

Veterans' Families United Foundation

Resources for
Friends & Families
of Veterans



Behaviors of Veteran Readjustment Problems and The Impact to Family/Friends

Understanding our veteran-loved-ones after they have returned home can be difficult. The emotions to deal with that include relief, hope, and a desire for things to “return to normal”. Then, there are the emotions and behaviors of our veterans who have lived in and through extreme conditions that are anything BUT “normal”.

There are varying degrees of challenges. The longer the veteran was away, the closer the more frequent the veteran was to active warfare, the age of the veteran and the martial status of the veteran all have effect on the veterans readjustment at home. Every veteran is different and so is every family, but there are some common “readjustment problems”.

This chart may help you to identify behaviors in the veteran and you and/or the family/friends of the veteran. Identifying and understanding where and how these problems originate can provide a starting point of change. However, readjustment is not about blame or changing the veteran, it is about learning to LIVE with the after effects that war has had upon the veterans we love.

IMPORTANT NOTE: If any of these “readjustment problems” become extreme enough that it begins to consistently and negatively effect the veteran and the family, then **SEEK HELP IMMEDIATELY**. The SOONER you get help, the BETTER. These problems do not go away by themselves. If you or your veterans civilian job(s) are jeopardized, your family’s safety and well being is compromised, there are legal and financial problems that begin to present themselves after returning that were minor or not present prior to wartime, then you and your veteran need help.

Definitions:

Veteran Survival Skill:

Each skill listed is actually a “War Zone Skill” that kept the veteran alive during active warfare. He/she trained and lived intensely exaggerated and extreme behaviors to prepare for and meet the potential dangers they would experience.

Veteran Readjustment Behaviors:

These are the “skills/behaviors” that kept the veteran alive during war which become skills/behaviors that can cause the veteran problems in the civilian world.

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Impact to Family/Friends:

The veteran's wartime-learned-behaviors that are being acted out at home, start to change how members of the family and friends act and react to the veteran and slowly begin to erode the relationships.

Please read the "Vet and Family Information Booklet" by James Munroe, Social Worker Boston VA, 2006 revised edition from which this list was adapted. This link provides a Microsoft Word attachment with the full Booklet for which permission was given to share.

Survival Skill	Veteran Readjustment Behaviors	Impact to Family/Friends
Safety	Hyper arousal (sensitive to loud noises, crowds, light, etc.)	<p>The family begins to adjust their life around the veteran and attempts to reduce things that might trigger the veteran's fear and arousal. Soon, the family is living in the veteran's world of fear for safety.</p> <p>Examples: Family tries to be more quiet in the house, doesn't ask the veteran to go "out" into public with them for fear the veteran may become anxious and irritable, changes channels on the television when war related or disturbing news is being broadcast, etc.</p>
Anger	Quick Temper, Over sensitivity, Confrontational Yelling, Verbal/Physical Abuse	<p>The family begins to "walk on eggshells" for fear that the veteran will "go off" on them. Family members begin to behave differently; they may "keep things" from the veteran that may anger him. They may avoid the veteran. They may feel the need to protect the veteran from confrontational situations. Soon, the family/friends start to become angry themselves.</p>
Predictability	Unpredictable, Avoids plans and people, Can't keep a job, Can't keep appointments	<p>The family begins to think that the veteran doesn't care about them, that the veteran is lazy and inconsiderate and deceptive. Soon, family and friends begin to quit "counting" on the veteran and may stop helping them entirely or schedule their whole lives around the veteran's unpredictability.</p> <p>Examples: Appointments for doctors are made and not kept, special occasions that have been planned are avoided by the veteran, etc.</p>

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Mission Orientation	Lack of initiative, “All or Nothing” behavior, Avoidance, Living in Extremes	<p>Family and friends begin to notice that the veteran either totally avoids tasks/ life circumstances or is fully engaged to the extreme. Sometimes it seems like the veteran can’t do what needs to be done without being told, but then is resistant to being told. Or other times, the veteran becomes so focused on a task that they lose orientation of day/time. They may work day and night at a seemingly non-essential task, only to crash and burn in the end.</p> <p>The family begins to accept this behavior as “normal” and their lives begin to revolve around whatever “extreme” the veteran is living in. They may become encouraged when a veteran DOES take initiative, and might put their responsibilities on hold, change their own plans or their world revolves around whatever “mission orientation”/”all or nothing” mode the veteran is in.</p>
Decision Making	Gives orders to others, Cannot make a decision, Avoids making decisions, Does not discuss solutions, Becomes frustrated when asked to make a decision	<p>Once again, the impact to family and friends can be one extreme or the other. If the veteran was an he/she may be more likely to order family members around and have an expectation that the order is followed. Or, the other extreme may be that the veteran cannot decide what to do and avoids making seemingly simple decisions.</p> <p>Either way, there becomes less and less mutual communication in the relationships. Working together as a give-and-take team seems impossible because the veteran knows no in-between, only the extremes that he/she lived in during active duty.</p>
Response Tactics	Act first, think later, Use of threats or violence, Use of intimidation, Anger when things are “out of place”	<p>Having everything “ready” to respond immediately to danger kept veteran alive. However, when returning home and imposing those behaviors on the family, it can become overwhelming, intense and even frightening.</p> <p>Examples can be a veteran “going off” on a loved one if anything seems out of place. This could be an item that has been moved, to taking a different route home, to being angry if tasks are not completed. The family becomes fearful of the person they love because their behaviors are extreme and disproportionate to the situation and they don’t seem to be able to understand nor control what they are doing.</p>

