military has little application to the so-called “real world.” This leads to obviously bad consequences, as young returning veterans feel listless and without purpose once their service is up.

While much of the dialogue on veteran mental illness centers on what can be done to alleviate the problems, there are some conditions that can only be managed rather than fixed. The pressures of leaving one’s family can often produce depression. I have had experience with this in my own life, as ripping apart my understanding of the world was very difficult to deal with. In addition, the harsher realities of war – seeing friends die and having to deal with the realities of carnage on both sides – can cause some people to struggle emotionally and mentally. It may be true that many of these issues will always be a problem as long as people are being sent to war. While it may be good to talk about the ways to improve how we see these issues as a society, it may be smart to think of these problems as transaction costs of war. As long as human beings are emotional and empathetic, they will always suffer when sent to war, and when returning from service. When deciding whether to send soldiers off to war, it may be instructive for leaders to remember that when those soldiers return, they will be dealing with a host of issues that are not easy to fix.

At the heart of this conversation is the reality that society, while investing significantly in war machines, has not invested as much in mental health provisions for veterans of the military. According to (Zivin 2007), close to a million veterans go to meetings for depression. Almost 2,000 of those end up committing suicide anyway. One of the major problems for veterans, as well, is that the toughness instilled into them by warrior culture makes it less likely for them to seek the treatment that they ultimately need. Soldiers are trained to work through things on their own and to show ultimate strength. In some cases, they are specifically trained on how to remain mentally strong through the most difficult struggles. When these people get out of the military, and even while they are in the military, they become desensitized to their own struggle, opting not to seek help in those situations when it might save their lives. With this said, there are two different problems. For one, awareness of these issues is very low, and the military has done a poor job of communicating the need for soldiers to seek help when they have a major mental issue. Beyond that, the help given to these veterans often come in the form of basic meetings. In many cases, veterans are suffering from very real conditions like bi-polar, depression, and PTSD. These are individuals who need more than just a simple group meeting. Many of these individuals could benefit from intensive therapy with an individual counselor. Many more could benefit from drugs that might help to regulate the chemicals in their brains. At current, the amount of societal investment in these services is lacking, and this is one of the primary reasons why suicide within the military remains the huge problem that it is today.

America continues to go to war, and the people who serve in the military are extraordinarily brave. When they come home, though, they are often broken, and they need support and professional help in order to put their lives back together. Mental illness in general is getting more attention in society, as people have come to see that depression is a disease that can kill. However, many still do not understand the challenges and pressures that are faced by people who leave their families, their jobs, and their lives to go fight in wars. These individuals see things that they cannot un-see in some circumstances. While it may not always be true that their problems are completely fixable, mental health issues are manageable. America has not invested as much as it should in awareness on veteran mental illness, and the country has not provided the kind of resources that these people need in order to get help. This is why almost every hour, a different veteran decides to kill himself or herself. The problem is especially bad for older and younger veterans, who tend to be those people who have gone through the worst in some of America’s most dramatic wars. Until more focus is put on mental health for veterans, these problems figure to remain.

References

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