Wounded Spirits, Ailing Hearts 2
Written Video Transcript

[00:01.20.00] When I came home, after 18 months, came home—got off from San Francisco I didn't come home. I didn't come straight home. I just, [00:01.40.00] I just couldn't. There was something wrong, something missing.

I wanted to, you know, get in, you know, find out what's going on. But it was like he was keeping it to himself, you know, it was probably the war.

Well, when my son was born it made me look at reality. It [00:02.00.00] made me look at, I got a child, I decided I better do something about myself.

Sam Loudhawk is a Vietnam combat veteran and a member of the Lakota Nation. He and his wife, Angie, just described experiences that are common to many Native American families. [00:02.20.00] In one way or another we can trace the trouble in Sam Loudhawk's life to his tour of duty in Vietnam. The war haunts Sam and thousands of other men and women who have witnessed the horror of war with their own eyes. When soldiers return from war they often have changed in ways they don't understand [00:02.40.00] and can't explain to themselves or to the people they love. They suffer from profound disturbances. Those disturbances affect the way they think and feel and the way they behave. We call it post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Hello, [00:03.00.00] my name is (Spiro Manson). I direct the Division of American Indian and Alaskan Native Programs in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Colorado, Health Sciences Center. The general public is pretty familiar with post-traumatic stress disorder. But many American Indian and Alaskan Native people still don't know about this debilitating [00:03.20.00] illness. Not knowing has caused a lot of heartache and has damaged many lives. The Department of Veteran's Affairs created this educational documentary to explain what we've learned about PTSD. American Indian and Alaskan Natives are the special focus of our research and this particular effort. [00:03.40.00] I'd like to introduce my colleague, Peter Montgomery. He is a physician and psychiatrist. He also is the medical director of the PTSD Residential Rehabilitation Program at the Denver VA Medical Center and is himself a Vietnam veteran.

(Spiro), it's a pleasure [00:04.00.00] to be part of this documentary. We have some excellent information about the causes of PTSD and best of all we have information that will give you the means to deal with it. Our goal is to answer questions like what is PTSD, what causes it, is it treatable and where can you get help? [00:04.20.00] There's no question that PTSD is a serious problem for American Indian and Alaskan Native military veterans. But there is hope. And there are answers.

The truth is we're not alone. In this documentary you'll meet Native American men and women who have successfully overcome post-traumatic [00:04.40.00] stress disorder. They have done it with the help of their communities and agencies like the VA and they have accomplished this victory through their own faith and strength. Our challenge is to wipe away the stigma surrounding PTSD so that people who suffer will get help and once again become whole. [00:05.00.00] Native Americans who have suffered from PTSD help us tell this story. As you listen to them please listen for yourself or for someone you care about who might be suffering.

Although research for this project is focused on the Vietnam experience among Native Americans and draws mostly from that of men, [00:05.20.00] it applies to veterans of all eras, male and female.

Some people may not be aware of the long history and role of warfare in Native communities, or if they are may not appreciate the link between tradition [00:05.40.00] and modern day military service. American Indians and Alaskan Natives are certainly no strangers to war. Historically and culturally the Native American warrior tradition is powerful. The warrior holds an honored place in our families, communities and cultures. Pueblo, Eastern [00:06.00.00] Woodlands and Southeastern Tribes were part of the earliest conflicts in American history. The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 against the Spanish in New Mexico, the French and British American War of 1753 and the American Revolution were among them. Of course most of know about the long and bitter war between the Indian nations [00:06.20.00] and United States government throughout the 19th Century. Ironically, at the same time an estimated 20,000 American Indians fought in the Civil War on both sides. Throughout the 20th Century Native Americans have served in U.S. Armed Forces. There are detailed records of Native Americans in World War I, [00:06.40.00] World War II and every major and minor military conflict since.

