



PTSD in Asian and Pacific Islanders: Veterans and Families 2 Written Video Transcript

Veterans suffering from PTSD often have symptoms of depression, including feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, an inability to enjoy activities or relationships, weight loss, appetite loss, sleep problems and suicidal thoughts. Panic attacks are also common. But with professional [00:00.20.00] treatment and support from family and friends, your life can get better. Now it's time to introduce our next Vietnam veteran, Melvin Rivera. Mel suffered terribly with PTSD. It took him 30 years and many tries until he finally got the help he needed. [00:00.40.00]

Instead of me going to work I just sit in my apartment. I sit in the corner and get, you know. I used to break down and cry. I mean I don't know why. But I used to get that depressive mood where I just wanted to kill myself. My mom kept telling me, you know, [00:01.00.00] "Why are you so cold-hearted?" I said, "Mom, I'm not cold hearted. I'm still the same person I am." Said, "No, ever since you came back from Vietnam you're so cold-hearted." I said, "Well, if you don't like it I don't have to come around." And I guess that hurt her. [00:01.20.00] So, I guess she called my brother.

But Mel's mother and brother would not give up. His brother convinced him to talk with a counselor at the vet center.

I stayed there two hours and we're talking about Vietnam, and I sat there and cried. And I finally realized that there is something wrong. [00:01.40.00] You know. And there was something that from Vietnam was bothering me from a long time ago and it was in the back of my mind. And every so often there's some things that triggers it. [00:02.00.00]

Mel said it was extremely difficult fighting a war where the enemy looked like himself. The only difference was the uniform. Mel shared one story in which he was told by his lieutenant to watch an enemy group of North Vietnamese prisoners of war.

You know, there was five of them. They all stood up [00:02.20.00] and they started walking. So, in Vietnamese I told them to stop. And [laughs] they said they told me, "No, no, no, we're all the same." I said, you know, "No, we're not."

It's been a long, tough road for Mel and for other Asian-American and Pacific Islander veterans [00:02.40.00] who served in Vietnam.

I have never been to the Vietnam Wall here at [2:49] But I've been to the moving wall in Colorado and the one that cam here. And you know it's sometime it's hard for me to go [00:03.00.00] because a couple of my friends are on there.



What helped me from the Vet center was the counseling, you know, learning how to control my temper and learning what triggers my PTSD, you know. [00:03.20.00] And from anger management that the Vet center set up for me I've learned how to control my anger at my occupation, because I deal with a lot of people. One thing that I found out with PTSD [00:03.40.00] is to accept the fact that there is something wrong with all Vietnam vets, especially the ones that went in combat. Even though we're called baby killers or murderers, you know, there's a time when we got to accept the fact and get out of the denial. [00:04.00.00] But if you want to sit, you know, sit around and mope and wait for handouts we're not going nowhere. You know, you always have to strive for something.

A young Filipino soldier like Mel not only struggled with surviving in the war zone but struggled with the additional hardships of fighting [00:04.20.00] an enemy who was culturally similar to himself. This became confusing to many Asian-American and Pacific Islander soldiers as their loyalty to the American government at times was tested by other American soldiers.

What happened to many Asian-American veterans in Vietnam was that they were being called [00:04.40.00] by the same term, gook, that American GIs used to refer to the Vietnamese. And this gook stereotype essentially portrayed Vietnamese and Asians in general as inferior and sub-human and I imagine led to atrocities committed against Vietnamese people including both civilians and military. [00:05.00.00]

Being exposed to some of the kinds of racist remarks that were said about the Vietnamese I sort of had an affinity to the Vietnamese because again, they would say to you same thing, and I wouldn't agree with that. And but also would feel [00:05.20.00] somewhat hurt that a lot of the American soldiers would dehumanize by calling them gooks, (things), slant eyes, and would make fun of them.

We can't go back and make what happened 30, 40 years ago okay. What we do need to do though [00:05.40.00] is try to find a way to sort of help the veterans address this issue. Because my experience has been that most veterans have had some kind of experience with bias or prejudice regardless of ethnicity and regardless of color.

Research psychologist (Chelsea Lu) has conducted a national study investigating [00:06.00.00] the impact of war on Asian-American veterans diagnosed with PTSD. Lu claims talking about racial issues is just as important as sharing your combat experience.

Regardless of whether you think the clinician does or doesn't understand these experiences, you should [00:06.20.00] talk about them. You should share them. Because the VA can work with you to try to help you with these problems and with the effects that these problems may have had with you and your family.

PTSD not only affects the individual but can have a huge [00:06.40.00] impact on the veteran's family. A constant sense of facing life threatening danger can lead veterans to



be emotionally distant, on edge and too protective. They may not be able to really pay attention or speak calmly. They may avoid responsibility.

Who are these people? [00:07.00.00]

Oh (basically) my lieutenant and myself.

Families often feel they're living in a war zone. Vietnam veteran Benjamin (Wyalama) and his family struggled for years until he was treated for PTSD. A native born Hawaiian, Ben lost his wife to cancer a few years ago.

At the time I didn't know [00:07.20.00] that I had PTSD. But I could not deal with life on the everyday schedule. I couldn't sleep. I had nightmares. I wasn't a very good person [00:07.40.00] to be with. I couldn't be around where a lot of people were at. I didn't trust people.

