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## Here's what to watch out for with PTSD

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"It's residual stuff from the war. It will pass."

Former Marine Sgt. Stanley Laskowski can't count the number of times he said those words to himself as he tried to make sense of the anxiety, flashbacks and depression that plagued him upon his return from a tour of duty in Iraq in 2003.

Laskowski, 33, had heard the term post-traumatic stress disorder many times. But surely, that couldn't be what *he* had. That only afflicts weak-minded people, those looking to "get out of doing stuff," he thought.

It's a common perception among the general public and those serving in the military, leading many of those who are afflicted with the mental condition to avoid seeking treatment, say experts who treat the disorder.

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that up to 30 percent of Vietnam veterans and 20 percent of veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan currently suffer or will develop PTSD. Yet studies reveal that as many as two-thirds of those veterans are not receiving treatment, according to a report by Military Pathways, a nonprofit organization that provides mental health assessment services to military personnel.

"There is an element of pull yourself up by your bootstraps," said Dr. Joseph Boscarino, a social psychologist at the Center for Health Research at Geisinger Clinic in Danville, who is an expert in PTSD. "You have to soldier on and suck it up. It's part of the job and your identity, and you take pride in it."

For most people, symptoms of PTSD develop within a few months of the traumatic event, but the condition is also known to lie dormant for years, Boscarino said.

"A study of World Trade Center responders showed some people didn't develop PTSD until a year or two after," he said. "The memories go back into the unconscious and stay there. When there is a big change in your environment or you get more stress, it doesn't have to be traumatic stress, it manifests itself."

Laskowski, of Carbondale, noticed something was wrong shortly

after he finished his tour of duty in July 2003. He was extremely edgy around people and began experiencing nightmares.

As time went on, his symptoms got progressively worse, coming to a head in 2007 after he was discharged from the military and moved his family from South Carolina to the Scranton area.

The circumstances surrounding service in Iraq and Afghanistan, including multiple deployments, the inability to identify the enemy, lack of real safe zones and the inadvertent killing of innocent civilians, make veterans of those conflicts particularly prone to develop PTSD, researchers say.

Yet despite significant research, the mental health community still doesn't fully understand why some people who have experienced trauma develop the disorder, and others don't.

Research has shown those with pre-existing mental conditions, such as depression and substance abuse, and those who experienced trauma earlier in life or have a family history of mental illness are more prone to develop PTSD.

"We are finding that people who get post traumatic stress disorder tend to have a lot of risk factors before deployment. Their deployment triggers the onset of symptoms," Boscarino said.

In most cases, symptoms typically last for several months. But others will be afflicted for years, and possibly the rest of their lives.

Laskowski has had to come to terms with that reality.

He is continuing to receive counseling for his symptoms and has made significant progress. But he's been told it's unlikely he will ever fully recover.

"I had thought that, if I'm on my medications and do whatever the VA told me to do, eventually this is going to go away," he said.

"They set me straight that I'm probably going to have this, at least some form of it, for the rest of my life. It was a sobering moment."

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