



National Alliance on Mental Illness

The Voice

The Newsletter of NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania

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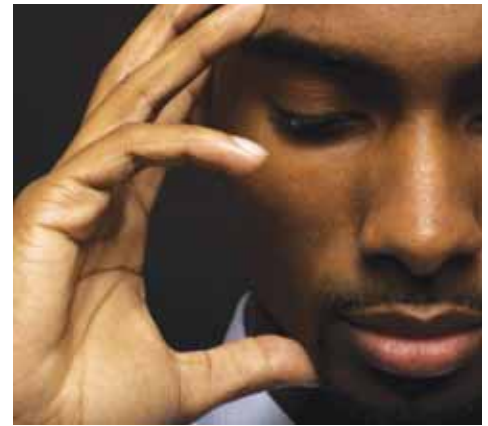
Mental Health Issues of Veterans Recognized

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Veterans Affairs, Pennsylvania is one of only six states with more than one million veterans. They range in age from elderly World War II veterans to teenagers of 19 now returning from Iraq or Afghanistan. It is estimated that approximately 30 percent of U.S. troops develop serious mental health problems within three to four months of returning home after a tour of duty, ultimately affecting hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvania veterans and their families.

Every branch of the military trains its personnel to survive in combat by any means necessary, and official studies have documented that those who have been exposed to combat long-term won't just "get used to the fighting," but will eventually suffer its effects both physically and mentally. In many cases, when veterans return home they are altered in some way, and they often face significant readjustment issues into their homes and communities.

Imagine you are a veteran coming home to a spacious, secure house after living for weeks or months in your vehicle because it's safer than a tent. Try to take a relaxing hot shower or sleep restfully through the night in a warm queen-size bed after more than a year of rushing through these activities under the threat of attack. Could you readily enjoy a leisurely five-course dinner by candlelight after months of waiting in lengthy chow lines with just minutes to eat? Would you mind heavy rush-hour traffic after dodging roadside bombs? How would you feel as a parent, seeing dramatic changes in your children that you missed while you were away?

For those waiting impatiently at home with open arms, it's easy to assume the readjustment process will be easy for a loved one who has missed the comforts of home. Yet, the reality is that family members cannot relate to the complexities of reintegration



veterans must face after months or years of reacting to and coping with the circumstances of combat. The veterans themselves don't expect the adjustment to be so difficult, and they often feel out of place in their own homes and communities.

In addition to the mistaken expectation that combat veterans should quickly readjust to civilian life, today's veterans often have to face other significant challenges. They are trying to process all the difficult experiences they have been through, often without support from others who have been through similar circumstances. They may suffer from chronic physical injury and impairment, including traumatic brain injury and cognitive impairment. They may also develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental illness caused by their exposure to life-threatening combat

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situations. It may be difficult for many of them to accept or acknowledge that they suffer from PTSD for fear they will be perceived as “weak,” the opposite of how they were trained.

Tom Shade is the NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania (SWPA) Washington County affiliate president and a

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), according to the National Institute of Mental Health, is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events in addition to military combat that may trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters and accidents.

Not every traumatized person develops PTSD, but those who do may develop symptoms ranging from mild to severe. Symptoms are usually similar to those of a heart attack and usually begin within three months of the traumatic experience, but sometimes emerge years afterward. They may come and go, but symptoms must last more than a month to be considered PTSD. Effective, proven treatments and rehabilitation are available for those suffering from PTSD, and people are most responsive to treatment in its early stages. The recovery time varies from six months to years.

member of the NAMI Veterans Council. A former NAMI board member, Shade is a Marine Corps veteran who fought in the Korean War. His son, who served with the 82nd Airborne Division of the Army, has schizophrenia. “I think many people are under the mistaken impression that once you’re a veteran, you’re always taken care of,” Shade explains. “With many physical disabilities, this may be the case, but it’s not happening as effectively with regard to mental illnesses.”

Shade goes on to say, “It’s now widely recognized that greater attention must be paid to the mental health of veterans. Organizations like NAMI, through the Veterans Council, need to advocate for legislation at the state and national levels to protect and support veterans with mental illnesses.”

NAMI SWPA acknowledges that, as increasing numbers of combat veterans return from tours of duty in Iraq, Afghanistan and other unsettled regions, communities need to have adequate resources and support systems in place to help these veterans and their families.

NAMI SWPA and its local constituents champion the reality of recovery from serious mental illness, which has given hope and the possibility of a future to many. Shade says, “Today, I see significant passion and motivation from people on the local level who want to bring about an evolution in the provision of mental health services for veterans. I believe NAMI’s efforts will bring significant, positive change for our service men and women across the state and the nation in the future.”

In Our Own Voice (IOOV) is an interactive, mental health recovery education program presented by trained consumers with the purpose of opening minds, changing attitudes and educating the public about what it means to have a mental illness.

In Our Own Voice is an ideal presentation for:

- Consumers
- Family members
- Health Providers
- Law Enforcement Officials
- Faith Communities
- Any Community or Civic Organization

If you are interested in scheduling a presentation, please contact the NAMI Southwestern PA coordinator at (412) 366-3788 or email sharring@namiswpa.org, to arrange the time and place.



NAMI Southwestern PA : Join Today – Let Your Voice be Heard!

Annual dues include access to our regional lending library, resource and referral information, newsletters, conference information, and membership in NAMI Pennsylvania and national NAMI.

- Individual/Family/Friend \$35.00
- Professional \$50.00
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- I would like my copy of the Voice electronically. (provide email) _____
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Please make check payable and mail to: NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania, 105 Braunlich Drive,
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Membership is tax-deductible. Official registration and financial information of NAMI Southwestern PA may be obtained from the PA Department of State by calling toll-free within PA: 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.

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