Module 9: The Experience of Veterans from Different War Eras

Objectives

- Understand the transformative experience of military service in the life of veterans
- Understand how Veterans’ cultural experience can be a source of strength and meaning
- Understand how veterans’ cultural experience varies based on time and type of service

Introduction

- Military service is an acquired cultural experience that continues long after discharge
- The cultural context of Veterans can have positive and negative impacts on their end-of-life care
- It can be a source of strength, and a source of distress

Clinical case

Experience of service

- All-volunteer armed forces for 35 years
- Veterans share the cultural diversity of our country, and the common bond of having served
- Many Veterans seek out Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs)

Military history

- First European settlers lived close to soldiers for protection
- American revolution
- Each generation has war; each generation produces Veterans
- Military/Veterans often see integration of race, gender, etc. before mainstream society
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**Leaving a legacy**
- Veterans Oral History Project: allows archiving of Veterans’ stories
- More informal methods: any clinician can ask: “Tell me about your service”

**Warrior culture**
- Most new recruits young, fresh out of high school: some search for purpose
- Better economic circumstances: search for adventure

**Basic training**
- Turns soldiers into squads: privilege, duty, connectedness
- Initiation into warrior class/stoicism: PTSD, depression, substance abuse

**Feelings about service**
- Pride
- Strength of the group
- Moral ambiguity from wartime actions: PTSD, guilt/regret
- Veterans who have seen combat: almost all carry some suffering

**World War II**
- Almost all WWII Veterans > 80 years of age
- Many died or were wounded
- Pride in American victory over fascism
- Segregation
- Many have injuries from combat or environmental exposure: radiation, mustard gas

**Cold War**
- Arms race: radiation exposure due to above ground nuclear testing
- Anger/mistrust of government, including VA
- Every VA has a registry physician
- Agent Orange
- Gulf War Syndrome
- Ionizing radiation

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### Korean Conflict
- Many Americans unfamiliar
- No clear victory
  - some feel service unappreciated
- Environmental exposure
  - injuries from extreme heat and cold
  - cold sensitivity
- Veterans may minimize experiences
  - many relive experiences

### Vietnam War…
- Source of much angst for United States
- Controversial
  - distrust of political leadership
  - first guerilla war
    - hard to separate combatants and civilians
    - soldiers could never let guard down
    - hard to have sense of accomplishment
- Dissent at home

### …Vietnam War
- Great physical, emotional, existential trauma
- severely wounded more likely to survive
- reintegration difficult
  - alcohol/substance use/abuse
  - many mental health issues, PTSD
  - Agent Orange
  - Hepatitis C
  - traumatic brain injury

### Persian Gulf Wars…
- Many exposed to environmental toxins
  - burning oil fields
  - depleted uranium, etc.
  - multiple vaccinations
- Gulf War Syndrome
  - memory loss
  - fibromyalgia symptoms
  - no specific test or markers

### …Persian Gulf Wars
- Two conditions correlate with service
  - ALS
  - respiratory problems
    - asthma
    - exposure to high levels of smoke
- Young age means few need palliative care
  - will change as population ages

### OEF/OIF
- Early evidence suggests psychological toll will be worse than physical toll
  - prolonged exposure to combat stress
  - increasing incidence of suicide/attempts
  - depression
  - PTSD
  - traumatic brain injury

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Summary