In fact, statistics show that American Indians and Alaskan Natives are over-represented in the U.S. military. While Native Americans represent a relatively small segment of the population between 20% [00:07.00.00] and 30% of the men are military veterans. Now, that compares to approximately 10% of adult males who are veterans in the general population. The question is, Spiro, why do so many Native Americans join the military?

Peter, the grinding poverty is part of the reason. [00:07.20.00] It's certainly not news to Native Americans that unemployment in Indian country ranges from 30% to 80%. Military service offers young Native people the chance for a good education and jobs and for opportunities unavailable to them in their isolated, rural communities. Besides many young Native Americans [00:07.40.00] want to see the world.

I stayed home a lot and helped my mother with, you know, chores and things like this around the house. And I would go from that environment to boarding school which was somewhat also the same concept, I guess. It's sort of confined in some ways, [00:08.00.00] you know, they controlled a lot of things in my life. So, I think in terms of that maybe that's what led me to join the military.

But there is another reason why so many Native Americans join the service. It has roots in our culture and our family traditions, patriotism and our [00:08.20.00] sense of personal duty.

You've probably all heard the expression war is hell? Combat is a horrifying experience for people of all races. We've seen that dramatized in popular movies like Coming Home, [00:08.40.00] Born on the Fourth of July which told of the story of Vietnam veterans. And Stephen Spielberg's World War II movie, Saving Private Ryan, show the terror and the waste of combat. Vietnam was a modern war. Stateside one day, in rice paddies [00:09.00.00] the next. The U.S. mission was ill defined and the country deeply divided about American involvement in a foreign war. Many veterans remember their tour of duty in Vietnam as "the year I never slept." They say the jungles of Vietnam clung like a wet blanket they couldn't ever take off. [00:09.20.00] Their days were filled with long marches and near physical collapse. Ants, leeches, snakes, they were their constant companions. For Native Americans the Vietnam experience was a shock. The experience turned everything they believed in upside down.

After I got to boot camp it seemed like [00:09.40.00] everything that I had learned growing up was just reversed and it was hard to accept.

The brand of bigotry and racism Native American soldiers experienced in Vietnam [00:10.00.00] had a peculiar twist. Sometimes the racism was unintended but its effects were just the same.

The officers and people over there it's just they give you all kinds of names.

Like what?

Like Indian blankets, chief, I always hate that word chief. [00:10.20.00]

You know, (at the time I went into) military I didn't know, I didn't know nothing about being prejudiced or anything like that, you know. When I went to boot camp, first thing that you start throwing at me [00:10.40.00] started calling me a fucking Indian and blanket ass, you know, squaw man. I didn't what the hell that meant, you know. I went to school with blacks, Chicanos and whites and all I saw was a human being. I didn't see no color. [00:11.00.00]

And Peter, we know that Native Americans heard troubling echoes of their own personal history. Our great grandparents, even grandparents had once been subjugated by a colonizing army. And at times the U.S. mission in Vietnam was a reminder of this not so distant past.

I'm talking about the aftereffects [00:11.20.00] of trauma. And I believe that historically Native Americans have been traumatized way, way back. And it's an experience that's

been passed on [00:11.40.00] because from the experience there's behaviors and there's feelings and there's attitudes that came, I suppose, developed from that trauma from way back. And I just—it just kind of got passed on from one generation [00:12.00.00] to another.

And Native veterans, families and community members have talked with me about the collective memory of traumatic events that still haunt most Indian people. Wounded Knee, The Long Walk, The Trail of Tears and the Sand Creek Massacre, atrocities by the U.S. government [00:12.20.00] on Native communities. Those atrocities resonate in our lives even today. But the most disturbing aspect of Vietnam for Native Americans involved the conflict between a sense of duty to the military and their view of themselves as warriors. Native American culture sees the role of the warrior [00:12.40.00] as a lifelong position. The warrior must meet expectations of discipline, of responsibility and of leadership during combat and afterward. Yet those who have PTSD have all they can handle just getting through an ordinary day.

