

## Student vets deal with PTSD in classrooms

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Upon his return home from the baking sands of the Iraqi desert, sophomore criminal justice major Ryan Hoffman didn't expect the memories of his experiences in overseas combat to follow him all the way into the classrooms of SRU.

"[Being in the Marines,] we got numerous classes on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder before, during and after deployment," Hoffman said. "We were screened when we got back and there were a lot of services offered, but I still can't enjoy [doing some things like] going down to the tavern—I just don't like being in big crowds like that anymore."

Hoffman, 24, is just one of over 300 student veterans who have served in the military, out of the roughly 9,000 graduate and undergraduate students who are currently enrolled at the university.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can not only affect a veteran's day-to-day life, but when they're attending college and trying to work towards earning a degree, it can affect their performance and attendance in class also.

Hoffman explains how PTSD might affect a student in the classroom.

"[The severity] really can vary," he said. "It depends on the individual, but it can be as simple as where they sit in the room—do they sit by the door, are they close to the window, always thinking about making a quick and strategic exit? It can affect [a student's] attention span, the effort that they put into the class and doing the work, if they're depressed."

Because veterans make up such a huge part of the SRU population, in celebration of Veterans' Day, and because of the services that they have done for their country, SRU President Robert Smith declared the week of Nov. 6 as Veterans' Appreciation Week.

Senior social work major Mike Crum, who served in the Marine Corps, was in charge of putting together various events during the honorary week for veterans.

Crum, 32, said he feels the educational value of the week was priceless.

"Besides just doing an event that says we appreciate our veterans, we have created an educational awareness, as well," said Crum.

Kimberly Specht, an Air Force veteran with PTSD, arrived on Tuesday with Patricia Lee Stotter, the co-sponsor of "Service: When Women Come Marching Home," a movie screened publicly for the first time at SRU on Nov. 8.

Specht openly described her own experience with PTSD and how she is currently coping with it.

"I've learned that it's a process that everybody goes through, but people are in different parts of the process at different times," Specht said. "You're always in the process though, moving backward and forward like an ocean tide. I've learned to recognize in other people just where they are."

After the film, Specht proudly introduced her service dog, Toby, and explained how he helps to control her condition.

"The dog creates a natural barrier between me and others in a crowd," she said. "They've got a very intuitive sense of smell."

He can smell my respiration and my perspiration, so he knows when I'm getting anxious and when and how to react."

While Specht told stories about the challenges that she faced with her service dog, Crum distinguished problems that students with PTSD may face when dealing with professors.

"Professors don't necessarily understand what the [veterans] go through," he said. "A veteran isn't a normal 18 to 24-year-old college student. They may have seen combat and they may be more mature, but I think SRU is becoming more aware of vets and their needs, which is why we do educational programming for faculty and staff and students."

Hoffman does not feel as though there are enough services for student veterans available at the school. Although there will be a veteran lounge in Eisenburg Classroom Building, according to Crum, and the counseling center is open to all students, sometimes more is needed.

"The closest place a student could go is all the way to Butler to the Veteran Hospital," Hoffman said. He suggested veteran support groups. "Some just need a support group of veterans and others that they can talk to, to help them through the hard times."

Specht said she could relate to those struggling with the disorder.

"There's nothing worse than having PTSD and having someone who can't relate to you try to treat you," she said.

When it comes to taking care of their veterans with PTSD, Crum said SRU has room to grow, but the university is on the right track.

"If you look at other schools and their vet services, some are better than SRU's and some aren't, but if you look at our university, I would say we're in the right spot for [change and development]," Crum said.