

USU veterans cope with PTSD

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American war veterans make up at least 400 of USU's total student population. Recent studies have aimed to determine what more can be done to reduce the difficulties many of these students experience, not only at college but in their day-to-day lives.

Veteran Resources and USU non-traditional students Program Coordinator Tony Flores said efforts are underway to better enumerate and track the progress of student-veterans — a group that includes active-duty soldiers, reservists, combat veterans and family members of those who have served in the U.S. Military.

"I know we have veterans that are utilizing benefits that are over the age of 50," Flores said. "Then we have some as young as 18 that are National Guard reservists."

The number of veterans enrolling at USU is on the rise, Flores said. There is higher unemployment among veterans in Utah than in other states, he said, along with an increasing rate of homeless veterans. Female veterans with dependents currently run the highest risk of being homeless in Utah, he added, so it's important to facilitate educational attainment for them, because "they have definitely earned it."

Currently, Flores said, numbers show that 45 percent of veterans who take advantage of GI Bill benefits and enroll as USU students actually graduate with some sort of degree. After returning home from deployment or combat situations, many of these students experience depression, social anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder or difficulty reintegrating into a civilian society.

While it's good to see a number of student-veterans make it to graduation, assistant professor of sociology Amy Bailey, whose past research has focused on U.S. veterans, said she has recently received a research grant and put together a team to further investigate these types of trends.

"I've seen some reports of some real tragic difficulties in reintegration," Bailey said, "or in failed efforts at reintegration. The military, frankly — and I think they've recognized this and have been in recent years taking some steps to try to do a better job — they were not doing a good job of identifying folks who are at risk of having some really rotten psychological outcomes."

The 'Crazy Veteran Category'

Coming back home after being deployed in combat zones such as Kosovo or Iraq is difficult, said USU biotechnology graduate student Dionna Scharton. Scharton, who graduated high school in 1998, said as a lab tech for the U.S. Army she moved around the



STUDENT-Veterans often face challenges when readjusting to civilian life. Some report having a hard time adapting socially, since few civilians can understand the experiences they've had at war. Some say they find themselves scanning rooftops for enemies or calculating escape routes from classrooms. CURTIS RIPPLINGER photo illustration



The Veterans Resource Office, part of USU's Access and Diversity Center, specializes in

U.S. frequently and eventually experienced combat in Iraq, in the mid-2000s.

helping military veterans adapt to civilian life and get the resources they need while at school.

CURTIS RIPPLINGER photo illustration

"It's like 'Groundhog Day.' It's boring most of the time, punctuated by moments of absolute terror or frenzy," Scharton said. "As a female, I didn't expect to get sent to a lot of the areas I was sent to. As far as the things I saw, I got shot at, got blown up, lost friends, lost people — other soldiers I didn't even know."

Scharton said it was especially difficult to provide assistance to "the bad guys," who would injure themselves attempting to improvise explosive devices meant to target U.S. forces, and then they would wander onto base seeking medical treatment.

Most veterans who go to college are above the traditional entry age for university students, which is 18-19. Like other student-veterans, Scharton, in her early 30s, said she is married and has started a family. Being non-traditional, working part-time and having a family — while dealing with PTSD — can sometimes make going to school a challenge, she said.

"Coming back's hard. You don't really feel like you identify with non-military people," Scharton said. "It's hard, too, because people don't understand. You don't want to get lumped into this crazy veteran category — the stereotypical Vietnam vet — you know, you don't want to turn into that, you don't want to give that image."

According to a report recently published by Rand Health, an organization that compiles data sets from surveys on various health-related issues, roughly 19 percent of the 1.6 million troops deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced some form of PTSD-related symptoms; "20 percent reported having suffered a probable traumatic brain injury while deployed."

Seeking help for PTSD

"Only about half of those who need treatment for PTSD and depression actually seek it," according to Rand.org, "and slightly more than half who receive treatment get care that meets minimum clinical standards.

