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## ***Fallen Comrade Ceremony for Veterans & First Responders***

### **What is a *Fallen Comrade Ceremony*?**

The ceremony is designed for Veterans and First Responders, their families, and civilians to help veterans lay their burdens down. While Memorial Day honors those who died in military service, the *Fallen Comrades Ceremony* honors those who *survived* and carry the burden of their dead comrades' memory. Based on Native-American warrior welcoming-home rituals, the ceremony restores hope for healing the *SOUL INJURY* that Veterans and First Responders who serve in dangerous-duty assignments often carry. Safe sanctuary is provided for them to mourn the losses they have sustained, such as: comrades who died in battle, loss of physical/ mental health, loss of the self they had prior to the trauma, assault that occurred within their own ranks, or an unfair administrative action taken against them.

### **Why is a *Fallen Comrade Ceremony* important?**

There is a gaping hole in our society from the aftermath of war caused by *unmourned losses* sustained by Veterans and First Responders, as well as *unforgiven guilt* over things they think they should or should not have done. This sometimes leaves a hole in their souls that continues to exert its influence throughout their lifetime until the losses are acknowledged, honored, mourned, and redeemed.

### **Who should attend a *Fallen Comrade Ceremony*?**

Veterans and First Responders are encouraged to attend. They will experience some level of healing even if they only witness the ceremony without participating in it. Family members are also encouraged to attend because they are secondarily impacted by their loved one's trauma plus they are the ones providing needed support on a regular basis. They are the "unsung heroes" whose sacrifice goes unacknowledged. Civilians and citizens are encouraged to attend so they can accept their responsibility to help heal our nation after war and violence. They will learn how to provide a safe environment so that the wounds warriors sustain in our name can be healed *together*. Healthcare professionals also benefit from understanding the unique healthcare needs of Veterans.

### **How Did *Fallen Comrades Ceremonies* Originate?**

*Opus Peace* non-profit organization was providing consultation services at a state veterans' home so staff would better understand how to care for the unique needs of Veterans as they age. One Veteran was asked, "Is there anything from the war that might still be troubling you now?" The Veteran started crying, saying: "My brother and I both went to Vietnam, but I was the only one who came back." Then, he added: "I didn't even get to go to his funeral." A memorial service was subsequently provided for him and for all the Veterans at the facility who held similar losses. Unmourned loss and unforgiven guilt were finally liberated and the result was visibly evident!

### **Why emphasize “unmourned loss”? Why dredge up the past?**

Grief is the normal, natural emotion that accompanies loss and change. Grieving helps us “let go of what was” and “open up to what is” so we can be present to the “now.” Grief that is not mourned gets stored in the body, mind, and spirit, keeping us stuck in the past. By numbing the pain, we disconnect from the part of self carrying it, banishing into unconsciousness. Rescuing the part of self carrying the pain and integrating it into the light of consciousness releases the trapped energy; fear of pain lessens its grasp on us.

### **If grief is normal and natural, why are we so afraid of it?**

American heritage is built on “rugged individualism” and “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.” Military and Police cultures take stoicism to an extreme; grief is not seen as a normal human emotion, but rather a sign of weakness. Addiction behaviors are commonly used to numb our fear of pain. Grief is often covered up with anger. Disguising pain with anger can cause chaos in a person’s inner life, as well as their family’s life.

### **What can I do to provide support to people who attend the ceremony?**

- Stop being afraid of grief. Veterans and First Responders will sense whether or not you are comfortable with their pain or whether you prefer that they maintain a mask of smiles and “positive attitude” *for your sake*. So, learn how to be present to your own pain. Then, you can create a safe emotional environment so Veterans and First Responders feel free to be their authentic self.
- The goal is to help Veterans and First Responders connect with the part of themselves carrying their pain so that they no longer have to use energy to numb that part of self. Grieving is how this is accomplished. So, recognize the creative role that grief plays in healing.
- Be a companion rather than an advisor or rescuer. Your job is not to “put a smile” on their faces, but to be with them with *whatever* they are feeling. Veterans and First Responders respond well to those who can abide with their feelings, without trying to fix or change them. Validate the courage needed to grieve and mourn.
- Offer permission for tears, such as: “I see you choking down tears. It’s okay to cry. We say here that the only bad tears are uncried tears,” or “It’s good to see your tears; they’re safe here,” or “This is a sad time. Tears are welcome here.”
- Validate their emotional pain. Resist the urge to tell them, “You were just following orders,” or “That was a long time ago; you don’t need to think about that now,” or any other phrases that indirectly communicate “Don’t tell me your problems. Don’t let yourself feel human. Put up that stoic wall and hide behind it.”
- Acknowledge the pain Veterans and First Responders have experienced because they have sustained many losses and carried unmourned grief, sometimes for decades. Let them know this is no longer necessary: “You’ve had to carry a lot of burdens. Fitting back into the world after violence wasn’t easy,” or “I would guess there have been times when you’ve been pretty angry at God for allowing the world to have war in it, for not intervening to protect people from cruelty,” or “I would think the world was pretty confusing after you returned from war. All the rules had changed; much of what you were taught was violated.”
- Do not force them to tell their stories of trauma; rather, invite stories so they are able to give voice to their trauma *if they so choose*. Be willing to hear the “ugly” side of war, not just the glorious, patriotic side. “Sometimes, a vet will tell me he lost his soul in \_\_\_\_ (WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq). Did something like that sort of happen with you?” or “Sometimes combat veterans tell me that when they killed others, they killed a part of themselves. Did you experience anything sort of like that?”

- Chaplains, counselors, social workers, and other staff have received specialized training in grief. Refer veterans for their services if needed.