

The Mental Impact of War

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Sgt. Anthony Sills comforted his wife as they waited outside Fort Hood.
nytimes.com

After the shooting rampage that took place at Fort Hood on Thursday, everyone is scrambling to understand why.

How could Major Hasan, an Army psychiatrist and an American citizen, have done this? What was going on inside his head? Was he a terrorist who had been planning the attack all along? Was he suffering from post-traumatic

stress disorder? Did he have any type of underlying mental health issues? Or is he simply a mad man?

Right now, all we really know is that it was triggered by the fact that he was going to be deployed to Afghanistan which he openly expressed concerns about.

Indeed, the government and news media are very much focused on digging up any possible ties he may have had with terrorists and his past statements condoning terrorism. But fortunately, this tragic event is also shining light on some very important issues. It's raising a whole slew of other questions that the U.S government and military as well as those in the mental health profession are now forced to address:

How common is PTSD among caregivers who specialize in trauma treatment? Are we paying enough attention to Army psychiatrists to make sure they're able to offer the best treatment? Is enough being done to help soldiers suffering from PTSD? Are we reaching out to them and their families as much as possible?

This list could go on and on. But of course, before we can really address these issues, we need to better understand the severity of PTSD and it's relationship to all military personnel.

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Mental health and trauma specialist, Charles Figley states in a recent [New York Times blog](#):

“Exposure to case after case of combat-related stress injuries often has negative effects for the caregivers who handle these cases. Yet in many instances, those professionals (not to mention family members) do not get proper attention and care for their emotional needs.”

In addition to this, he has found through his research on secondary traumatic stress that not only can the negative effect be similar to those of primary exposure but that military caregivers are actually especially vulnerable for several reasons. This includes:

“the high concentration of trauma patients they see; inability to change jobs; their focus is on readiness and keeping the troops sufficiently healthy to be re-deployed; the expectation of being deployed (often multiple times), and; the complexity of providing treatment while fighting the fear, stigma and embarrassment of active duty personnel who are forced to seek such treatment.”

That being said, just how common is PTSD amongst Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans and active-duty personnel and what impact is it having?

The U.S Department of Veteran Affairs has

reported that between **6 and 11 percent** of Afghanistan war vets suffer from PTSD and about **12 to 20 percent** of Iraq war vets suffer from it. These cases range from mild to severe and the chances of developing PTSD increase with the number of redeployments.

According to a [PBS NewsHour report](#) last November, for the soldiers who had deployed once, about 12 percent had symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD. For those who had been deployed three times, that number rose from **12 percent to 27 percent**.

As a result, they say that suicides among the Army’s active-duty personnel have doubled in recent years, with almost **700** within the last nine years.

Another [recent study](#) published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, indicated that veterans who screened positive for PTSD were **4 times** more likely to report suicidal thoughts compared to veterans without the disorder. This held true, even after accounting for other psychiatric disorder diagnoses, such as substance abuse and depression.

Finally, according to a recent [Wall Street Journal article](#), since the start of the war in 2001, Fort Hood--the largest U.S military facility in the world--has lost at least **75 soldiers** to suicide. So far this year alone,

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they've had **10 soldiers** commit suicide, the second-highest tally in the Army behind Kentucky's Fort Campbell, which had **16 suicides**.

What makes all of this even worse is the fact that this war probably won't be ending anytime in the near future. So perhaps it's a perfect time for all of us to realize just how serious of an impact war can have on the mental health of almost everyone involved.

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