



## War On Many Fronts Written Video Transcript

[00:00.20.00] I am pleased you're watching this program on African-American veterans and post-traumatic stress disorder. After a number of years with the US Coast Guard I have seen the horrors of war and how they can [00:00.40.00] destroy the life of soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen, (coasties), and their families. You and your family may be suffering your own war at home. Living with someone with post-traumatic stress disorder can be difficult. Some veterans experience their pain physically. Others suffer depression or [00:01.00.00] experience uncontrolled rage because they don't know how to handle the war within. And many veterans have suffered in silence, avoiding treatment, being afraid to trust the system. But you are now in a caring place. The treatment providers here want to help you get better and heal from your [00:01.20.00] military experience. We have brought together African-American veterans and family to share their stories about how your life can improve. This program is just the beginning in helping you and your family understand PTSD and begin to heal from the war within. [00:01.40.00] [00:02.00.00]

The war is over, come home. But how many [00:02.20.00] of you feel like you're still living in a war zone? Many veterans of all backgrounds develop post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, as a result of their traumatic military experiences.

War is hell. Hell. And the remnants of war [00:02.40.00] sticks in your mind forever. It don't go away.

Stress will kill you and you can't keep all of that bottled up, because it just leads to other things.

PTSD is a group of symptoms that people commonly experience after suffering or witnessing a traumatic event. It cuts across [00:03.00.00] all groups of people in all walks of life in all areas of our country, so being diagnosed with PTSD is nothing to be ashamed of.

I guess I learned from WWII how to suck it in and that's the worst thing you can do.

That's exactly what I had, PTSD. And I realized, of course, that I had been suffering with it [00:03.20.00] for years as a result of all of the unusual treatment that I had received.

It is not a sign of weakness. PTSD can be thought of as a normal reaction to an abnormal event.



And a lot of veterans just drop out from society and you find a lot [00:03.40.00] of them out on the street, you know, and living homeless veterans, you know.

This program is designed to assist veterans, their family members and loved ones whose lives have been impacted by post-traumatic stress disorder. We want to help you understand PTSD by sharing stories of other African-American veterans [00:04.00.00] who are getting help for their PTSD. We'll also explore the symptoms of PTSD and what to expect in treatment. We must remember African-Americans' valiant efforts in our nation's military history from pre-colonial times to the present day. Despite their significant contributions [00:04.20.00] to society and to the military their bravery and loyalty has not always been recognized and appreciated.

African-Americans have always viewed themselves as fighting on two fronts, that they were fighting for justice abroad and fighting for justice at home. The irony was, [00:04.40.00] for African-American vets, is they were often fighting for the freedoms of others abroad which they themselves did not experience at home. My father talks to me about German prisoners who were allowed to go into the Officer's Club when he was not allowed to go into the Officer's Club himself.

In fact, [00:05.00.00] African-American veterans may be understood as having to fight a war on many fronts. Blacks have had to fight their way in the military. Many African-Americans have grown up in poverty and this environment adds to stress. We must also keep in mind each veteran's personal history, hardship, and duress. [00:05.20.00] It's important to understand each veteran's military experiences, especially those that were stressful or traumatic. We must also consider each veteran's struggle with his own PTSD. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a war many veterans experience. In fact, PTSD is the [00:05.40.00] third most common problem for our nation's veterans who access VA services. But many African-Americans avoid treatment. It's common for PTSD vets to feel that they must keep things private and that they cannot trust the government for help. In some cases, African-Americans may experience [00:06.00.00] these feelings even more intensely. It took Aaron, a 31 year veteran of three wars, nearly 60 years to seek help. Aaron served in World War II, the Korean, and Vietnam Wars. But it was his watching the Iraq War on TV that [00:06.20.00] triggered his war memories. Finally, at age 81, Aaron came to the VA when his symptoms of PTSD felt overwhelming.

I've always been a very personal, private person. And [00:06.40.00] a lot of things would hurt and I guess I learned from World War II how to suck it in and that's the worst thing you can do. I guess I didn't want to admit that I really needed help and I was going to do everything I could to keep from asking the government [00:07.00.00] for help.

