

Conifer Counseling Informational Article

Returning Veterans: Where to start?

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Remember before when we said:

"We Start There!"?

We may have gotten this wrong for many of our returning Veterans. They are coming into counseling sessions expressing frustration about the basic issues civilians naturally understand, since they have never been separated from this civilian society. Yes, these other mental health related issues may impact reintegration but one does not automatically have PTSD or other mental health issues just because they served. Reintegration does not only effect those who have been deployed to conflict areas. Living in the culture of the military alone makes reintegration difficult. Addressing the major mental health issues may not be possible if some basic readjustment can't occur. Let's listen to the experiences that these Veterans are reporting and help them start by addressing basic needs.

In a recent training with trauma expert, Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., he astutely pointed out that the Veteran doesn't always need to learn to manage their trauma; sometimes they just need to learn how to manage dealing with people in a grocery store. If the perception "*Civilians are Crazy*" is accurate to a Veteran's reality, then, in a grocery store, we have just asked him/her to spend significant time in close quarters with "*crazy*" on a regular basis and survive it.

So how do we better meet the needs of these men and women? How do we break down resistance to engaging in work aimed at giving them the relaxed and enjoyable life they deserve and protected for the rest of us? It may be that we need to move from the clinical to the practical. That we acknowledge and understand:

- the intensive training Veterans complete to build strengths meant for a war zone- so they can come home and protect home
- the highly structured, black and white world within which they lived versus the gray world which runs on unspoken rules beyond laws, and the struggles of then returning to gray world living once again
- that navigating social situations and making interpersonal connections outside the "tribe" are not skills which offer protection in a time of war. They can, at times, become a risk instead
- that if they learned and did well, then they had to suppress and, potentially, "forget the rest"

Let's remove the stigma of mental illness from the counseling session and replace it with skill building and redirecting one's strengths, which have now become barriers.

Fortunately, our community does not have a deficit of resources. The Mountain Resource Center maintains a Veteran's Support Services Program offering a variety of services which include job searching, emergency services, and funding for counseling (not just counseling for mental illness). For further information, you can contact them at (303)838-7552.

Additionally, Park County has a very involved and informed Veteran's Support Officer who can be reached at (303) 816-9498.