

Veterans' Families United Foundation

Resources for
Friends & Families
of Veterans



“The New Life Ahead”

Learning to Accept Change with Hope for your Future

There are many times during the journey of healing with your veteran and family that “a new life ahead” will not seem possible. Some days, you may barely feel able to deal with the circumstances of the day, much less even have “thoughts” about a future. Just to consider the future can seem overwhelming.

BUT, there are some very important reflections that may allow you to gain a new perspective on your life and that can be part of a new beginning.

1) Your Veteran has amazing coping skills. The war and survival skills that your veteran used to stay alive during conflict and to return home are extraordinary and resulted in him/her doing just that, “staying alive and returning home”. The skills that the veteran engaged were:

a. Safety

- Being constantly alert for dangerous situations
- Seeing anything unexpected or out of place as a possible explosive device
- Watching people and looking for escape routes

b. Trust and the Enemy

- Being suspicious and seeing everyone as a potential enemy
- Being uncomfortable and alert around crowds or strangers
- Checking people for trustworthiness

c. Mission Orientation

- Focusing only on a single task and not wasting time on unimportant things
- High use of energy and resources while on a mission
- Exhaustion and withdrawal when the mission is done

d. Decision Making

- Chain of command determines who makes decisions
- Little questioning or discussion
- Deciding and acting without hesitation

e. Response Tactics

- Act first, think later, and be ready to respond with force when necessary
- Avoid planning, be ready to act
- Be prepared and have things in place

f. Predictability and Intelligence

- Be unpredictable, vary routes and behaviors
- Do not let others know what you are thinking
- Avoid talking or giving out information that could be used against you

g. Emotional Control

- Control emotions to enhance performance
- Numb emotions, others may see them as weakness
- Have anger readily available to respond with

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h. Talking about the War

- People will ask you stupid questions, prepare your answers well
- It may be very difficult to talk to people who were not there
- People may not want to hear about details, don't be surprised
- Learning who to talk to and when is important

(James Monroe, Boston VA Healthcare System 617-248-1077. james.munroe@med.va.gov)

These skills DO NOT easily transfer back to civilian life, However, the Strengths found in many of these skills can be tapped into during the transition home.

2. Your family has ALSO developed and learned survival skills while your veteran was at war. These skills helped you to make it through daily life, even knowing the constant peril that your veteran faced and the uncertainty of your future.

You may be unaware of how the coping skills that you learned while your veteran was away, and your own Strengths can be transferred to begin a "new life" once your service person has returned home.

These are some examples of the coping skills and how families and friends developed their own strengths.

a. Safety

- You found ways to keep your family safe by engaging in life and taking care of family business
- You were aware of and took precautions for emotional and financial safety by recognizing BUT living with the possibility that your veteran may not return
- You may have developed a "safety net" of people in your spiritual community, workplace, neighborhood who were supportive while your serviceperson was deployed.

b. Trust and the Enemy

- You may have needed to extend your circle of trust to help you cope with life circumstances while your veteran was deployed.
- You may have learned to guard your feelings from anyone who may not be supportive of the war effort.
- You may have had to be hyper alert to decisions, wondering if you could trust yourself when you once relied on your veteran to share in making important decisions.

c. Mission Orientation

- You may have learned to multi task even more than ever by managing a life that once included you and your veteran, but now relied solely on you taking care of many tasks at one time.
- You learned that you had to pace your energy so that you could manage the daily affairs of life. There was never a beginning or an end of the mission, it was just continuous and you had to learn to balance it.
- Even when you felt exhausted, you may have relied on people in your community, neighborhood, or church to help and support you while your recharged your energy to continue your continuous mission.

d. Decision Making

- Decisions once made by you and your veteran had to be made by you alone. These decisions included all facets of life; financial, emotional, spiritual, family/children issues. You may have consulted in trusted people to help you make the decision, but ultimately, you had to make them to survive.
- To make these decisions, you had to give it thought and consideration and time and try to make the best one on behalf of you and your veteran.

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e. Response Tactics

- Every decision had to be made, some required thought, and some were spur of the moment and you had to learn to do the best you could under the circumstances.
- Planning may have helped you to manage the many facets of life that you faced. Thinking ahead and considering all options help you to better respond to your families needs.
- Almost everything you needed to survive was accessible, so even if you didn't plan, you could easily obtain what you needed to survive.

f. Predictability and Intelligence

- Having a stable and predictable schedule and routine helped you to manage the many aspects of life while your veteran was away.
- By sharing your needs and gathering information, you could make better decisions to manage your life and give it as much stability as possible while your serviceperson was deployed.

g. Emotional Control

- You may have cried more, felt depressed, were anxious and recognized these symptoms and shared them with friends to help you through them.
- Being without the one you love, and being in fear for their life daily, you recognized that you may be preoccupied, more frustrated and other intense emotions.
- Many times, your emotions seemed out of control, but you were probably very emotional and allowed that part of you to be expressed.

h. Talking about the War

- People would ask you about your veteran and you knew it was because they cared, but it was a reminder of their danger and sometimes very hard to keep being reminded.
- You found people who understood, or kept it bottled inside, but you knew that you had your own "war" at home in your heart and it was difficult but you got through it.

3. The survival skills that your veteran learned and the coping skills you learned while he/she was deployed may seem in direct conflict at times. HOWEVER, both you and your veteran have displayed tremendous strengths and resiliency that can be tapped into when developing your "new life". Drawing upon those skills, recognizing the differences, understanding one another and being willing to compromise will be a KEY in forging a new life ahead.

4. You will have to make a conscious effort to develop a "new life". The life that you and your veteran knew before his/her deployment has changed forever. It is unrealistic to expect that your previous life together will be restored in the same way.

In one way, the previous life together is lost forever. With loss, comes some sadness and grief for which there are predictable stages. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Ph.D. found that all loss includes the following:

- Denial** – examples include thoughts like "Life will get back to normal" or "Things will be like they used to be".
- Anger** – when awareness's arise that tell you things are different. Examples include "what is the matter with "you", snap out of it and get back to normal".
- Bargaining or Dialogue** – this happens when you see that things are changing and you say to yourself, "if I change this, then he/she will be better" or "if I had only done this, then things would be different"
- Depression** – the deep sadness that you have lost something very important and the hurt that comes with it.
- Acceptance** – final awareness that things have changed and that you have the wonderful opportunity to learn to live with the change.

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The feelings associated with these stages of loss do not come in any order or degree, but they all come in one way or another.

Understanding that these are normal, healthy stages – even though they feel uncomfortable is sometimes helpful and there is much information on grieving and loss that can help you through your situations (see resources)

5. Beginning a “new life”. One thing is for sure, the “only person you can change is yourself”. It would be wonderful to be able to wave a magic wand and remove the loss, fear and sense of hopelessness that often comes during readjustment and transition home.

But, it just won't happen. However, YOU can begin to get in touch with the changes that have occurred, recognize the different ways you and your veteran coped with deployment, focus on the strengths that you have to bring through your separate challenges and begin ways to create new ways of living.

There is hope. Sometimes it does not feel like it, or it can feel like the sadness and loss will last forever. If you or your veteran feels that way, be sure to seek help. Connect with other families through this web site and the resources we have provided. Know that you are not alone and that both the family and veteran are worth finding new life...you both have given a great sacrifice and now have the opportunity to renew your love for yourself, your partner, your family and the country in which you gave so much.

God Bless you on your journey!

NOTE: VFU does not guarantee results or outcome of the information provided in any of its materials.

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