



Chuck Norris Sees a New Way to Look at PTSD

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Beyond designated holidays and formal observances, it's important that we continue to ask whether we, as a nation, are doing right by our military veterans. The Veterans Administration is considered the largest integrated health care system in the country. Today, half of all health centers are said to be certified by the Veterans Administration.

This is not meant, in any way, to disparage the important work they do. It's simple to stress the importance of continuing to do all that is possible to deliver the best health outcomes possible for our vets. This is especially true when it comes to behavioral health conditions, an area where far too many veterans still do not seek help when needed.

A federal government report released last year found that among those veterans who received care through the Veterans Health Administration, nearly 40 percent were diagnosed with a mental health or substance abuse condition. The overwhelming diagnoses were for depression, followed by post-traumatic stress disorder.

Despite efforts to reduce the stigma and other barriers faced by veterans seeking psychological counseling, encouraging new work is being done to change this. Since 2011, some of that work was conducted in classrooms at William James College, a small school located west of Boston. William James College claims it is the only U.S. psychology graduate school focused on training veterans as counselors.

“If you talk to most vets, they want to talk to people who have had the same sets of experiences,” Robert Dingman, the director of military and veterans psychology at the school, recently explained to Reuters. “We don't believe by any means that only vets can help vets, but we think it's a good career pathway.”

Another innovative and similar approach to treatment is Warriors Heart, based in Bandera, Texas. It's considered the first private “warriors only” residential treatment center in the country providing peer-to-peer solutions to help veterans, law enforcement and first responders who struggle with addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Warriors Heart is a community of elder warriors, healers and support staff united in the battle of addiction and PTSD,” says CEO Josh Lannon. “Together, we serve and support our warriors who are still suffering and their loved ones.”

We hardly need reminding that psychological trauma like that caused by combat can trigger post-traumatic stress disorder; and that PTSD can produce debilitating, even crippling effects. Yet researchers now seem to be closing in on what could be a life line for those who suffer from it. Like most things, there are two sides to this coin. Everything that follows traumatic experiences isn't bad. These experiences can be turned around to become a creative, positive force, we're now being told. In fact, research shows they can actually trigger growth.

According to a new study of military veterans who went through trauma conducted by researchers at North Carolina State University, veterans in the study with post-traumatic stress disorder were also more likely to experience “post-traumatic growth” – such as an increased appreciation of life, awareness of new possibilities and enhanced inner strength.

“These findings are important,” says Sarah Desmarais, an associate professor of psychology at North Carolina State University and author of a paper on the new study, “because they show that the way veterans respond to trauma is not a zero-sum game.”

Post-traumatic growth is a psychological term first coined in the 1990s when a group of researchers became interested in trauma as a catalyst for positive change. The difference today is that, instead of looking only at one side of the equation – on post-traumatic stress as predicting lower quality of life or post-traumatic growth as predicting better quality of life – current study recognizes that a traumatic event is causing both.

The goal of the North Carolina State University study was to increase overall well-being without focusing solely on the subject's post-traumatic stress symptoms. In the study, the most common type of that growth among veterans participating in the study was increased appreciation of life.

While researchers found that members of each group shared common characteristics, the group in the study that experienced the greatest post-traumatic growth was made up of participants who were the most likely to report that their trauma fundamentally challenged the way they viewed the world. They also spent the most time thinking about their traumatic event and had the highest rate of post-traumatic stress disorder.

For far too long, we tended to look at veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress symptoms as broken individuals; combat vets who are ticking time bombs. This has

continued despite the fact that the vast majority of former troops who live with post-traumatic stress cause no harm to themselves or others. It is hoped this current study will help erode these stereotypes, as well as prompt more large-scale efforts to foster post-traumatic growth in veterans.

After experiencing a traumatic event, it is not unusual for someone to see that their psychological functioning increases their relationships, creates a change in views of themselves, as well as their philosophy of life.

“These findings also demonstrate that we need to do more research into post-traumatic growth, working with the veteran community,” Desmarais adds. “The fact that we still know so little about post-traumatic growth, and that much of the existing work was not done with members of the military, is a significant oversight.”

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