That is very common for African-Americans to feel they must keep things private and cannot trust the government for help. They also fear they'll be seen as weak or crazy, then locked away in some institution. But times have changed.



The VA, especially, is more able to [00:07.20.00] understand the issues (that) African-American vets, to diagnose their problems more accurately and to provide better treatment. From past issues when people came into the hospital in the '70s there was a great deal of misdiagnosis and then there was a great deal of mistrust about what would happen if you came in the hospital. [00:07.40.00]

Aaron has just begun treatment for PTSD and advises other vets not to wait so long and to be open to asking for help.

Take advantage of the treatment. Cooperate, because eventually you're going to need it. I [00:08.00.00] experienced something in the last month that I never thought that would happen to me. I relived the Iraq War and I couldn't help [00:08.20.00] it. It just, it didn't happen during the Gulf War, but I relived every day of it. And that's why I would encourage them to get—prepare yourself for this, because eventually it will happen. And suicide is not the answer. [00:08.40.00]

If left untreated, PTSD can have a devastating effect on your body. It's not uncommon for veterans with PTSD to try many different methods to remedy their physical and emotional symptoms. [00:09.00.00] Going to a primary care doctor for treatment of physical problems, such as pain, high blood pressure, panic attacks, or sleep problems is a common choice. Other options may include seeking help for emotional and behavioral symptoms from a psychologist or psychiatrist or your religious or community leaders. [00:09.20.00] There's no one best remedy for treating PTSD.

Historically, African-American veterans in our culture it's been kind of frowned upon airing your dirty laundry in public, especially to a stranger. Historically, African-American veterans have gone to [00:09.40.00] people in the community, such as their minister.

You have a right and responsibility to take care of yourselves. The VA is just an instrument for you to use and it's your right to use. So, you need to come if you feel that you're having problems, whether it's with sleep or you're feeling [00:10.00.00] like you get angry too quickly or you're feeling you're withdrawing from the family, you just feel uncomfortable in large crowds, don't feel like you want to do things. Then those are little red flags.

PTSD requires a history of exposure to or witnessing a traumatic event. In your combat, you may have experienced or witnessed [00:10.20.00] something life threatening. Or you may have experienced serious physical injury to yourself or others and your response at the time was one of intense fear, horror, or helplessness. Extremely stressful or traumatic military experiences include walking point, [00:10.40.00] firefights, being wounded, losing body parts or seeing a buddy severely injured or dead. Other traumatic stresses can include (grave) registration duty, POW status, sexual assault, and severe sexual harassment. However, not all stressful experiences lead to PTSD. [00:11.00.00] The first



group has to do with re-experiencing the trauma. You may have intrusive memories of the traumatic event or repeated dreams of the trauma.

Frequently, veterans will have flashbacks where they literally re-experience things as if they're happening almost for the first time. [00:11.20.00] And they happen now, 20, 30 years after the traumatic event occurred. This makes the veterans feel like they're losing control, like they're going crazy.

The second group has to do with avoiding reminders of the trauma, avoiding conversation, thought, feelings about the trauma, or avoiding situations or places [00:11.40.00] that may remind you of the traumatic event. The third group has to do with symptoms of increased arousal. For example, problems falling asleep, staying asleep, problems concentrating, or being easily startled and these symptoms need to occur for at least a month following the event.

These are all things that are very, very [00:12.00.00] troublesome for a family. To have a family member who's easily angered, to have a family member that frequently wants to go off by themselves and perhaps the most devastating thing is to have a family member that really doesn't want to feel anything. [00:12.20.00]

PTSD not only affects the individual but can have an impact on a veteran's family. Often family members have to alter their entire way of living to adjust to a veteran's PTSD. Korean War veteran James and [00:12.40.00] his wife Bertha and children have suffered for years because of James' military experience.

Our children had problems with James because he was so (strict) and we had to adjust to that. We wasn't used to that. He wanted everything to be just so. At nighttime he was [00:13.00.00] up all night, up and down. He has mood swings. And one night, he was sleeping. I guess he was fighting. I don't know what he was doing. Making a lot of groaning noise. And I tried to wake him and got punched in the face. [laughs] So, now when I attempt to wake him I get on the far side of the bed and reach over. [00:13.20.00]

James says he didn't realize he had post-traumatic stress disorder until a fellow vet told him about PTSD. So, he asked to be tested. He was accepted into the VA program and for the past three years, James has been coming for treatment.