I was short-tempered. In a split second I can just be [00:08.00.00] on the worst side of me. And it was going on for too long that I had to do something to correct it. I was suicidal. I attempted suicide a couple times. I always thought about it. A lot of us have suffered, [00:08.20.00] especially during the Vietnam era when we were looked down upon, called baby killers. You have to (camouflage) yourself and be civilians coming off the airplane from Vietnam, pretending you're not soldiers. And I didn't like that. Because I was proud to be a soldier. [00:08.40.00]

As a Vietnam veteran Ben served for 30 years in the U.S. Army and eventually retired.

When the military sent us into combat and we come back from combat environment we get the debriefing of what we did and why we did and what we accomplished, etc., etc., etc. [00:09.00.00] And even before we go into combat we get a briefing of the objectives, the goals and the accomplishments, the whole nine yards. But when I retired one day I had the uniform, a few hours later I was in a civilian uniform and there was no debriefing. [00:09.20.00]

In some cases family members have been directly traumatized by the veteran's violent rage or by witnessing violence done to others. In other cases even though they were not directly exposed to trauma family members have to alter their entire way of living, feeling and thinking to adjust to the veteran's PTSD. Ben's daughters tell us that their father [00:09.40.00] was very strict and treated them like soldiers.

My military experience with my children was I think it was a little harsh at times. They were young, I was a young person. Didn't have really any guidelines to follow, book to go by, [00:10.00.00] how to raise a family.

I always knew my dad like that. My dad was in the military when I was born. So, they would know much more than I would. I'm the youngest one out of the seven girls and



there's my brother. So, my dad was going through I just that was just something normal. [00:10.20.00]

I think it affected a lot of us, all of us, because he was very controlling and we knew what was happening. I mean we didn't really know, we just seen him, you know, at times snapping because we weren't sure of what was happening in his mind. [00:10.40.00] He didn't tell us. We didn't sit down like this and talk stories with him, for him to release all that stress.

It was like every one of us had a problem with my dad. And I guess I was thinking about when my mom was sick and what she was going through with her cancer [00:11.00.00] and what my dad was going through with his problem. And just thinking about the things my mom and I shared together just before she died. And it's hard sometimes to keep the family together, and it has a lot to do with my dad. [00:11.20.00]

Ben finally had a place to share his grief and to get treatment. He was recommended for a workshop with other veterans going through similar problems related to their PTSD.

I'm a firm believer in group because I think it's safer in many cases for some veterans to talk about these experiences. [00:11.40.00] And I think if the group is structured in a way we're not passing judgment. What we're really trying to do is help the veteran look at how these feelings might be getting in the way of them sort of putting to rest some of the issues.

It had a lot of impact [00:12.00.00] on helping me to deal with life and dealing with people and be more tolerable and a little (softer) I guess. Kind of let things go instead of chasing [00:12.20.00] cars on the freeway and trying to run people over, having 19 different weapons that I had to protect myself, I don't know what from. And I got rid of all of that. It's not that it's going away, it's always there, it will never go away [00:12.40.00] until the day we die. But it's (idea) and the technique of controlling anger. And to me done a great job for me.

I think by going to this anger management it kind of made him in control of [00:13.00.00] what he had done to us. And he's more mellow and we like him a lot more now. [laughs] We don't know if because he's getting older. But I think he's opening up a little bit more.

And we stick with my dad. Whether he's right or wrong in a lot of stuff we still love him, [00:13.20.00] we still respect him. We understand him a little bit more. And I'm so glad with the VA.

And above all, I don't care who you are, what, Polynesians or Asian-American or any other veterans, you've got to have patience with VA. But I was very fortunate [00:13.40.00] that the time that I finally got help things turn up to be the better for my whole self and family. And I was fortunate that that took place.



You go ahead and rake the leaves. Not me.

As you saw in Ben's story, his family shared [00:14.00.00] in his pain and recovery. Together, you can heal as well. When you go for treatment bring back information to your family. And as family members, you may be invited to attend some sessions that will be helpful to you all.

Many families have been devastated by having a [00:14.20.00] member of their family having post-traumatic stress disorder. It's very difficult for them. Difficult for the children and definitely difficult for the spouse. And of course now these children are adults and have had their children, so now we have some exposure to the grandchildren. [00:14.40.00] I think it's important that the family, even if the veteran doesn't want to get assistance, that the family get some assistance so that they can understand what's going on with their loved one.

What can you expect in PTSD treatment? Most VA medical centers and vet centers have [00:15.00.00] PTSD specialists who are familiar with problems caused by battle trauma.

You're not reading things about the war before you go to sleep at night.

No, I'm not. [laughs]

They can provide veterans and their families with a thorough evaluation and recommendations for treatment. PTSD treatment may involve an evaluation to see if medication [00:15.20.00] would help, counseling and education to assist in coping with the stress of chronic medical problems, evaluation and treatment for alcohol or drug problems, educational classes for veterans and for families about trauma, PTSD and recovery, educational and support groups for dealing with anger, depression, anxiety [00:15.40.00] and stress, one to one therapy and supportive guidance and specialized PTSD treatment centers. Check with your counselor for locations.

You know, the providers might not look like you. And they might not come from the same culture. They also might not [00:16.00.00] even be veterans. But as you know as a person of color, you need to look at the person inside. And the only way you're going to be able to know that is to actually become acquainted with that person. Give them a chance, because they really do care. [00:16.20.00] But in order to understand you you're going to have to share, you're going to have to take that risk.

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