And so it was a difficult thing for us to [00:13.00.00] try to relate, try to relate our experience to what our beliefs are. Because a lot of times it didn't fit. What we believed in isn't what we participated in. I guess I just got real tired of doing [00:13.20.00] the PTSD shuffle and hiding and, and harboring these feelings of guilt and shame and anger and all these other things. And how could I have these things and be a [00:13.40.00] Lakota warrior? Things just did not add up, you know. Is this the way it's supposed to be for me? Is this the part of what the responsibility entails, you know? And what it amounted to was confusion.

Well, you're supposed to be brave and all that, [00:14.00.00] you know, and not to be afraid of anything, you know. And here I'm afraid all the time, you know. And I can't—I'm always afraid of things and those things have been happening, you know. [00:14.20.00] And I'm not supposed to think like that. But here I am, here I am like that, you know. And that makes me think that I'm just, you know, thinking of myself as less of—short of being a traditional man I'll say, you know. [00:14.40.00] Because my dad was very traditional and my grandfathers were very traditional. And I try to follow in their footsteps.

Peter, is combat trauma something new?

No. No it's not, (Spiro). In fact a famous Greek story teller named Homer wrote about it 2,500 years ago. His great poem called The Iliad reminds [00:15.00.00] me of stories I hear from my patients. During World War I, doctors called it shell shock. They used that term to describe stress reactions to combat. World War II they used the term traumatic war neurosis. By that time doctors had developed a better understanding of the psychological effects of combat. [00:15.20.00] In the Korean War the term was combat fatigue and showed a growing understanding of the connection between the mind and the body during and after combat. After Vietnam the doctors used the term combat stress reaction. Now we know and now understand that trauma is at the heart of all these,

whatever we [00:15.40.00] call it. It has nothing to do physical or moral weakness. Combat stress reaction is a human being's first response to war. It's not, however, PTSD.

Peter, when we hear the words disorder or [00:16.00.00] diagnosis some of us get pretty nervous. It sounds so serious. But there's nothing really mystical about diagnosis and disorders I've learned. Could you explain what those words mean?

Sure. The American Psychiatric Association developed this book called The Diagnostic and Statistical [00:16.20.00] Manual for Mental Disorders. Most people call it the DSM. We use it like a dictionary. The DSM defines groups of major mental disorders and their symptoms. For example, a mental disorder can cause something like disrupted sleep. A disability is something like a [00:16.40.00] serious trouble in a family or having trouble at work. We use the DSM as we gather information from a person. The end result of that process we call the diagnosis.

Peter, I've watched you and your colleagues at work with Indian veterans. How do you gather this information? That is how do you make a diagnosis? [00:17.00.00]

Spiro, we begin by asking in our own way about the stories, then we simply listen. And we must listen very carefully. In a sense, our patients are teachers and we are their students. When we listen to combat veterans they often share key information [00:17.20.00] which tells us whether they have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. It follows a definite pattern. PTSD patients always describe a traumatic event. They have witnessed a terrible death or they have been threatened with death or serious injury. During and after the trauma they felt intense [00:17.40.00] fear and they were horrified or they felt helpless.

One of the jobs I had as a river boat man which is a—was to go into areas and do policing work. We went into areas where they did different types of firefights, they did [00:18.00.00] bombings, napalm. And it was our job to pick up the—it was our job to pick the pieces. Sometimes there wasn't very many pieces to pick up. Feel very horrified, [00:18.20.00] feel guilty, I feel angry. It bothers me a lot. I can't seem to shake it, it's kind of one of those things that's always there.

I thought I was dead, you know. And I just started begging, you know, I [00:18.40.00] (looked in guys) and those three guys they were all armed. I begged them and I said [18:47] I'm sorry, you know, I'm sorry. And they kept on hitting me, you know. A guy had [00:19.00.00] a pistol to my head, you know. And another guy had a knife on me and, you know, I couldn't do anything.

The symptoms of PTSD begin with an adrenaline driven excitement, known as hyperarousal. [00:19.20.00] Then they have trouble concentrating. They can't sleep and they're very jumpy. Worst of all they often lose their tempers over what seems like nothing. And when that happens they are frightening.