The treatment that I receive here with the group sessions [00:13.40.00] as well as the medication and the sessions with the doctors have helped me to a point that I'm almost like a different person because I accepted it.

Oh, life is much better. He sleeps better at night. He's not quite as moody. [00:14.00.00] He's better but he still has some of those problems. And I can talk to him a little more and get a better answer without him going off on me. [laughs]

James and Bertha agree PTSD treatment saved their marriage.



My life has really changed [00:14.20.00] because it's given me a better stability and being able to concentrate and work with others. At my church I'm a deacon now and highly respected by even the kids. [00:14.40.00]

As we've learned from veterans and family members, PTSD can be devastating. However, there is hope. Life can improve. Your symptoms of PTSD can be controlled and managed. As part of treatment, a doctor may prescribe medication [00:15.00.00] that will help relieve your symptoms.

There's no question that what we have to offer, speaking of psychopharmacologic treatment, is world's ahead of, say, 20 or 30 years ago which in many of these patients is when they first began to show symptoms. The antidepressants are frequently prescribed for patients [00:15.20.00] with PTSD, particularly with depression. However, we have a fair amount of data that even without depression antidepressants can be helpful with the symptoms of PTSD. It's very common to be on more than one medicine and they shouldn't—families should not take that as a sign that anything is desperate. [00:15.40.00]

Without medical or psychological intervention, veterans with PTSD often numb their emotional pain by using street drugs or alcohol. This is a short term fix and usually leads to more problems. Vietnam veteran Aaron dulled his pain this way until he found help through the VA and his local Vet Center.

And [00:16.00.00] a lot of veterans just drop out from society and you find a lot of them out on the street, you know, living homeless veterans, you know. But fortunately, I never had to go that far with it.

Aaron says his wife saved him from hitting bottom. He found out about the PTSD treatment program through her friend, who experienced a [00:16.20.00] traumatic event. Like so many African-American vets, he had avoided going to the VA.

Attitude inside the facility is far better today than it was 30 years ago, you know. And we all felt like we were being discriminated against for being Vietnam veterans, [00:16.40.00] you know, and just being black just was another problem, you know. But it was almost as if, you know, because we didn't win the war we shouldn't be treated here, you know.

Aaron has been working nights at the Postal Service for many years. He finds this one of the ways in which he copes [00:17.00.00] with his PTSD.

My life has changed since I've started treatment and my biggest change is that I don't use alcohol to go to sleep. I use medication now, you know. And I don't use drugs to stay awake, you know. [00:17.20.00] I just accept the fact that, hey, I'm going to be awake all the time because I know I have a sleep disorder. You know, and it's a difference when



you know what your problem is as compared to when you're going through it not knowing, you know, and it's easier to deal with it. I wish I could say something that needs to be done as [00:17.40.00] far as treatment of the Vietnam veterans, you know, and Vietnam African-American veterans I can see that the VA hospital is more than just sensitive towards the need. You know, they are applying themselves in more ways than I can imagine now.

Aaron has also found time to write a book about his Vietnam experience. After years of planning [00:18.00.00] and talking about it, he finally completed his book this year.

The book is about war, peace, love, hate, comedy, tragedy, race, religion, politics, sex, drugs, and rock and roll. And I just hope I can just reach everybody with it.  
[00:18.20.00]

You've seen how other veterans and families have changed their lives through PTSD treatment. So what can you expect? Most VA Medical Centers and Vet Centers have PTSD specialists who are familiar with problems caused by military trauma. They can provide veterans with a thorough evaluation [00:18.40.00] and recommendations for treatment. PTSD treatment may involve an evaluation of symptoms to determine the best course of treatment, combinations of medication, individual counseling, or group therapy, counseling and education to assist in coping with chronic medical problems, evaluation [00:19.00.00] and treatment for alcohol and drug problems, educational classes for veterans and for families about trauma, PTSD, and recovery, educational and support groups for dealing with anger, depression, anxiety and stress, one on one therapy and supportive guidance, and specialized [00:19.20.00] PTSD treatment centers. Check with your counselor for locations. Black female veterans with PTSD often face even greater challenges.