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Intelligence	Secrecy, Isolation, Unsocial, Suspicious, Controlling	<p>Little by little, the veteran begins to display an unwillingness to “connect” with anyone about anything. They withdraw from social activities and do not communicate their thoughts, feelings or needs. They seem to be suspicious and sometimes even paranoid about everyday affairs.</p> <p>The family begins to think that the veteran is lying and/or trying to control everything. They, too, become suspicious of the veterans behavior. They start to “disconnect” themselves from interaction with the veteran and sometimes with the outside world. In other words, the family begins to adapt to the veterans behavior in the same ways the veteran is adapting to coming home.</p>
Emotions	Numb, Cold/Indifferent, No joy	<p>In order to survive the horror of war, and to be able to take action immediately, the veteran has learned to numb feelings. Not only have the feelings been numbed, but they have been “stuffed” since the veteran had no opportunity to “process” what was happening to them. They had to learn this skill to survive.</p> <p>However, since there is no “unlearning” upon return, the veteran continues to behave the same. Family members begin to notice that there is little or no emotional sensitivity...the one emotion that is in tact is anger, which fueled them to survive. But sadness, compassion, fear, grief, etc. can become nonexistent since to have such emotions would make the veteran vulnerable in time of danger.</p> <p>The family recognizes that they cannot talk of or express emotions in a healthy manner as it may be received by the veteran uncaringly. The family may also notice that the veteran uses alcohol or drugs of any kind more in an effort to numb the feelings. Chemical abuse is a by-product of war behaviors that have not been readjusted to civilian life. The family system becomes as sick as the veteran as the family futilely attempts to connect with the veteran who has been living in extremes and may also be becoming chemically dependent.</p>

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Authority	Distrust, Hostility, Defiance, Resentment, Opposition	<p>The family may notice that the veteran is defiant and distrustful of authority; boss, police, etc. and that they, in fact, almost create and/or look for situation to display open hostility to authority.</p> <p>Examples of this may include conflict at work and subsequent inability to hold a job. It may include getting speeding tickets and “blowing up” at police officers.</p> <p>Continued loss of employment and employment opportunities and continued run-ins with the law compromise the families financial and emotional security.</p>
Closeness	Intense relational emotions, Pushing away loved ones, Avoidance of “closeness”	<p>Getting close to someone at war can be dangerous to the veteran as it may cost him his life and ability to use life saving skills. However, this skill translated to the civilian world can cause the veteran to “push away” the very people that love him/her most. They do so by being unable/unwilling to let their “guard” down and building a barrier to intimacy. They will not share or express emotion. They will not tell you what they want or need. They can feel unworthy of being loved because of what they have seen or done and “push away” people that do love them.</p>
Trust	Suspicious, “Testing”, Loner, Resistant	<p>Deeply underlying all issues is that of trust. Fundamental to our human growth and development is the ability to trust others. Veterans have been taught to solely trust their command, even when their instincts told them otherwise and their trust has many times, been betrayed. They have been taught to basically trust mankind, yet they have seen the horrors that man perpetrates on man. They may have been taught to trust God, but their wartime experience may cause them to question if there is one, and if there is, why the sorrows of war continue.</p> <p>At the heart of each of the readjustment challenges is trust. Examples of the impact on the family is that the veteran may be paranoid or suspicious of all relationships and may even sabotage them by testing them with “push-pull” relationship behaviors that are very, very confusing to those that love them. The veteran may insist on handling things alone and may be resistant to communication and compromise that is essential for healthy relationships. Family members begin to distrust the veteran as much as the veteran distrusts others and the gap in relationships grows wider because both sides are becoming distrustful.</p>

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The Enemy	Avoidance, Paranoia, Suspicion, Tenseness, "Danger" sensitive	<p>For the veteran, it is sometimes difficult to use discernment..."who is the enemy?" can be a constant, nagging suspicion even with people they love. The veterans avoidance of people and activities, their paranoia and suspicion and the resulting tension keep the family on pins and needles.</p> <p>An energy level of tension and anxiety is pervasive in every facet of life. Whether at a restaurant, mall, in the car or at the park, the veteran is "keyed up" and unable to let his/her guard down. The overspilling anxiety to the family results in less and less joy in activities and then participating less and less with one another and then isolation and alienation.</p> <p>The veteran will not "talk" about "it" or anything other than surface affairs and with each incident, seems to withdraw more and the family further apart from one another.</p>

If any of the above situations are occurring in your family, please seek assistance. These are REAL issues that will not just "go away", but can be confronted lovingly and gently. The main thing to recognize is that the veteran is not PURPOSELY trying to hurt you or the ones he/she loves. Families need help and the veterans need help to work through these very real issues and back into healthy family dynamics.

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

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