

Out of combat and insecure

Reintegration team helps vets deal with stress, depression

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By MITCH LECLAIR Hermiston Herald |

Frivolous arguments in a supermarket checkout lane induce stress in even the healthiest residents in western Umatilla County.

For a veteran recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it could prove to be the breeze that fells his or her life's frail house of cards.

Luke Wilson of Hermiston is the National Guard's area manager for the Oregon Reintegration Team. His job is to work with veterans with mental health issues and cover all of eastern Oregon, from Hood River to Ontario - a distance of more than 300 miles along Interstate 84.

Wilson suffered a severe leg injury in a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) attack shortly after arriving in Iraq in the spring of 2004, and he spent a year recovering in Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

After leaving the hospital, Wilson said Col. Scott McCrae, who lost a son in Iraq to an improvised explosive device (IED), approached him with an opportunity in the reintegration team.

Wilson said he jumped at the chance and started in May of 2005.

According to Wilson, the reintegration team's goals include every aspect of helping veterans adjust back to civilian life after deployment.

"Eastern Oregon is unique," Wilson said, "because we don't have the resources compared to the [Willamette] valley."

In the Hermiston area, veterans face spatial, social and financial obstacles in obtaining care.

"I've personally driven several vets to Roseburg for the 28-day, in-patient PTSD program," Wilson said.

The Roseburg Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center offers one of many options to veterans in the area. Wilson said the Roseburg program is a wonderful resource, but it only accepts completely sober patients - a tall request for many struggling veterans.

According to Wilson, the medical center in Walla Walla also offers help to returning veterans.

"The Walla Walla VA hospital is excellent," he said, though it's not always accessible.

"They don't have the funds, time or man-power to travel out to the veterans," Wilson said, adding that in a relatively remote town like Hermiston, this is a problem.

"The veteran doesn't have the money or time" to get to Walla Walla, he said, especially if he or she owns no means of transportation.

Alongside the challenges of lacking a car, Wilson said some veterans have struggled with substance abuse, not finding work and the overall stigma of seeking mental help for combat injuries.

Russel Hunt, a Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner in La Grande, said he has worked with veterans who were in Vietnam 40 years ago that have missed out on many life experiences, because they did not seek help for PTSD or other mental health issues early on.

Seeking help and discover an absence of PTSD, Hunt said, is much better than not going in at all.

"There's no shame in going and getting help," he said.

Hunt, who was a member of the military for 23 years, said when he works with veterans at his private practice, the goal is to get them back into their civilian lives and help them deal with the anger that sometimes does not fade.

"PTSD is a normal response to abnormal circumstances," Hunt said.

"We do a good job teaching people how to be in the military," he added, "but we don't do a good job of teaching people how to be a non-soldier."

Hunt said his practice doesn't automatically focus on or suggest medication as treatment; instead, he said he takes a more holistic approach, evaluating exercise, relaxation, nutrition and other factors of a veteran's life.

Douglas Marlow, a clinical psychologist working in Hermiston, said he has worked with many returning military members in the area.

"I haven't treated a veteran where PTSD isn't part of the picture," he said.

"PTSD is an injury, not an illness," Marlow said, "but it's a non-visible injury."

Marlow added that it is an anxiety disorder, because many veterans feel like they do not, or did not, have control of a situation.

This can lead to impatience, hyper-sensitivity or aggressive tendencies, he said.

"[Veterans] will always have the memories," Marlow said, "but they don't always have to be bothersome."

All three service providers - Wilson, Hunt and Marlow - said while veterans might sometimes feel as though they're alone, help is available in the area.

Marlow said it's vital for veterans to have therapeutic experiences, whether that is talking to a fellow veteran, a psychologist or just a friend.

"War re-orientes their perspective on what is really important in life," Marlow said.

It can even turn register lines into lonesome roads.

Veterans can reach the Oregon Reintegration Team at 888-688-2264 or on its website at www.onrg-vet.org.

Both Russel Hunt and Douglas Marlow said they welcome any new veterans to their clinics. Hunt is available via his website, www.russelhunt.com or at 541-963-7643.

Marlow can be contacted at www.douglasmrlow.com or at 541-289-7777.

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