

Practical Suggestions for Ministering to Combat Trauma Sufferers

Most of these suggestions come from combat veterans who have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Others come from friends and family who love and care for these veterans.

1. Be sure they have a genuine, public, positive welcome home. Provide recognition, appreciation and an honoring of their sacrifices and those of their family.
2. Help them find ways to talk about, honor and memorialize their fallen comrades.
3. Pray for the person – frequently, throughout the day.
4. Show practical love by small acts of kindness.
5. Take the initiative with them – don't wait for them to come to you. *Do* something; don't be passive. (From a female veteran with PTSD: “I just wish someone would have noticed my unkempt yard and offered to help me with it.” She *never* would have asked for help.)
6. Don't let them run you off or push you away. They will test the resolve of your friendship.
7. Get them into the Word, either through formal Bible study with them (both small group and one-to-one), or in "teachable moments."
8. Encourage them to talk about what they experienced. This is one of the most important tasks of a returning warrior. It's part of the grieving process, and helps them to pull together the fragments of their war experience and integrate them into a “new normal.” They may not want to talk with someone who hasn't ever been there, so encourage them to find other vets they can talk with.
9. When you ask them, "How are you doing?" communicate to them that you really want an honest answer to that question.
10. *Listen* to what they share. Let them talk; don't analyze and try to fix them, just let them talk; identify with and empathize with them as much as possible.
11. No judgmentalism.
12. Be prepared to be shocked by what they share and how they share it, and (with God's help) don't react.
13. Help them gain a sense of forgiveness and purification by your grace-filled reactions to the experiences they share for which they feel guilt. In battle, people are required to act and react in ways they never would in civilian life, and this makes it difficult for them to feel they can “fit in” normally again. Let them know you understand this, and so does God. Help them seek and find God's forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

14. Be prepared for their diminished coping skills, their tendency toward hyper-vigilism and explosive anger. Help them through these episodes with gentleness and understanding. Don't back away. Keep loving them despite their struggles.
15. No in-your-face confrontation.
16. Help them stay "in the moment" and in touch with the present reality – not drifting back to the battlefield.
17. Emphasize that you can't solve all their problems for them – God is the problem-solver, and they need to go to Him. But you're available to help them along in that journey.
18. Recognize they are not the same person they were before they went into combat.
19. Be calm and relaxed around them - avoid loud noises or sudden movements that might startle them or trigger memories.
20. When you go out with them, take them to places that have a safe, secure feeling - not a lot of action, crowds and close spaces until they feel they are ready.
21. Treat them naturally and normally – not like they are some kind of an invalid.
22. Inject humor into your relationship whenever possible.
23. Try to avoid stupid questions, for example: "Are you glad to be back?" "Is your wife glad you're home?" "Was it scary getting shot at?"
24. Get them involved in service to others who are hurting – especially to other vets.
25. Be sensitive to feelings they may have about the war, and about their friends who are still over there. Avoid sharing "updates" such as, "Hey, did you hear about that chopper that got shot down outside of Baghdad?" He or she might have friends who are helicopter pilots, and it could cause undue anxiety.
26. Offer practical ways to help them and their family adjust to the changes that have come into their lives.
27. Offer practical ways that they can hold on to loving, supportive relationships in their lives (spouses, children, parents, close friends).
28. If there are significant family/marriage problems (and there probably are), urge them to go to a professional counselor – and take them there personally, if necessary.
29. Give them practical, specific things to *do* that will help their situation.
30. Always offer hope that they won't be this way forever. Help them overcome feelings of being "behind" in civilian life, or that their life is "on hold." Help them move out of the past, into the present, with a vision for the future.

31. They won't *only* want to talk about combat-related matters. They will have lots of spiritual questions. You may not have all the answers as they ask these questions, but communicate that you will help them find them.
32. Speak frequently about God and His love and faithfulness and sovereignty - keep bringing their thoughts back to Him as the solution to their problems.
33. Realize the depth of their pain, their sense of aloneness and separation, the sleep difficulties they are having, and their related tendency to want to self-medicate these symptoms through drugs and alcohol. Be ready to help them with rehab if necessary.
34. Help them connect with other vets (particularly Christian ones) who have experienced combat and/or PTSD. Ideally, connect them with those who have experienced God's healing, but even those who are still struggling can be helpful (sharing stories, camaraderie, opening up, helping each other cope, "We're in this together.").

Let us know what other insights you have gained.



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