The one thing that I have a very difficult time with is—again this is something that I [00:19.40.00] wasn't aware of until recently—is the adrenaline, adrenaline shot that comes with the startle. And it has gotten to a point where I, you know, it's—it bothers me. And then my heart rate is [00:20.00.00] just really going and started, you know, trembling and I don't want that anymore, you know. That's just—but it happens, sometimes. So, I don't know what to do about. I try my best to live with that I guess. [00:20.20.00] It's gotten to a point where I, I just don't want it anymore.

The last time, maybe a month ago, we were in church and I was—well I had my eyes closed praying when somebody, I guess the wind, [00:20.40.00] slammed the door. I mean I jumped. Or any time I would hear backfire, automobile backfire that really upsets me, [20:58] I don't know it's [00:21.00.00] sounds of somebody shooting at me or, you know, throwing a grenade, an explosion.

I had no control. I just, you know, short of going to jail, you know, I done some things that, you know, I feel kind of [00:21.20.00] guilty about, ashamed of, you know, because of anger, because I couldn't control it, because it had a high degree of importance at the time when in reality it was probably [00:21.40.00] not worth becoming angry over.

One time I was watching TV. I bought my son—he was only about four years old then, I bought him a small pistol. And I wasn't thinking or anything like that, you know, and I was watching TV. And it was all—I was really interested [00:22.00.00] in that TV. I guess he snuck up on me from the side and he stuck that pistol right in my—into my ear like that and he says, "You're under arrest dad," you know. And I just, I almost hit my son, you know. I just grabbed him like that. [00:22.20.00] I was thinking about setting up booby traps. You know, like cutting out two by fours and then putting nails in it and putting them around the windows and all that, you know. My oldest daughter, you know, she tells me, "Listen, dad, I'm tired of you," you know. [00:22.40.00] She said that's the reason why she moved away. She said, "Everything that startles you get mad and then you take it out on us, you know." Like if my wife drops a pan or something, you know, in the kitchen, you know, anything that drops, you know, [00:23.00.00] I get a startled reaction out of it. If I'm standing looking at it, you know, I can handle it. But if I don't, if I'm not aware of it, you know, it really—I try real hard to concentrate, you know,. When I read a book, [00:23.20.00] I know I'm reading it, but when I read one page and I think about it, what did I read? You know, so I got to go back and read it again, you know, in order to get it into the memory banks. And it's hard for me to read, you know, [00:23.40.00] a book. I love to read, you know, and all that. But, you know, it's just that I can't remember, you know, sometimes what I read, you know, because my mind wanders all the time.

I have a lot of concentration is a lot—it's difficult for me, you know. [00:24.00.00] When I was working, you know, like when (I running labs) I have a hard concentrating what I was doing, work and a lot of things like paper work, you know. Like taking a test, well my mind be [24:16], my mind be wandering around someplace, you know, instead

of taking the test, [00:24.20.00] you know. That's how I was like. I'm still the same way right now though.

These experiences result in what psychiatrists call psychological intrusions. Vietnam veterans call them flashbacks. They're very real and extremely scary. During a flashback [00:24.40.00] veterans will have terrible memories of the trauma. They may also have horrifying nightmares of the trauma. And often flashbacks will make them feel as though they were actually reliving what happened to them during the war.

I just can't remember a day that went by [00:25.00.00] without any kind of, you know, memory of Vietnam. Dreams where we are running through the jungle. I can actually feel tree bark stinging my face, [00:25.20.00] my arms as we're running. I can hear the gunfire behind us and the talking, sometimes laughter, of the VC [00:25.40.00] or NVA or whoever's out there. And they're chasing us and we're running and stumbling.

