



Wounded Warriors: Their Last Battle Facilitator's Guide for Grief Work with Veterans' Families

Deborah Grassman's presentation, "Wounded Warriors: Their Last Battle" has dramatically and almost singlehandedly increased awareness of Veterans and their unique end-of-life issues in both VA and the community. Not only has Ms Grassman given this presentation to dozens of audiences across the country, a DVD has been widely distributed to VA and community healthcare providers as an effective teaching tool. Although the presentation focuses on Veterans and the impact military service has had on their life and impending death, it also contains **insights into the family's experience and offers perspectives for understanding how these experiences can impact on and often complicate grief and bereavement.**

The questions posed in this facilitator's guide are meant to help Bereavement Directors and Coordinators use the "Wounded Warriors" DVD as a point of departure for exploring issues faced by the families of Veterans with hospice staff and volunteers. The DVD can be viewed in segments or in its entirety followed by a facilitated discussion using some or all of the questions in the Guide. If the DVD is not available, see the resource list at the bottom of this document for alternate sources of materials that can be used in its place.

This Guide was developed by a workgroup of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization's (NHPCO) Veterans Advisory Council (VAC) and is part of a series of materials and resources produced for hospice and other healthcare providers in the community. The workgroup is constantly seeking to improve and update all of these resources and would like to hear from you about this Guide:

- How you have used it
- How effective it is
- How easy it is to use
- Suggestions for improving it

Please send your comments to NHPCO at Veterans@nhpco.org.

Wounded Warriors: Their Last Battle

Facilitator's Guide for Grief Work with Veterans' Families

Veteran's Military Experience

- **How has the Veteran's military experience been acknowledged by his or her family? the community? society?**
- **How might this have an impact on the Veteran prior to his or her death or on the bereavement of the family following the Veteran's death?**

Personal Growth

Military service may promote personal growth and self-actualization in the Veteran thus producing a positive outcome for the Veteran/family in terms of improved education, socio-economic status, and upward mobility. Acknowledgement of these aspects of the service experience can have a positive impact on **caregiver/family members' grief/bereavement** in numerous ways.

Period of Service

The specific war/conflict during which the Veteran may have served (i.e., WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf War, OEF/OIF) and its perceived community acknowledgement, (positive or negative), may impact a **Veteran/caregiver's sense of personal shame/pride** and influence their grief/bereavement.

Medals, Awards, Commendations

A Veteran may not seem inclined to talk about his or her military service, but there may be some non-verbal clues such as displayed metals, commendation letters, awards, and unit photos in the home. These mementos afford an opportunity to engage the Veteran/caregiver in a dialogue about their experiences, especially in the presence of stoicism or guardedness.

A deceased Veteran's military service may embody an intergenerational family tradition and be viewed by the bereaved as a badge of honor. Given praise and accolades by others could impact their grief/bereavement by validating or invalidating their feelings.

Veteran's Symptoms

Dynamics such as detachment, psychic numbing, or other symptoms of PTSD demonstrated by the Veteran may have had a profound impact on caregivers or family members and perhaps caused them to fear expression of thoughts and feelings about the Veteran's status. This behavior might translate into avoidance or suppression of these issues in bereavement.

Family Member/Caregiver's Experience of Grief

- **How is the experience of grief at end of life both similar and different for Veterans and non-Veterans?**

Stoicism

Veterans are notorious for their stoicism. Families coping with the effects of PTSD on a loved one can also be stoic and fail to show their feelings externally, often "stuffing" them.

Sense of Helplessness

The process of grieving may be compromised and/or complicated by high levels of stress. For a patient who has experienced traumatic events, the dying process may trigger a sense of helplessness. The bereaved caregiver who may have coped over time with the loved-one's **mental health issues related to experienced trauma**, may find that they also are vulnerable to feelings of helplessness. Veterans and their caregivers may be particularly at risk.

Acceptance and Letting Go

Acceptance and letting go at the end of life will be **impacted by the patient's life experience, including vulnerability to and survival of traumatic events and situations**. The need to remain in control may contribute to decisions that challenge therapeutic goals and **treatment recommendations intended for the patient's benefit**. For Veterans, this "trained-in" directive not to let down their guard may compete with and complicate caregiving and can cause frustration for both family and professional.

Absence and Estrangement

When a patient has been separated from home and family, anger may be present when a family is called upon to provide care for **"someone who was never around to care for us."** Veterans, due to the nature of being "called away" to serve and long posts away from family, may be particularly affected by this issue.

Difficult relationships

At the end of life, if the patient has a history of being abusive in their relationships, they may experience a host of emotions such as shame, guilt, abandonment, regret, fear of retribution, etc. Complicating this picture may be the feelings experienced by the family providing care, possibly as the formerly abused. Sometimes the reunion of the patient and family is for the sole purpose of providing end of life care. This kind of stress in relationship may be true for both Veterans and non-Veterans.

**Service Related
Illness & Death**

This situation is Veteran-specific. The grief experience may be impacted if death is experienced as a result of injury/illness associated with the Veteran's military service "service connected" (i.e. cancers following exposure to Agent Orange during Korea and Vietnam, ALS and service during the Gulf War).

**Perceived Lack of
Care**

In general, caregivers/family may grieve with anger towards the institutional caregivers whom they perceive as unsupportive. For the caregivers of Veterans, this anger **may focus on the "government" and the lack of support to which they believe the Veteran was "entitled"** but did not receive.