After she left deployment and subsequently left the Army, Scharton said it was initially hard to seek help. She also said she was trained on how to identify the symptoms of PTSD but ignored the fact, for a while, that she was experiencing it.

Once she began to accept her condition and deal with it, she said she started to see improvements. Another USU student-veteran, Kurt Mantz, a 23-year-old senior majoring in psychology, said he too began to overcome PTSD by dealing with it and having a strong support network in place.

"Generally, when I first got back, like the first month," Mantz said, "the problem that I had then was just driving a vehicle, if I saw something related to (an improvised explosive device), then I'd kind of react like I would in Iraq."

He explained that in Iraq enemy combatants would hide roadside bombs in potholes and behind various anomalies in the road. Back home in Utah, he said he would have a psychological reaction to seeing potholes and mounds in the road.

Mantz also said he had a hard time being in large crowds of people in social situations, something he said he didn't have as much of a problem with before being stationed in Iraq.

"Then, over time, I just overcame it," Mantz said. "When I got back I did some brief sessions, just like follow up — kind of like some tips and techniques I can do (to overcome my anxiety)."

Both Mantz and Scharton explained that they experienced states of hyper-vigilance in which they would pay close attention to their surroundings in average social situations, such as scanning rooftops on or noting windows and exits in a classroom.

"Having to deal with PTSD while in college, it's another problem," Scharton said. "It's right up there with 'Where are you going to come up with the money if you don't have it?' I honestly don't know how I could've gotten through and graduated. Not just my husband, my family but the counselors, it's a whole group — a network of people — who made it possible."

Veterans Resources at USU

The Veterans Resource Office is a department within the USU Access and Diversity Center, which Flores said specializes in helping veterans access and utilize GI Bill benefits as well as find other resources available locally and on campus.

"One of our commitments is to be a one-stop shop," Flores said. "If somebody has a concern beyond just their educational benefits — they need support or resources from somewhere else — our goal is, they come here, we can't help them, we get them in direct contact with (someone) who can help them."

Fall 2009 is when the center originally materialized, and in 2010 the Access and Diversity Center came about as a way to aid non-traditional, minority and multicultural students by providing assistance in a variety of day-to-day things as well as crisis situations, he said.

"I thought I was OK when I came to USU," Scharton said, "I basically had — not a breakdown, but a definite — a crisis situation, that caused me to seek help from the USU counseling center. They were very helpful."

She also said she has found "invaluable" help from the Disability Resource Center, the Veterans Resource Center and the mobile vet center that visits campus.

Mantz said he plans to attend graduate school to earn a master's in behavioral analysis. He recently joined the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) peer-outreach team to aid fellow students who seek help on campus.

"As the United States, we certainly have plenty of experience having soldiers return from combat in other places," Bailey said. "There are all kinds of problems with domestic violence, with suicide, with substance abuse and — at least according to the research that Rand's done — only about half of the folks that have these kinds of symptoms get identified."

Veterans experience a perceived risk in seeking or asking for help with coping with post-combat, psychological difficulties, Bailey said, because they sometimes fear it will interfere with their military careers, or they might think people will think less of them. Others experiencing psychological difficulties simply feel like nobody will understand, Scharton said.

"For the support to work, they have to be familiar with what you're going through," Scharton said. "They have to recognize the signs, the symptoms and the steps that they need to take in helping you."

Scharton said members of the armed forces are trained to deal with problems on their own and are made to think they should exude a sense of bravado or toughness. It can be hard, at first, to seek help when it feels like people might not understand, she added.

"It's great that people say they support the soldiers," Scharton said, "but I really want them to support the soldiers. It's one thing to slap a magnetic yellow ribbon on your car, but you know, you let it get faded. What does that say? If you're going to be there for the soldiers, you know, be there for them."

"Student-veterans are a growing population on college campuses all around the country and USU is certainly no exception to that," Bailey said. "I think we need as a community to think long and hard — think critically about what we're going to do to best meet the needs of these students."

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