Oh, one night we were sleeping and all of a sudden, you know, I was slammed out of sleep because he, you know, grabbed me and threw me down. And I remember looking into his ... [00:26.00.00] into his eyes. They were like dead, no feeling, no—it's a horrible feeling like he was going to kill me or—and then he kind of snapped out of it. [00:26.20.00] But he was still kind of there. He was saying, you know, "Don't move." I guess the lamp beside our bed was shaped like he said one of the gooks, what they wore, the Charlies or whatever they're called. And so we moved them, we moved the lamps.

They don't seem to leave, [00:26.40.00] they kind of trick you a little. You work real hard and you think, oh I got this beat. Next time you let your guard down it's right there again. And every time it does that it get more confusing because, you know, all of us like to consider ourselves [00:27.00.00] normal and all of us like to consider ourselves educated and intelligent. And here's something I can't shake. And everything I've done seems to either bring it back worse or to still be there after 30 years, 35 years. I don't understand it. [00:27.20.00] A smell or a noise or something will set it off, I don't really know what. But when it happens it's live on whatever, it's ready, its there. And it causes a lot of pain and anxiety [00:27.40.00] in me because I can't control that. And I have family that I love. I have my wife and children and my mother and father and her mother and father. It's just very, very hard to control.

(One time) I'm watching TV or something, you know, [00:28.00.00] a part comes up where somebody's pointing a gun to somebody's head, that brings it back.

I looked out there and I saw the sun. Not looking at directly at the sun but the sun's reflection on the land [00:28.20.00] and I knew I was in Vietnam again. Because there was that orange, that orange sunshine that I was so used to over there. And it was a different—the same kind of heat that that radiated over there with the humidity. And I knew that [00:28.40.00] Vietnam was close again.

The human mind is a remarkable thing. When our mind can't protect our heart from a horrible experience it starts shutting out bad thoughts and feelings. The trouble is when our minds shuts out bad feelings it shuts out good feelings too and then we become [00:29.00.00] numb to any feelings at all.

I avoid crowds, like a movie or where there's a meeting. And I get edgy and just want to get out of there. And sometimes it's (for) entertainment (purposes) [00:29.20.00] for a gathering but I tell my wife, "No, I don't want to be in that crowd."

I think it's part of the thing of, you know, confronting the unknown or, you know, trying to avoid the unknown. But, you know, I don't—[00:29.40.00] I try my best to stay out of situations like that, you know.

All of this means they push people away, even the people that they love most. They lose interest in everything that once gave them joy. And because they are numb they can't express love or gratitude. [00:30.00.00] It's even hard for them to laugh anymore.

He never, ever said his feelings. He never told me his feelings or anything. It's just in the latter part of our years together that he started to talk about it.

Really didn't care whether they loved me or not, [00:30.20.00] so—or like me.

It just didn't seem to matter anymore, you know. There was no value to it and, and I just didn't feel comfortable out there, you know, with that kind of—you know, with the attitude of the people, you know. I was afraid, you know.

I felt completely alone. [00:30.40.00] I felt like everything I worked for was gone. And I felt empty, felt alone. And it hurt, it hurt a lot. It made me afraid, made me feel helpless, made me feel like I didn't belong anywhere.

I like to hug, you know, my kids and all, [00:31.00.00] I like to hug. But when I hug my kids it seems like just a barrier in between, you know. I can't get through that barrier. I try to get my feelings, you know, [00:31.20.00] I try to (think to them) to get my emotional feelings, you know, to hold them. I get that warm feeling but I don't get it, you know. And I think they sense it sometimes, you know.

Spiro, that's a simple explanation of the complicated human suffering we call PTSD. [00:31.40.00] Veterans of all wars, even men and women who haven't seen combat, can suffer from it. We know that Native American veterans suffer from PTSD with more frequency and in different ways than combat vets in other ethnic groups. And because of this study done by you and your colleagues, [00:32.00.00] now we understand why.

