

Combat Veterans: What Not to Say and Why

This is a general guideline put together by former Sergeant Andi Westfall, who served with the National Guard as a medic during Operation Iraqi Freedom and who suffers with PTSD. These tips will be useful when interacting with a veteran and should not be considered absolutely true for *every* veteran. Each Soldier, Marine, Airman, Sailor or Coast Guardsman who has been deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Somalia or any other combat theater, has had a different combat experience. How they deal with their experience will vary depending on age, culture, faith, gender, community support, or lack of, and the presence of or lack of a family and/or social support system. A combat veteran is **not** the same person they were before being deployed to a combat theater and how the civilian population interacts with them can either help or hinder their very difficult transition.

1. **Did you kill any anyone?** (*It would seem that common sense would deem this an inappropriate question, however this question is asked a lot. What purpose does this serve the individual asking this question knowing this about the veteran?*)
2. **What was the nastiest or most disgusting thing you saw over there?** (*If the veteran wants to share this kind of detail they might, but ONLY after trust has been established. However, the chance they will want to relive the details of those events, which might be very traumatic, could be slim to none.*)
3. **Are you glad to be home?** (*Consider for a moment what these words could be asking: “Are you glad that you are no longer in a situation where you are getting shot at, missiles being fired at you on a regular basis, the threat of your vehicle being blown up every time you get in it, sand storms and 140 degree temperatures?” It is also important to be aware that the veteran’s homecoming was more traumatic than being at war. Some come home financially desolate because the person they trusted to take care of their finances spent ALL their money. Others come home thinking they will be welcomed by their spouse only to find they have been unfaithful, usually with someone close to them such as a brother and/or best friend, and they are being handed divorce papers. Unfortunately this happens quite often.*)
4. **How are you doing?** (*This question should really only be asked when you are willing to stay and listen to the answer. Most likely the veteran doesn’t know how they are doing and definitely may not know how to express it. It is okay not to know what to do with the answer because there isn’t anything you can say to fix it or make it better. Just being there so the veteran can “debrief” for just a moment can be enough.*)

5. **Did you see the news...?** *(And then proceed to go on and share what gruesome thing that has just happened in Iraq and/or Afghanistan, or how many Americans have been killed. The veteran has “lived” the news and doesn’t need to relive it through the present media and certainly does not need to hear about it. The war is very personal to the veteran and most likely they know people still fighting and dying over there.)*
6. **Do you feel guilty about what you had to do over there, i.e., kill another human?** *(Just about any combat veteran will have some measure of guilt. Those who make it home alive, although grateful, have survivor’s guilt. Those who participated in direct combat had to make decisions that ultimately resulted in taking human life, to include women and children. These individuals generally have tremendous guilt but may not know how to identify it let alone admit it.)*
7. **Do you want to go get a drink?** *(This generally becomes a BIG problem later so do not be the one to help them start self-medicating and on the path to destruction with chemicals. Coffee is a much better addiction and easier to quit.)*
8. **Do you want me to pray with you?** *(This should be automatic. You may not know what to pray for but the Holy Spirit knows what the veteran needs and will direct. **And**, the veteran may be very angry at God and the last thing they want is to commune with Him. So be discerning: if he/she says no, honor that – and don’t ask “Why not?” unless you have already established a strong relationship of trust.)*
9. **What do you think about the U.S. being over there and don’t you think we should get out?** *(It is not a good idea to get started on the politics concerning the hell they were sent into and have just come out of. Their perspective, because of experience, is going to be very different than the average civilian getting their information from CNN.)*
10. **What do you think of Obama? Bush?** *(Just a good idea to stay away from these types of questions! If they want to talk about it, let them bring it up. But, be prepared to hear a point of view you might not agree with. They have a different perspective because of their experience that has shaped their point of view.)*
11. **Do you think God could ever forgive you?** *(There are people out there who are extremely opposed to the war and blame the military for the destruction and loss of life they see on TV. These individuals seem unable to distinguish between their politics and the individual Soldier. The veteran will have some measure of guilt no matter what their job was, so do not make it worse by helping them along with the notion they can never be forgiven for the things they had to do to protect themselves and their battle buddies.)*

12. **Did you see any dead bodies?** *(Again, if the veteran should want to share this very intimate detail of their deployment they might. However, this may occur after time but be prepared that they just will not share.)*
13. **Do not tell a veteran that you understand what they are going through and then share a story of when you hit your thumb with a hammer.** *(There really is no way to completely understand going to war unless you have also “been there, done that.” There really is no experience you have had that can come close to the stress, terror, guilt and just plain hell of this type of event. However, God can use your trauma to extend compassion and empathy, which does not always require words. You don’t have to understand what they’ve been through, but to recognize this was something incredibly painful for them will show the veteran that you do care.)*
14. **DO NOT, even in a joking manner, tell a veteran that they should be grateful they made it home alive, they didn’t die “over there” and they need to get “over it” and be happy.** *(There is already a VERY good chance that they wished they had been killed in action. Coming home is much more difficult than actually being in combat. The veteran knows what is expected of him or her during the heat of battle. They rely on training and the instinct to survive. There is no training manual for coming home and there is no debriefing that can fully prepare the veteran for how difficult it will be. As a result many desire to go back to Iraq or Afghanistan because they know who they are and how to survive in the civilian world. Then there are those who cannot deal with these pressures and consider suicide as the only option.)*



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