

Top 10 Things Your Combat Vet Wants You To Know

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I'm a psychiatrist. Every day I listen to my combat veterans as they struggle to return to the "normal" world after having a deeply life-changing experience. I do everything I can to help them. Sometimes that can involve medications, but listening is key. Sometimes a combat veteran tells me things that they wish their families knew. They have asked me to write something for their families, from my unique position as soldier, wife, and physician. These are generalizations; not all veterans have these reactions, but they are the concerns most commonly shared with me.

(Author's note: obviously warriors can be female — like me — and family can be male, but for clarity's sake I will write assuming a male soldier and female family.)

1. He is addicted to war, although he loves you. War is horrible, but there is nothing like a life-and-death fight to make you feel truly alive. The adrenaline rush is tremendous, and can never be replaced. Succeeding in combat defines a warrior, places him in a brotherhood where he is always welcome and understood. The civilian world has its adrenaline junkies as well; just ask any retired firefighter, police officer, or emergency room staff if they miss it.

2. Living for you is harder. It would be easy for him to die for you because he loves you. Living for you, which is what you actually want, is harder for him. It is even harder for him if you are smart and do not need him to rescue you, since rescuing is something he does really well.

3. "The training kicks in" means something very different to him. It is direct battle doctrine that when ambushed by a superior force, the correct response is "Apply maximum firepower and break contact." Unfortunately, your tears are unbearable to him; they create explosive emotions in him that are difficult for him to control. Unfortunately, warriors frequently respond to strong waves of guilt by applying more "maximum firepower" on friends, family, or unfortunate strangers.

4. He is afraid to get attached to anyone because he has learned that the people you love get killed, and he cannot face that pain again. He may make an exception for his children

(because they cannot divorce him), but that will be instinctual and he will probably not be able to explain his actions.

5. He knows the military exists for a reason. The sad fact is that a military exists ultimately to kill people and break things. This was true of our beloved “Greatest Generation” warriors of WWII, and it remains true to this day. Technically, your warrior may well be a killer, as are his friends. He may have a hard time seeing that this does not make him a murderer. He is a sheepdog, not a wolf. The emotional side of killing in combat is complex. He may not know how to feel about what he’s seen or done, and he may not expect his feelings to change over time. Warriors can experience moments of profound guilt, shame, and self-hatred. He may have experienced a momentary elation at “scoring one for the good guys,” then been horrified that he celebrated killing a human being. He may view himself as a monster for having those emotions, or for having gotten used to killing because it happened often. One of my Marines recommended *On Killing* by Dave Grossman, and I would pass that recommendation on.

6. He’s had to cultivate explosive anger in order to survive in combat. He may have grown up with explosive anger (violent alcoholic father?) as well.

7. He may have been only nineteen when he first had to make a life and death decision for someone else. What kind of skills does a nineteen-year-old have to deal with that kind of responsibility?

8. He may believe that he’s the only one who feels this way; eventually he may realize that at least other combat vets understand. On some level, he doesn’t want you to understand, because that would mean you had shared his most horrible experience, and he wants someone to remain innocent.

9. He doesn’t understand that you have a mama bear inside of you, that probably any of us could kill in defense of someone if we needed to. Imagine your reaction if someone pointed a weapon at your child. Would it change your reaction if a child pointed a weapon at your child?

10. When you don’t understand, he needs you to give him the benefit of the doubt. He needs you also to realize that his issues really aren’t about you, although you may step in them sometimes.

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