In late 1996 my colleagues and I at The National Center for American Indian and Alaskan Native Mental Health Research in Denver, Colorado, completed that major study. We interviewed 621 Vietnam [00:32.20.00] combat veterans in reservation

communities in the northern plains and southwest. In the study we found that 55% of southwest veterans and 59% of northern plains veterans experienced combat or war related trauma. This was much higher then the 42% of white veterans who reported similar [00:32.40.00] experiences in an earlier study. As you can see almost 27% of the southwest and 31% of the northern plains veterans suffered PTSD at the time they were interviewed by us. This was twice the rate reported among white Vietnam veterans. Forty five percent [00:33.00.00] of the southwest and 57% of the northern plains veterans in our study experienced PTSD at some time in their lives. Southwest veterans suffered PTSD at twice the rate of white veterans. Northern plains veterans were closer to three times that rate. [00:33.20.00] Combat-related trauma and PTSD are linked to other disorders and suicide. In the American Indian Vietnam Veterans Project at the time of interview over 70% of Native men abused or were dependant upon alcohol. This rate ranged [00:33.40.00] from two to six times greater than the rate in other groups of veterans. Lifetime rates of alcohol abuse and dependence mirrored a similar pattern. It was more than 80% among the Indian and Native veterans who participated in this project.

Spiro, why do these veterans abuse alcohol?

Well first [00:34.00.00] Peter, many people seem to think that heavy drinking is a part of being a soldier or a sailor or a marine. People in uniform often feel pressured to act as though drinking a lot is the mark of a real man. So, when our young soldiers return from military service they were used to hard drinking.

If you're a Green Beret [00:34.20.00] you have to outdrink the Marines. You have to outdrink the Navy and the Air Force and all the infantry units and everybody in between. You know, they've got the Army Rangers, they got Navy Seals, (Air Commandos), you have to be able to hold your own and drink them under the table. There's that expectation. And so you do that. Every time you do a good job you're given a drink. Every time you meet [00:34.40.00] a buddy he buys you a beer. Every time you go into the field you come back out and you're okay, you celebrate. You celebrate somebody's birthday, Christmas, national holidays, anything there's always a six pack of beer there. You go to a briefing, when it's over there's a big trash can full of beer iced down for you. Fourth of July celebrations [00:35.00.00] there's a big truckload of beer there. There's beer, beer, beer everywhere you go. I couldn't believe it, they thought of my drinking as a problem. Because it was a manly thing to do. It was a soldierly thing to do was to drink everybody else under the table. Of course I've been arrested a few times, but that was okay too. You go out there, you fight with the cops, you fight with the MPs, [00:35.20.00] its part of the lifestyle. You show what a big man you are to everybody else. And so its part of the routine and if you did that often enough you got to be a legend in your own time. And so if you're a living legend you have something that you have to maintain that image.

And [00:35.40.00] we also know alcohol is the drug of choice in Native communities. In recent history, alcohol has played a major part, unfortunately, in what it means to be sociable.

Indian veterans have told us that they drink to blunt pain and to dull unwanted memories.

I was still self-medicating and [00:36.00.00] letting all this shame and all this guilt and this fear and things like that get to me because I didn't want to—I didn't want to have to deal with it. I didn't want to be sober and have to try to deal with it.

Ever since 1971, you know, I [00:36.20.00] started. I drank, drank to forget a lot of things.

And even in sobriety it got worse. Without the medication, minus the medication and running around, you know, stark raving sober as I like to call it. [00:36.40.00] Stark raving sober presents a lot of problems even if you have this spiritual concept tied down. It still makes holes in it. It is that powerful. And I was always uncomfortable. In fact, I've lost [00:37.00.00] more jobs in sobriety than when I was drinking.

I did a lot of drinking just to forget all this. And I did a pretty good job of forgetting it. And I paid the price of course because I drank too much. The drinking I guess was—helped a lot because it would kill [00:37.20.00] some of the guilt feelings of being a survivor when all my men got hurt, you know, my buddy died. It was really bad. I kept wanting to die, I didn't want to live.

