

Helping soldiers cope with trauma

UBC's Veterans Transition Program puts vets through group therapies to help them reintegrate into civilian life

BY TIFFANY CRAWFORD, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 11, 2010



Tim Laidler, 25, comforts 'fallen soldier' Jake Jennings as (from left) James Alexander, Marvin Westwood, Stu Hoover and James Nickason take part in a re-enactment aimed at teaching soldiers how to cope with traumatic experiences.

Photograph by: Les Bazso, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

A Canadian soldier kneels beside his dead friend, picks up his hand and holds it tight.

Racked with guilt, he tells his best friend that he regrets drinking the night before. He regrets he was hungover and didn't want to drive. He regrets that his friend offered to drive instead and that he was the one who was killed when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb in Afghanistan.

He feels so guilty he has nightmares and he needs to tell his friend this so he can let him go.

Then he says he will miss the friendship as he goes through life without him.

This heart-wrenching scene is just a re-enactment of one of the many horrors soldiers have endured in Afghanistan -- for soldiers rarely have that much time to say goodbye to someone in a war zone. Tragedy happens in a flash.

The re-enactment was performed by a group of soldiers and counsellors at the education faculty at the University of B.C. last Friday in a program designed to help veterans cope with the traumas of war and reintegrate them into civilian life. It was a rare glimpse into the deeply personal traumas the veterans in the program grapple with.

In part, the re-enactment allows the soldier to have back that lost time to say goodbye and to find a sense of completion.

Tim Laidler, 25, a reservist who went through the Veterans Transition Program after spending eight months in Afghanistan, gave The Vancouver Sun a rare demonstration to show how soldiers who go through the three-month program -- the only one of its kind in Canada -- learn to cope with their ordeals and ultimately draw strength to move on with their lives.

The Veterans Transition Program was established in 1997 with funding from the BC/ Yukon Command of The Royal Canadian Legion.

As Laidler kneels beside a colleague who pretends to be the dead soldier, he is prompted with lines from his counsellor while the other men in the group stand behind him, some with their hands on his shoulder for support as he talks.

In other re-enactment scenes, the soldiers will talk to Afghan kids who were killed in front of them, because they need to deal with the crushing guilt that they didn't do enough to protect them. Or they may act out a nightmare that has been causing them too many sleepless nights. The re-enactments vary depending on the individual experiences of the war veterans.

This type of group sharing can be very difficult for many military personnel, explained Laidler, because

