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Traumatized soldiers told they are not alone

By *Susan Herendeen*
sherendeen@modbee.com

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People can heal any hurt, including the lingering trauma that comes from being a soldier in a combat zone, according to an expert on family violence, who gave a presentation Saturday sponsored by the American GI Forum at Teamsters Hall in Modesto.

But the stigma that comes with mental illness means many veterans won't ask for help, even if they are so tense and anxious that they are "on guard" at all times.

Researchers worry that domestic violence will rise because an increasing number of veterans are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after serving multiple deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As a result, the veteran's group is using a \$75,000 grant from the Verizon Foundation to sponsor domestic violence prevention programs at its 25 chapters across California.

In Modesto, therapist Jerry Tello assured a dozen former soldiers and their families that they are not alone.

"The second war is the recovery," said Tello, who served in the Vietnam War after being drafted into the Army. He is director of the Sacred Circles Healing Center in Whittier, California, and says lingering trauma can make people turn to violence or drugs because they are hypersensitive to everyday stressors.

The problem has been well-documented:

The U.S. Department of Defense reported a 50 percent increase in PTSD cases in 2007.

Research by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs shows that male veterans with PTSD are two to three times more likely than their peers to engage in acts of violence against their partners.

A 2008 study by the Rand Corp. said more than 300,000 veterans have mental problems and only half of them seek help.

Willie Galvan, state commander of the American GI Forum, said his group is offering counseling in friendly group sessions because many veterans don't want help from the military, even if it is free.

"They don't want it on their record," he said.

Frank Alvarez, commander of the Modesto chapter, said he will bring Tello back for a second meeting so military families can learn to help themselves.

"We're trying to help the veteran in a way that's not scary," he said.

Most of the people who attended a four-hour session with Tello declined to share their experiences but said the program was worthwhile.

Some said they were glad to find a place where they could talk.

Others said they struggle when friends and family want to hear about heroes, but don't understand the emotional baggage soldiers bring home from war.

Ramon Bermudez, a retiree from Riverbank, returned from Vietnam in 1968. More than 40 years later, it still helps to



(BART AH YOU/bahyou@modbee.com) American GI guest speaker Jerry Tello, director of Sacred Circles Healing Center in Whittier, California, presented how to maintain healthy relationships and deal with PTSD. July 18, 2009 - Modesto Bee - Bart Ah You

talk about the stress that comes from combat.

"It lingers for life," he said.

Bee staff writer Susan Herendeen can be reached at sherendeen@modbee.com or 578-2338.

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Phone: (209) 578-2000.