

[Click to Print](#)

Nov, 21, 2011

PTSD can trouble veterans decades after their military service

ERICKA PIZZILLO COHEN / FOR THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Older veterans can be caught off guard when the emotional impact of their war service resurfaces decades after they left the military.

"Some of our veterans are finding that the stress of life is intensifying with age, as they begin to look back on their wartime experiences," says Bridget Cantrell, a Bellingham mental health counselor who specializes in treating veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. "The older veterans are at a point in their lives where they still don't understand why they get so anxious and feel as if they are unraveling, as if it were just yesterday in a war zone."

The National Center for PTSD, part of the federal Department of Veterans Affairs, calls it "late-onset stress symptomatology." In other words, veterans who late in life try to make sense of their wartime service might experience symptoms similar to PTSD.

"Perhaps they also have some remorse for not living their lives up to the expectations they had for themselves, or what others had for them," Cantrell says.

Cantrell said some veterans used their work as a coping mechanism for years, and now need to find a healthy substitute to help them cope with their anxiety.

"One of the issues we commonly see is avoidance and isolation," she says. "This is seen not only by pulling away from people and events, but they close down emotionally."

In some cases, the veteran isn't willing to admit that he or she needs help. Cantrell said it's important to enlist another veteran to take the veteran out for coffee, to build rapport and give him or her an opportunity to tell their story.

During counseling sessions, Cantrell tries to help veterans realize that what they're experiencing is not the end of the world, and that they are not alone.

"I teach them how to relax and stay in the present time, and how to put things into perspective," she says. "Healing takes place in mind, body and spirit, and all these areas are equally important in working with trauma."

Steve Duncan of Mount Vernon, a Marine, was 62 when he was first diagnosed with PTSD, although he now realizes his symptoms had created challenges for him ever since his return from Vietnam. He now receives counseling and is also connected to a support group through an American Legion post.

"You are never too old to do something about this," Duncan says. "You have to take care of things or else it's going to get worse. Being old doesn't make it go away."

Ericka Pizzillo Cohen is an Ohio-based freelance writer and former reporter for The Bellingham Herald.