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Commentary

YOUNG: Help all those wounded vets

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A book from my childhood about Medal of Honor winners has a chapter about him: "Too Young to Fight."

The Texas boy lied about his age at 17, his face and physique betraying him to the Marines who turned him away. Enlisting in the Army at the stroke of 18, he was nicknamed "Baby." Then he became one of World War II's most highly decorated warriors. From there, Second Lt. Audie Murphy graduated to the rank of movie star and, away from the set lights, to basket case.

When I wrote recently about Murphy's largely untold battle with psychiatric wounds, I heard from a chorus that jointly expressed this thought: What person is ever seasoned enough for this? Combat, that is.

Eighteen — yeah, that's a man. And pimples are facial muscles.

A two-term Iraq veteran who's had success dealing with his own post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) wrote to say that he despairs over so many brothers and sisters in arms who won't acknowledge they carry the same weight, and won't seek help.

Then again, I heard from a veteran in Austin who had sought help, and wanted everyone to know what worked for him. He called it a cure. "It" is EMDR.

Eye Motion Desensitization and Reprocessing is a mouthful. It causes the unversed to think "quackery" by the sixth or seventh syllable. It's not. It's a tremendous breakthrough that could help countless war veterans and others who are dealing with trauma.

The procedure was discovered and refined by San Francisco behavior therapist Dr. Francine Shapiro. She found that effecting a pattern of side-to-side eye motion with a trained practitioner somehow can dislodge crippling things from the brain's right hemisphere — deeply buried impressions and memories that, said Shapiro, "are beyond verbal comprehension."

This is a major departure from traditional psychotherapy because it doesn't involve talk.

"Talk doesn't affect the emotional brain or the physical brain," said Waco therapist Sharon Rollins. "EMDR works on all levels," just as REM (rapid-eye movement) plows the fields of sleep.

If anyone thinks this is a fringe activity in a clinical nether world, Rollins is one of 35,000 EMDR technicians nationwide. She said she became convinced of the procedure's worth in dealing with her own personal trauma.

Austin therapist Sue Hoffman, past president of the EMDR International Association, said that not only could more veterans benefit from the procedure, but so could family members. She has treated several military wives.

When facing psychiatric illness, she said that too often "a veteran tries to numb it" with alcohol or drugs. Additionally, in many cases, PTSD will be suppressed for years before it explodes in destructive behavior.

Audie Murphy made all the rounds as a war hero, always keeping his youthful chin up. When Hollywood discovered him, he made dozens of movies, often re-enacting actual battle scenes from his "To Hell and Back" experience. Having talked to veterans who climb under the bed at the sound of an engine backfiring, I could only imagine what such movie making did to Murphy's psyche.

Unknown to most, Murphy experienced every dimension of PTSD, then known only as battle fatigue or shell shock. He suffered from insomnia. He lashed out in frightening ways at his wife.

The Department of Veterans Affairs now operates a Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans at the Waco VA Medical Center, a hospital threatened with closure until two years ago. One of the center's initiatives is to track 1,000 veterans, upon their return from war, for the rest of their lives.

Let's hope they all get help the moment they need it. No human being is fully prepared for what these men and women have endured, no matter what the movies say.

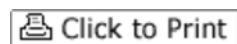
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