Peter, many Native cultures have social rules that discourage veterans from talking about the atrocities they've seen or their painful memories. [00:37.40.00] But, unfortunately, when Indian veterans drink those rules change. They can cry and curse about their wartime experiences and their terrible feelings. Their communities usually will blame that behavior on alcohol. For veterans who are in pain it seems like a good reason to drink. It's one of the few [00:38.00.00] times they feel free to unload to terror in their souls.

We lived by the rule of not talking about painful things or ugly things or we don't want to express ourselves or rock the boat. And so that's basically the way we handled it. No one talked about it. We were [00:38.20.00] just glad he was home and that was it, you know. Leave the rest over there, let's not talk about it. But there's a lot of things going on inside.

That was the only way I could tell my dad anything, you know, tell him about what it was really like over there. And he understood it, you know. [00:38.40.00] But I felt, you know, I—later on I felt real ashamed of it, you know, that I had to be—I had to tell some people under the influence of alcohol, you know.

Drinking too much can explain away one's failure to meet a community's expectations. It's easier to see, [00:39.00.00] easier to understand. Being alcoholic doesn't carry as much stigma as having a mental illness. And yet alcohol is like poison to someone who has PTSD.

I think there's still a lot of stigma attached to mental illnesses or having a mental disorder. In their minds they're thinking, "Well you're crazy or something if you—[00:39.20.00] I don't want to be seen as a crazy person, you know. So, therefore I don't want to go get help for this." And so there's still a stigma for this and I think this is one of the reasons why they don't get the help that they need.

We all know alcohol reduces inhibitions. Your study, Spiro, [00:39.40.00] showed that Native American veterans who suffer from PTSD often act out in rage. And when they mix alcohol with rage these veterans lose their jobs, abuse their loved ones and sink into other kinds of violence. It isn't long before they feel worthless. So, it's [00:40.00.00] no wonder that many Native American veterans push their families away. And that's a tragedy since families are one of the greatest resources of our culture and one of the few anchors in this storm of emotions.

It was almost like I wasn't—I don't know how to explain it, I wasn't there. I mean I was there but [00:40.20.00] he didn't really want to include me, like I wasn't part—I mean like he didn't want me to know what was wrong with him or—and so it was kind of strange like I was—I just drove somebody that I didn't even know to a hospital appointment. [00:40.40.00] And I kind of resented that because I was his wife and I thought I should know some of these things, but I didn't.

I was hurting so much inside and physically and mentally and spiritually. I had to find out, you know, what was inside of him, what was going on in his mind and in his body, [00:41.00.00] why he was just turning away from me. I could—I knew he loved me and I knew he loved the kids but for some reason there was that dark side.

Because of his pain he doesn't like to listen to a lot of noise. My kids turn on the radio, TV, he doesn't like that. [00:41.20.00] He'd rather be by himself, no noise, nothing. So, my family and I we drove away and spent some time somewhere else where my kids would—and he'd have free time. It's very hard to live with a person like him. [00:41.40.00]

Alcohol may dull the pain and memory of combat but as one Navaho veteran told me the cure was worse than the disease. Alcohol abuse and dependence mask the underlying symptoms of PTSD. If we ignore them the symptoms only get worse. It's no wonder that veterans suffer from [00:42.00.00] profound depression and many think about suicide. Indeed many have taken their own lives before we began the American Indian Vietnam Veterans Project.

Oh yeah, in my lifetime I attempted suicide several times too. You know, couldn't live with myself. And alcohol was probably the only [00:42.20.00] band aid, numbing agent, anything that could numb, numb my mind, you know.

It got so bad, you know, I just wanted to—that's where all these suicidal thoughts are coming to my mind and I just can't take this shit no more. And I want to [00:42.40.00] end it know, you know.

I have an uncle who committed suicide. And he's a Vietnam veteran. And it was so hard to know what help there was out there that could've like helped him and his family. And it was just so sad to [00:43.00.00] actually have my brother and sister experience that when their father left.

PTSD exaggerates the ordinary problems of daily life. This causes trouble with family and work, school and the law.

