

Supporting Those Left Behind By Military Suicides

by SARAH GONZALEZ



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Courtesy of TAPS

Surviving family members of service members who committed suicide support each other at a TAPS seminar held in Arlington, Va.

October 21, 2010

text size **A A A**

A spike in military suicides has led to a renewed focus on prevention efforts by the Defense Department. But the surviving family members often have an uneven network of support that allows some to work through their grief, while others are left feeling angry and confused.

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors — TAPS — is trying to fill the gaps by bringing together families from across the country to share their grief and learn.

About 250 adults and children recently gathered at a hotel in Arlington, Va., to share their stories at the TAPS seminar for surviving family members of

suicide by service members. Some traveled from as far as Alaska and Hawaii.

Adding Guilt To The Grief

For many, like Denise Coutlakis, the grief is still raw. Her husband, Col. Todd Hixson, committed suicide in October 2009. The 27-year Marine veteran of several wars had been home just three weeks from his only deployment to Iraq.



Courtesy of Denise Coutlakis
Marine Corps Col. Todd Hixson poses with his daughter. Hixson committed suicide in 2009.

When Coutlakis got the phone call saying that her husband had committed suicide, she says she did not know what to do. "I didn't know ... how to get my husband's body. I didn't know what to do next, so I called the Marine Corps," Coutlakis says.

She made the call on a Sunday, and Coutlakis says it took a while for anyone at the base to respond. "They showed up at some point and ... started talking to you about, 'This is what you need to do to move on. [Here] are the things you need to do. Here are the services,' and it gives you a sense ... [that] you have a list of things to do," Coutlakis says.

But Coutlakis says the list did not help her heal, and the suicide only added guilt to her grief.

When a service member dies in combat or in an accident, Coutlakis says, "nobody looks at the family and says, 'What was their responsibility in this? What did they not do?'"

Maintaining Mental Fitness

Families are often the first witness of a soldier in crisis, according to Bonnie Carroll, the executive director of TAPS. She says that while military families need to know the signs of suicidal behavior, the military also needs to do more to encourage soldiers to get mental health treatment — just as a coach encourages an

athlete to see a trainer.



[Enlarge](#)

Courtesy of TAPS

An art therapy workshop at a TAPS seminar provided an opportunity for surviving family members to create collages to express their grief.

"We've gotten off track in that we don't allow our service member to do that for their mental fitness in the way we insist they do that for their physical fitness, and that has to change."

A Suicide Prevention Task Force was formed under the Defense Department last year to make recommendations on how to decrease military suicides.

Maj. Gen. Philip Volpe is co-chairman of the task force, and he oversees Army treatment and medical facilities. Volpe says one way to help prevent future suicides is giving service members more "dwell time" in between deployments "to reconnect and re-establish some of the bonds that may have been

weakened and [to] get back to a sense of normalcy before they start training for the next mission."

One Of The Lucky Ones

In 2007, Army Spc. Jeremy LaClaire returned from his first deployment to Afghanistan distant and unable to relate to his family. His widow, Megan LaClaire, says the Army diagnosed him as bipolar. Less than a year later, he was scheduled to be deployed to Iraq.

"And he was not going to go is what he told me," LaClaire says. "He said he didn't care what it took, but he was not going back."

More On Military Suicides



Suicide Rivals The Battlefield In Toll On U.S. Military

Cracks in the system often fail to identify the warning signs when it comes to suicidal soldiers.

LaClaire's husband shot himself in the head on their living room couch the morning of their daughter's seventh birthday. LaClaire refused to cancel their daughter's birthday party. She says her military family helped her through the grief and enabled her to be strong.



A Marine's Suicide Brings The Battle Home

Mary Gallagher says her family was crippled by the death of her husband after he returned from Iraq.

"The Army has been amazing for me. They have done nothing but support me in every way possible. I was one of the lucky ones. A lot of people weren't that lucky," she says.

LaClaire lives near an Army base and always has access to the support resources offered there. Others, like many who attended the TAPS seminar, travel across states to get that same support.

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Recent First



Charles Gillard (shylove) wrote:

Not having worthless wars to nowhere is a good way to cut down on the warrior suicide rate... in fact even necessary wars are not good for mental or physical health and unnecessary wars are unconscionable. Low battlefield casualties do not make wars cost effective nor necessary.

Friday, October 22, 2010 3:10:07 PM

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Chris Lynch (ChrisLynch) wrote:

We need to help soldiers that are returning from combat to the slower pace of American life.

It must be stressful to return from a war zone to a place where no signs of conflict have occurred. Where people don't share the same stresses, or even appear to notice we are fighting 2 wars.

We just pay lip service to vets as a nation. We tell them they are heroes, then send them off to war. When they return, we just ignore them.

We won't do anything about it but read the articles and shake our heads while sipping coffee. Just my observation, of course.

Friday, October 22, 2010 10:57:04 AM

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brian woo (BrianTexas) wrote:

okay call me dumb but the best support for military is not to over use them.

Friday, October 22, 2010 10:52:58 AM

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Trena Gravem (Trena) wrote:

Something systemic to the military is at the root of these suicides, so I don't believe we can turn to the military for solutions to this problem. The military, being what it by definition, is completely not equipped to address this problem. I believe these suicides are motivated by a sense of betrayal at the deepest possible level within a human being. These people can't live with what they once believed they had no choice but to do, nor can they live with the outrage they feel toward the system which, unforgivably, harnessed their lives into doing it.

Friday, October 22, 2010 10:51:37 AM

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Eleanor Alden (EAlden) wrote:

The suicide rate among active duty military and Veterans is frightening, and it appears we are killing ourselves more effectively than any enemy. Then add an 80% divorce rate for those who are actively serving abroad we have an immense tragedy. As an author, teacher and psychotherapist who works with families and stepfamilies I know the suicide rate is lower for those with supportive family around them. I applaud the support being provided by the armed services to those families still intact. I do think that more needs to be done for those men and women divorcing and starting stepfamilies; a complicated but rewarding process often ignored by our culture who prefers to shame those with step-relationships. Stepparenting classes, remarriage workshops, etc. might help provide the 80% getting divorced with help they need to develop a loving home with much lower risk of suicide, etc. Eleanor Alden, LCWS, BCD

Friday, October 22, 2010 9:12:34 AM

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