



THE CLERGY CONNECTION

FEBRUARY 2014

Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does. ~ William James

Newsletter of the National VA Chaplain Center Rural Clergy Training Program

New Research: Social Interaction, Religious Services and Length of Life

Researchers were interested in whether social relationships were related to length of life. They compared information on smoking, obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and four measures of social contact for 16,849 adults. High levels of social isolation predicted earlier deaths for both men and women as did smoking and high blood pressure. Among men, individual social factors that predicted earlier death included being unmarried, not belonging to a club or other social organization, and attending a place of worship fewer than four times yearly. For women, individual social factors that predicted earlier death included being unmarried, interacting fewer than three times weekly with other people, and attending a place of worship fewer than four times yearly. Of the social factors, infrequent attendance at a house of worship was the strongest predictor of mortality.

Clearly, having relationships with others is beneficial. Other research strongly suggests that healthy relations with others reduces depression and increases mental health. But other research indicates poorer and less frequent relationships for those with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

What could your community do to encourage more social interaction for Veterans and members of the military?

Want more information? See the source: Pantell, M., Rehkopf, D., Jutte, D., Syme, S.L., Balmes, J., & Adler, N. (2013). Social isolation: A predictor of mortality comparable to traditional risk factors. *American Journal of Public Health, 103* (11), 2056-2062. &

Did You Know?

How Children Respond to Deployment

Children of different ages respond in different ways when one or both of their parents are deployed as part of their military service. Here are a few things to watch for in children having problems with a deployment.

12 months and younger: Can be upset over separation or changes at home. Can seem uninterested in life or refuse to eat.

1-3 years: May sulk, cry, throw temper tantrums, or not sleep well if their caretaker is having problems or is not available.

3-6 years: Might think their parent was deployed because "I was bad." May react with toileting issues, thumb sucking, sleep problems, clinginess, and separation anxiety. They may also be touchy, depressed, aggressive, or complain about aches and pains.

6-12 years: May perform more poorly in school. They may become moody, aggressive, or whiny. They may get stomachaches or headaches.

Teens: May become angry and act out. They can also withdraw or act like they don't care about things. Adolescents may also not like new family roles and responsibilities after the deployed parent returns home.

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The Clergy Connection is a publication of the Office of Rural Health (ORH) and National VA Chaplain Center "Rural Clergy Training Program." For more information, contact: Jim Goalder, jim.goalder@gmail.com.



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Your Story Matters

Our one-year follow-up data are in! Findings are based on evaluation questions that compared the year before training with the year after training on a number of measures. We will review these findings over the next few issues of this newsletter.

For this issue, we will share findings related to workshop participants' referrals of Veterans to VA. One of the reasons for holding these workshops is to encourage and train community clergy in identifying the problematic issues of military personnel and get them effective assistance in a timely manner. Such a response could reduce the effects of problems with mental health, increase Veterans' quality of life and, in some cases, save lives.

A Community Success Story

Mike Conklin of San Ramon, California, the father of three Army Rangers, was inspired to reach out to severely injured Veterans after one of his sons was wounded in Iraq in 2003. He created the nonprofit Sentinels of Freedom Scholarship Foundation.

This two to four year program is meant to assist Veterans with severe service-related injuries who have the drive, attitude, and aptitude to become independent and successful members of society. Scholarship recipients are called "Sentinels" in honor of their sacrifice and commitment to guarding America's freedoms.

With the help of Mike's close friends and business associates, the first volunteer team formed and the program came together just in time for Cpl. Jake Brown's return to the San Francisco Bay Area in 2004.

How Children Respond to Deployment *(continued)*

These are relatively normal reactions to major changes in children's lives though these reactions may be very distressing and confusing to parents. As a member of the clergy, help the parent to understand these new behaviors and to respond with compassion.

If issues persist and become a problem for the child or parent, consider making a referral to a specialist for assistance. ☞

Have the workshops been effective in increasing referrals to the VA?