And I wasn't sure if they weren't used to dealing with females and I just happened to be an African-American female [00:19.40.00] or if it was just that they were infantry officers. I don't—I'm not certain. But I did receive some unfair treatment.

(Terry), a Marine and mother of two, suffered in silence for many years after her Desert Storm experiences.

After I was activated [00:20.00.00] —I started out as a reservist—when I was activated, I was told I would be attached to a graves and registration unit.

Graves registration duties include the gruesome task of sifting through bodies and body parts. These experiences in Desert Storm contributed to (Terry's) frequent nightmares. [00:20.20.00] Then a year later, (Terry) was sexually assaulted and harassed by a commanding officer.



Before my experience in Desert Storm, I believe I would have been able to handle it and never have gotten in that situation. But afterwards, I just I didn't have it in me [00:20.40.00] to stop that situation.

Before getting treatment for PTSD, (Terry's) symptoms caused problems not only for herself, but for her two small children.

When I was going through these difficult times, my children, I think [00:21.00.00] they suffered a bit as far as not being able to go outside and play. I'm constantly having migraines or not feeling well but I try to focus on them.

(Terry) was recommended for PTSD treatment [00:21.20.00] this past year because her primary care doctor asked the right questions. So, veterans and family members, tell your doctor about your physical and emotional symptoms and any problems you think might be related to PTSD.

How my life has changed now that I've been in treatment? [00:21.40.00] Wow. [laughs] I get out more. I'm not afraid to go to the mall and feel that people are talking about me. My children are loving it. We get out. We go to the movies. We do family [00:22.00.00] dinner night, family game night. I get out. I feel like a big burden has been lifted. God was answering my prayers and I do believe that. I just happened to be—I was led to the right place at the right time to get what I needed. And [00:22.20.00] if there's anything I can do to spread the word, then I'm here. I'm free.

Many women, generally, are hesitant about coming into the VA system. First of all, [00:22.40.00] they've all had the experience of being in a male dominated environment being in the military. And for the most part that experience has not been a positive one. Those feelings about the military get transferred to their thoughts about what it would be like to seek services at the VA. [00:23.00.00] In fact, many of the female veterans that come into our facility carry with them the diagnosis of major depression and may have had that diagnosis prior to being diagnosed with PTSD because so many of the women have either not shared the details of their trauma or [00:23.20.00] it was overlooked.

Another thing to keep in mind in treatment as an African-American veteran is to talk about racial issues. This can be as important as sharing your combat experiences.

I was told in no uncertain terms (again), "You're nothing but a—you're still a nigger."

Whether you think the clinician does or doesn't understand these experiences, [00:23.40.00] you should share them. Your treatment provider can work with you to help solve these problems.

The treatment is more sophisticated. There's a better cultural understanding of the needs of African-American veterans and there's more sensitivity to the cultural and civil rights



issues that many veterans have faced in society [00:24.00.00] and more of a need to be able to empower you to be able to talk about the issues that are important for you.

I would say for a veteran that has PTSD [00:24.20.00] to get some help as soon as possible because the breaking point, you never know when it is. And I'll suggest that the family also get involved in the therapy, also, with the veteran. The PTSD staff is a very wonderful, very caring [00:24.40.00] and very professional staff. And without them I don't think I would have made it.

Group therapy is often a part of treatment for PTSD and may involve family members. In groups, veterans get a chance to talk about their symptoms and discuss [00:25.00.00] the effect PTSD has on them and their family members. Veterans also gain support, a better understanding of PTSD, themselves, and each other.

Before treatment, I think I was my worst nightmare [00:25.20.00] to my family. To myself, I felt like everything was okay. They just really didn't understand me and I couldn't put it into words or explain how I was feeling. And so it made things very, very difficult.

(What I like) to say is when I came in to begin treatment the biggest thing for me [00:25.40.00] was denial. That I didn't have it that bad. It was for other people, the other guys. They had it that bad. (I guess I had) a little problem.

I think the most difficult time was when our son was getting in trouble at school. And I'm sure it was going through [00:26.00.00] the teenage years he was having trouble anyway. But because of the troubles at home also it just compounded the problem.

