



# WHAT VETS WANT THEIR FAMILIES TO KNOW

## UNDERSTANDING OUR LIFE IN THE MILITARY

- Please understand that we deeply trust the people with whom we deployed. We were and are very, very close to those who proved that they were willing to risk their lives for one another
  - ▶ This is important to understand, “I may love my wife, but love is much different than trust”
    - + Civilians don’t easily grasp that concept
    - + Wives/husbands can and do leave you, veterans don’t leave one another on the battlefield
- When a veteran returns to the civilian world, they no longer are surrounded by their trusted group of service members
  - ▶ PTS/TBI makes that sense of loss feel stronger to us
- Veterans know that civilians “think” they know what battle is like but, they cannot comprehend the true nature of combat
  - ▶ We will avoid so-called friends and acquaintances who show their insincerity by asking flippant questions such as:
    - + Did you see any action, like in the papers?
    - + Did you kill anyone?
    - + Did you enjoy killing?
    - + What was that like
- Wanting to know everything a veteran observed during deployment is very, very personal to us
  - ▶ A general rule: MYOB unless you are invited in

- Veterans understand there is sometimes a moral contradiction between being a warrior for their country and killing for that cause
  - ▶ We did not return home so that family, friends, or “talking heads” could question our service
  - ▶ We don’t want to share those feelings with you partly because retelling those events causes us to re-live the sometimes deep emotions associated with those events, and:
    - + There is little chance you will ever be able to comprehend a warrior’s internal conflict
    - + We worry you may try to judge us
    - + We never want to expose you to that hard, violent world, so we keep it to ourselves
      - Respect our privacy, unless we invite you in to have that conversation
- If you ask highly intrusive and glib questions, expect us to quickly cut you from our life

## HOW YOU CAN HELP US?

- A family member builds trust by carefully listening
- Be heartfelt in your interactions with us
  - ▶ Otherwise, we will withdraw from you
  - ▶ Be empathetic by listening to us, not asking us war-related questions
  - ▶ Let us decide if we want to talk about our experiences
  - ▶ Keep the conversation light and very in-the-moment, “Would you like anything special for dinner?”

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- Veterans experience the sensation that the VA, medical doctors, PhDs, and other so-called support system members are merely “talking machines” who do their 15-minute appearance and leave**
  - ▶ Rarely will a veteran trust those professionals
  - ▶ Short, rotational, and infrequent meetings with medical professionals frustrate veterans
  - ▶ Help the veteran by being patient when s/he is frustrated
  
- When you start to ask about my hobbies and other interests, then I will start to pay more attention to you**
  
- Don't break your promises to us**
  - ▶ If you said you would show up for my return from deployment—be there!
  - ▶ Don't make promises you can't keep
  
- Don't put down my choice to serve in the US military**
  - ▶ Just hanging out with me and doing nothing may be just the right thing to do
  - ▶ That means listen, have a beer, enjoy a hobby together
  - ▶ Avoid using sentences that start with, “You have to...”
  - ▶ Never let that time be “an interrogation of me” by asking questions like, “What I did or did not do”
  
- It may take us longer than you would like for us to re-engage in the civilian world...be patient**
  
- Help guide us to a veteran-to-veteran support group**
  
- Well-intentioned “academics” are not always as helpful as fellow veterans for discussing our fears, our challenges, and our needs**
  
- You may not understand us, or the following sentiments, but please don't question our beliefs, attempt to get us to change, or confront us. We'll let you know if we change our minds.**
  - ▶ Some experience or training has made us very cautious, hypersensitive, and for our immediate well-being we need to be aware of our surroundings even in the civilian world. Please accept the fact that:
    - + We may never go to malls, Disneyland, flea markets, graduation ceremonies, and similarly crowded venues for quite some time or never at all
  - ▶ Please do not try to guilt us into attending such events or activities. Saying things like, “You do want to be at your son's graduation, right?” Of course we do! However, we still are in a condition that does not make it as simple for us to participate at the level you would like. Our hesitance to such requests are normal, especially based upon what we have been trained to do or have experienced
    - + What is going through our head is something that affects the worst part of our PTS. We think, “I want to do right by my family. I want to be a good spouse/son/daughter, but how do I cope in that environment?”
    - + Worse is that any guilt-trip scenario employed towards us forces us to consider using one of our coping mechanisms, most of which are usually the self-destructive, self-medicating ones
  - ▶ The better way to approach us regarding those special events is to ask something like, “Let me know what might be a good way for you to attend our son's graduation ceremony. Whatever you suggest is great, including not coming at all.”
    - + Using such an even-mannered request shows you really do care and reduces greatly our PTS-related worries

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- ▶ Please don't surprise us with family reunions
  - + So much has changed for us while we were away
  - + We definitely don't want the focus to be on us
  - + Ask us first and we'll let you know if we are ready for such events
- ▶ We don't think of ourselves as a "war hero," so please avoid that description of us when we do go places with you. The heroes are our brothers and sisters who lost their lives.
  - + We were doing our job like every other man and woman in the service
- **Not receiving military training on the signs and symptoms of PTS/TBI compounds the problem for veterans**
  - ▶ Be patient and helpful to us. Sometimes we can't figure out what is wrong with us
    - + Until we are diagnosed, we fear we're being viewed as "imagining things"

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