Last year's evaluation had suggested that when community clergy are in greater contact with VA mental health professionals, referrals to VA increase. Our data indicated that there was a statistically significant increase in contact with VA mental health professionals in the year following training. And as predicted, more community clergy made referrals to VA (39.3% making a referral in the year before training; 58.3% making a referral in the year following training). Also, the satisfaction of community clergy with VA services significantly increased in the year following training. ☞

Jake was crushed by a tank while he served in Germany in 2003. After 26 surgeries and nearly a year of rehabilitation, he was welcomed home and introduced to the Sentinels support system, made up of local leaders, area businesses and community groups. Supporters provide educational assistance and all the supports needed for success in school (e.g., housing, computers, cars, etc.).

Sentinels for Freedom has now helped 118 wounded Veterans with their education and have extended into other local communities. Jake has graduated college and is successfully reintegrated in his community. This story is a testimony of what a group of like-minded, service-oriented leaders can do in a community. *What could a coalition of similar leaders do for military personnel in your community?*

Learn more at <http://www.sentinelsoffreedom.org>. ☞

How to Make a Referral to the VA

If you want to make a referral for a Veteran, Reserve or Guard member, please remember to ask the permission of the warrior before contacting us as a matter of respect. To make a referral or to gain additional information, telephone the Chaplain Service at the VA Medical Center nearest to your location: http://www.va.gov/CHAPLAIN/docs/NatChapDir_3_15_13CityState.pdf.

Direct phone numbers were provided to workshop attendees on a magnet and in a more detailed paper handout. ☞

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A Soldier's Story for Reflection

"One night in particular it was raining. We had set up an ambush and I guess it might have been around 1 or 2 AM. We heard some people walking down the path speaking Vietnamese. No one gave a warning or asked them to surrender. We just opened fire. One didn't die right off. His guts were hanging out.

You could hear him up there moaning and groaning. The guys pulled his body back to the ambush site. The medics shot him up with meds. Some of the guys begged to be able to put him out of his misery. That really got to me.

'Lord, why do I have to be here.' I never thought about killing, about taking someone's life. To be put in a position of my life or his life, it was foreign to me. Hearing 'Thou shalt not kill,' it hurt me to be put in that situation.

Besides being afraid, ashamed, lost, very nervous to the point of shaking. You have to get off to yourself because

you don't want the rest of the guys to know. There was a lot of anger involved, too."

"I never thought about ... taking someone's life. ... It hurt me to be put in that situation." "Ashamed ... afraid ... anger."

- 1) The need to appear unaffected to one's fellow soldiers can be powerful. Might the inability to speak about such an important event lock things inside this man? Might he carry such "silent wounds" into his future life? What might you do with pastoral care to help him?
- 2) "Moral Injury happens when your brain tells you to do what your heart tells you is wrong."

There is the potential for moral injury here. Think about approaches to helping with moral injury listed in the Practical Pastoral Tips section of this newsletter. Which of the tips would you be comfortable with in helping this man? ☺



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Practical Pastoral Tips

"Moral injury" is a term used to describe the psychological damage service members face when their actions in battle contradict their moral beliefs. "Moral Injury happens when your brain tells you to do what your heart tells you is wrong."

Military personnel who have experienced a moral injury may be deeply wounded with a sense of shame, guilt and unworthiness. Here are some things that community clergy can do to help.

- Listen deeply and be open to truth; be a forgiving and compassionate moral authority about any transgression.
- Support healthy lifestyles to reduce behavioral risks.
- Promote self-forgiveness in the context of the individual's faith-based or religious practices.
- Explore ways to create a safe space for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) injuries.
- Provide long term social support through friendship.
- Develop opportunities for service to others (making amends); this can include writing forgiveness letters and an action plan to start the process of making amends.

Source: Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder:

http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/moral_injury_at_war.asp. ☺



The Rural Clergy Training Program is supported by the VHA Office of Rural Health.

For more information, please visit www.ruralhealth.va.gov/ruralclergytraining.