Sometimes you do things wrong and that's understandable. But for like my father it used to be like a huge big thing. "Oh, no, you're terrible. You can't do anything. [00:26.20.00] You know, you're useless." So, sometimes it's like no matter what you do it's never good enough.

When I did speak, you know, they knew that I meant what I was saying because I kind of like, spoke like a drill instructor, you know, and I'd just give them orders.

At the school, it was me [00:26.40.00] going to the school all the time. It wasn't him. If you tried to tell him, he'd get angry. (What you?) It was hard to talk to him. But he's, like I said, he's changed a little. It's helping.

Well, with Harry and I, he's been extremely good [00:27.00.00] throughout the time since our kids were born. He's been a very compassionate father. Had a lot of patience with them. [laughs] He just didn't have any patience with me. I was seemingly the thorn in his side. Didn't know what to say, didn't know how to say it. Still don't know, to a great degree, [00:27.20.00] what to say and how to say it to him without rubbing him the wrong way. And I mean, I've even asked that question.



(The beast is) post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD for short. But when you begin to understand it, then I have an answer. Before, I didn't have an answer. I didn't have anybody to tell me what was wrong with me [00:27.40.00] or how to fix me. It's just me against the world. And my family is the world. They become, physically, spiritually, mentally, my enemy.

Don't give up. There is hope. You know, you need to go to the VA Center nearest to you and ask for help. [00:28.00.00] Don't think that there isn't help out there.

I think the biggest value that comes from families coming to PTSD meetings together and therapy is that they realized that they're not—especially if it's wives—they realize that they're not the only woman that's going through the situation. [00:28.20.00]

I wear this cap that says I'm a Vietnam veteran. I have another cap that I wear that says I'm a Vietnam veteran. The reason I wear those caps is because I want a Vietnam veteran to recognize it and ask me if I've been to Vietnam. And then I will [00:28.40.00] start telling him things about post-traumatic stress disorder that he (have). And he will say, "Man, how do you know that much about me?" And I'll say, "I don't know nothing about you. I just know about PTSD."

I think PTSD is something like a—it's an invisible sickness that we're unaware of. And just like [00:29.00.00] the common cold, we really don't know how much damage it really does to us. If I have the cold, man, I spread that to my wife, my children. All of us become contaminated and affected by it.

This video is extremely important to the VA because in our mission it's to serve our veterans who have given their all. [00:29.20.00] They've been asked to do the unthinkable and asked to put their life on the lines, regardless of what their job was during the time they served. It is our responsibility to come forward and provide the kinds of services, the kind of healthcare that they were promised. And [00:29.40.00] that includes seeing people as individuals, because they are.

The veterans and family members featured in this video shared their thoughts and memories with you in the hope that you might benefit from their experiences. Some of the main points that we heard were post-traumatic stress disorder [00:30.00.00] has nothing to do with intelligence or your racial, ethnic, or cultural background. PTSD symptoms not only cause distress in the lives of veterans but in the lives of their family members and loved ones. Sometimes you may see a counselor for individual sessions and get extra support and guidance. Your treatment provider [00:30.20.00] may recommend the full assessment to see if medication or psychotherapy may help relieve some of your symptoms. Common symptoms of PTSD include nightmares, sleeplessness, irritability, avoidances, heightened startle response, difficulties with concentrating and memory [00:30.40.00] and memories of traumatic events. Other common related symptoms include depression, anxiety, panic attacks, substance abuse,



chronic pain and medical problems. Your counselor will probably want to refer you for a physical exam or if you see a primary care physician first he may refer [00:31.00.00] you for a PTSD evaluation. You may also be invited to join group sessions with other veterans going through similar issues. With your consent, your treatment provider may include your religious or community leaders in your treatment. And your family has an important role in helping you to heal the wounds [00:31.20.00] from PTSD. We're glad you're taking steps to reach out for help. Your life can improve. As you've seen, your family can take steps towards healing but it will take commitment and effort on your part. The VA Medical Centers, Vet Centers and other organizations are available to help [00:31.40.00] you get the care you deserve. Congratulations on taking your first move toward freedom from the war inside. [00:32.00.00]

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