

THE FORT LEAVENWORTH LAMP ONLINE

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Chapel program helps couples reconnect after deployment

By Melissa Bower | Staff Writer

Lt. Col. Rich McConnell said he's among a generation of service members that has been "quietly making history" in the longest deployment in American history, according to some recent news reports.

"The more people tend to go to combat zones, it's not uncommon to run into guys who have been downrange four tours, five tours," he said. "Some folks come back with great combat experience, but they are also experiencing a lot of bad stuff."

His wife, Rose, has also been a survivor of her husband's three recent deployments. She and her husband are one of the couples facilitating a group for the Fort Leavenworth Chapel Community called "Faith-Based Solutions to the Combat Experience."

"Those of us who are leading the group have been through it," she said. "This is a confidential environment. This is a safe environment for us to share."

The chapel program began in February. Each session is about two hours and runs for eight weeks. Two sessions, one for couples and one for spouses, are ongoing and a third session for couples will start March 23. There is also an option for military members only, but no participants yet.

The McConnells are facilitating one of the couples groups. The couples program has been military men and their spouses, but McConnell said the same program could easily work for women in the military and their spouses, or dual military couples.

The chapel uses "The Combat Trauma Healing Manual" and "When War Comes Home," both published by Military Ministry Press. Tom Schmidt, lay minister at Main Post Chapel, said the materials were written by mental health professionals who are Bible-knowledgeable. Schmidt said anyone could participate in the program regardless of spiritual beliefs.

"There is no expectation that people are of the Christian faith when they come," Schmidt said. "What is taught is done from a Christian, Biblical perspective."

Schmidt said one of the benefits of the Fort Leavenworth Chapel community's program is that it is not attached to any military requirements. He said that as a chapel volunteer, he is the only person who keeps a list of participants, and he doesn't share them with anyone. Only the facilitators, who are military couples experienced in combat trauma, and other participants know the identity of those who come to the sessions.

McConnell said the ongoing program has three couples. The sessions begin with a half hour of couples talking together, an hour of separating the military members and spouses from each other, then a half hour of wrap-up. Sometimes, members of the military are able to share things with each other that they might not think about sharing with a spouse, McConnell said.

Rose said as an Army wife, she wants to be prepared for what "triggers" might upset her

spouse upon returning from combat.

"The women listed what we thought were the triggers, but the guys had a different list," she said.

Rich McConnell said loud noises sometimes bother him, but he had never told his family. It's better for his family to know what triggers him so they can be aware, he said.

Although Rich McConnell said he experienced many IEDs, suicide bombs and enemy contact during his last deployment to Iraq, combat trauma can affect anyone.

"It's not just people who have dealt with that type of thing that can benefit from this," he said.

Rose McConnell said the intent of the program is not to diagnose clinical mental health issues or post-traumatic stress disorder. In fact, some of the couples currently in the program seek professional help along with the chapel program. The McConnells said they and other facilitators are looking at reintegration into society after combat from a personal, faith-based perspective.

Garrison Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Mike Thompson said bringing faith discussions into healing follows, in part, the idea of Comprehensive Soldier Fitness. He said one of the common themes found in service members returning from combat is changes in faith - the question, "Where was God in all of this?"

Rich McConnell said it was his faith that allowed him to answer that question. As a battalion executive officer, he and his commander both had the same approach, he said.

"God was really good to us on that thing," he said. "I can see the miracle in what occurred, and I think for me, that has made the big difference in being able to distinguish that, it's being able to see the miraculous in even some of the bad things that have occurred."

Rose said her background in Christianity helps her cope with challenges of being a military spouse.

"Having the ability to reconcile what has happened with my faith is, in many ways, the first step in healing for me, see where God was in a situation, and sometimes it's hard to see where God is in a situation," she said. "But to see that he is there helps me in that next step."

Thompson said one of the challenges of getting community members to participate was the stigma attached to getting help.

"I know there are fears about reaching out for help," he said. "(For example) 'I might lose my clearance,' 'I might get pulled from a command,' or 'I don't want people to know my business.'"

Thompson said he urged community members to overcome those fears and find a way to actively participate in their own healing.

"It just doesn't go away on its own," he said. "Negative feelings and emotions that are stuffed never go away on their own."

Rich McConnell said he wasn't just a member of the military recovering from combat trauma. He also went through the process as a family member after his father's service in Vietnam. He said his family didn't talk about the issues of reintegration much until years later when the younger McConnell first deployed to Operation Desert Storm.

"He said, 'Don't do what I did - make sure you talk about it,'" Rich McConnell said of his father.

"Faith-Based Solutions to the Combat Experience" for couples meets 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays. Child care is provided. Contact Tom Schmidt at Main Post Chapel at 684-8990 or e-mail Thomas.schmidt1@us.army.mil for more information.

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