

Aid to Veterans Follows the Way of Love

By Amy Blumenshine

Many family members and loved ones of recent veterans wonder how to be helpful to veterans after their deployments. Unfortunately, in the realm of human behavior, one size does not fit all. There is no guide to what to say. Veterans will have had very different experiences in war-time deployments. The nature of how they have been impacted by their experiences may take time to realize.

Those connected to veterans are encouraged to let their love guide them in their actions. Reaching out in love- even clumsily- is better than doing nothing for fear of doing the wrong thing. Family members often feel powerless when confronted with bewildering behavior. The power of their concern and love can be an important part of helping the veteran “come home” from the war experience.

According to author Philip Yancey in *Where is God When It Hurts: A Comforting Healing Guide for Coping with Hard Times*, “love instinctively detects what is needed.” Following the way of love, we have the wisdom of Christ to guide us to connect with those we love who are hurting.

Communicate that you are available for the veteran through words and deeds – even if you don’t get much response. Yancy explains: “People who are suffering often times feel an oppressive sense of aloneness. They feel abandoned, by God but also by others, because they must bear that pain alone, and no one else quite understands. Loneliness increases the fear, which in turn increases the pain, and downward the spiral goes.” Veteran and social worker Raymond Monsour Scurfield has developed some excellent suggestions for families in his chapter, “The Return Home and the Ricochet Effect on the Family,” in *War and Trauma: Lessons Unlearned, from Vietnam to Iraq*.

He writes that most veterans return wishing to get on with their lives, wanting not to dwell on their war experiences. They appear to be just fine. Another group returns preoccupied with their war experiences, but while obviously troubled, also don’t want to talk about their experiences and prefer to move on with their life. Family members, however, can be very tolerant and forgiving of difficult behavior if they have a sense of what their loved one has suffered. They can say, “I don’t need to hear about what happened now, but I need to know that sometime you can share some of that with me.”

A third group reveled in the war and now disparage civilian life. Writes Surfield: “Help is required in dealing with such veterans, and they need help (if they have any interest in being back in the normal world), but in all likelihood will not avail of it.

Family members who are troubled in relating to veterans who cannot leave the war behind need to take care of themselves in order to sustain themselves in connecting with the veteran. Many Al-Anon groups provide support for loved ones of those with mental health and behavioral problems, as well as for those who struggle with addiction.

Scurfield says that the veteran has the responsibility to inform their loved ones when they are able to connect, but that families may need to accommodate changes in contact and withdrawal. Persist in showing that you are available when the veteran is ready. Do not press anyone to tell traumatic stories before they are ready.

It is important to remember that veterans vary greatly in their mental condition after war. For those who have post-traumatic stress disorder, however, their chances of recovery are greatly improved if they can receive love.

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