Delayed Grief

Grief may be delayed for multiple reasons, including legal proceedings, illness, multiple losses, etc. Delayed grief may place the bereaved in the position of needing social and emotional support at a time when others are no longer prepared to provide that support. For spouses of deceased Veterans who have experienced time without the Veteran as part of their military life, intense grief may begin only after a time beyond the longest period of deployment.

PTSD: Veteran's Experience & Family's Experience

- **How might a family's coping over the years with the Veteran's PTSD affect the family/caregiver's grief experiences?**

Loss of the "person"

Sometimes loved ones express that they lost a part of the Veteran in the war. The grief may be expressed not only for the loss of this "changed" person but also represent an end to the hope of ever regaining the "whole" person. They may feel like they no longer had a mother or a brother after he/she returned from battle/combat or their military experience.

Guilt

Might there be added regret or guilt over words spoken, or those left unspoken, due to the strain that PTSD placed on relationships?

Anger

There may be anger at the government, at society, at themselves, or towards the Veteran for experiences suffered because of the war.

Relief? Guilt? Shame?

Might there be relief because they no longer have to shoulder the burden of the Veteran's PTSD? Such a reaction might trigger shame or guilt for having such feelings.

Unknown Veteran stories

Stories that family didn't know, or perhaps didn't attempt or want to know, may surface at the end of a Veteran's life, leaving the family with questions about why they didn't know and/or why the Veteran never shared the stories with them. These stories may spark a wide range of feelings, such as guilt, remorse, anger or betrayal, especially in the absence of the Veteran.

Death at Home or in a Community Nursing Home

- **In the video, the Veteran dies in a VA facility. How might dying at home or in a community nursing facility affect both anticipatory mourning and bereavement following the death?**

Death at home or in community nursing home

Veterans who have used the VA healthcare system for much of their care throughout their illness may feel an acute sense of loss or even abandonment if/when their care is shifted to home or in a nursing home. Receiving care outside of the VA system often means that the Veteran will no longer see or interact with his or her VA healthcare providers and fellow comrades.

It is possible that community caregivers, such as hospice agencies and nursing homes, may not know a lot about the health, psychosocial and emotional issues that are unique to Veterans. They also may not understand the importance of military rituals and honors, which often take on more meaning at the end of life. This lack of knowledge may interfere with life closure activities, anticipatory grieving and bereavement following death.

Perceived loss of support

Families, especially non-Veteran family members, will likely experience a loss of support accompanied by loss of access to a system that has been a major part of their lives, perhaps for most of their adult lives.

Loss of Benefits

Families may be concerned that they will lose benefits if they don't stay connected to the VA system.

VA System: Benefits & Support. Veterans want to make sure their families have adequate resources after they die

- **How can we help families/caregivers use the VA system for access to both benefits and emotional support?**

Military History Checklist

Use the military history checklist to identify Veterans and family members of Veterans

VA Benefits	<p>The single largest concern for the families of Veterans, especially those who have used the VA system, is that community hospices do not understand their benefits or know how to help them access those benefits.</p> <p>Support for survivors begins early in the process by having an understanding of the relationship between the patient/family, the VA and the benefits to which they are entitled.</p>
VA Benefits Counselor	Every VA Medical Center has a Benefits Counselor and a Decedent Affairs Counselor who can help with both benefits and burial needs.
VA Hospice Benefits	VA hospice services are part of the Basic Medical Services package. All Veterans can access the VA Hospice Benefit if they are enrolled with the Veteran Health Administration; enrollment usually can be expedited if the Veteran is eligible for hospice services and is not yet enrolled.
VA Mental Health Counselors	VA Medical Centers have Mental Health counselors and Suicide Prevention Coordinators available to provide counseling services for enrolled Veterans.
State & County Veterans Service Officers	Every state has county or municipal Veterans service officers. Most communities have Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) such as the American Legion, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Disabled American Veterans that can help families advocate for benefits to which the Veteran/family may be entitled.
Vet Centers	Vet Centers offer counseling services for Veterans who served in any combat zone and their families.
National Cemeteries	Many times both Veterans and their family members want a military burial or may want to access burial benefits available to the Veteran. Community hospice providers can do a great service and provide enormous comfort by having some knowledge of these resources and being able to support the family member in accessing them. Go to www.cem.va.gov for more information. Hospice providers can also contact the Decedent Coordinator at the nearest VA Medical Center or the County Veterans Service Officer for assistance.
VA Resources for Community Agencies	Resources are available to help community hospice providers learn about Veteran benefits
We Honor Veterans	A program of the National Hospice and Palliative Care

Organization, **We Honor Veterans** has many resources, including the Military History Toolkit, posted at www.WeHonorVeterans.org.

Resources

"Wounded Warriors: Their Last Battle", the video. Email Veterans@nhpco.org.

"Wounded Warriors: Their Last Battle" slide set is available on the Hospice and Palliative Care Federation of Massachusetts website:

http://www.hospicefed.org/hospice_pages/education.htm

Boss, P. (1999) *Ambiguous Loss – Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Grassman, D. "Wounded Warriors: Their Last Battle", Home Healthcare Nurse. 25(5): 299-304, May 2007.

Grassman, D. *Peace at Last: Stories of Hope and Healing for Veterans and Their Families*. Vandamere Press, P.O. Box 149, St. Petersburg, FL 33731. (To order from within the United States, please call 800-551-7776. To order from outside the United States, call 727-556-0950 or email orders@vandamere.com).

www.vandamere.com/peace.htm