Within 28 years [00:43.20.00] I've had 21 jobs. And each one of them lasted approximately a year, on average a year. So, the rest of the time I was unemployed.

I struggled on a daily basis with my family to be a family. It's hard [00:43.40.00] to explain, it's just there.

My husband was kind of abusive to me, but never to his children. He never laid a hand on them or even used any harsh word on them or even throw them or anything like that. And I'm asking myself, "Why, you know, why are you like this to them, [00:44.00.00] you know, you're like a lamb but to me, you know, you expect just me to, you know, to be everything?" And then he says, "Well it takes me back to Vietnam, you know. Over there they used the kids, the families, you know, to run behind and here I'm not going to do that." [00:44.20.00]

Combat exposure is the predominant cause of PTSD among Vietnam veterans. But other things can influence how severe it may become and how long it lasts. Peter, can you share some examples from your clinical experience?

Of course. The Indian and Native service men I've treated frequently mentioned family [00:44.40.00] and community support as one of these key elements.

My wife had a lot to do with it. She encouraged me to start attending church, so we did. And the power of prayer start working. [00:45.00.00]

My kids, you know, they kind of helped me out to, you know, not to drink, and told me not to drink, you know. So, I think about more of my kids, you know, that's why I don't drink, you know. I wanted to stay with my wife and my kids, you know. So, that's why mostly I stay away from [00:45.20.00] all of my drinking.

And I guess I was just there for him all the way. No matter how far he tried to get away from me I was always there with the kids. And he knew I was strong for him so he came back.

On one hand, some Native families found the Vietnam more difficult to understand for it did not appear to [00:45.40.00] directly threaten their lives or their well-being. Few knew how to ask about their son's or their husband's or their friend's experience overseas. After they returned home this frustrated veterans because they felt no one cared about them. PTSD often cause people to isolate themselves. [00:46.00.00] They have unpredictable behavior and terrible fits of anger. We know patients who have turned away even the most sincere offers of help and understanding from their families and their friends.

My anger just got out of control. [00:46.20.00] I've hurt people, even my own relatives. And all I have to show for it is, I guess physically is a beat up body and some of my own relatives [00:46.40.00] won't even talk to me to this day because of the anger during the drinking.

I was angry all the time. I don't know why. When I came back from the service—I mean Vietnam, I had that anger all the time, you know, every day. I don't know what's wrong. I don't know why [00:47.00.00] I was angry for, you know. (Soon) my wife and my children notice it, you know, I was always angry. (From there) my family didn't kind of don't bother me, they just stay away from me, you know. This, I have a hard life with my family, you know, just given all this [00:47.20.00] anger, you know.

But there is help and there is hope. Many Indian and Native veterans have broken this terrible cycle with the help of family, their culture and resources in their communities.

I think it's really important for a veteran that if they have these feelings that they're holding back on [00:47.40.00] that they have to talk about it to somebody. And usually the best people are their loved ones, their spouse, their family, relatives. They should not hold back. This is not good for them, it's not healthy for them, it's not healthy for the families. Somehow they have to get over [00:48.00.00] this and begin to trust, you know, that these people do—their families care about them, want them to be happy.

All the strengths I had was not to leave him, not to let him be walking on the road or [00:48.20.00] not to mistreat him, but help him. Because we have a lot of love for him. That was my strength.

Native American families and communities have found ways to reach their veterans often through longstanding ceremony that honors their [00:48.40.00] sacrifice and accomplishments.

My family and I we get together and we talk about, let's have a prayer done in Navajo traditional way, not enemy way. Or either have a blessing way or have some kind of [00:49.00.00] (singing) done so that would help him. And he goes along with us.

We know that Native American veterans face enormous challenges in getting care for PTSD and related problems. VA hospitals [00:49.20.00] and clinics are often hundreds of miles away. During the American Indian Vietnam Veterans Project we paid careful attention to the nature and the extent of the participant's use of VA, IHS and other private providers. This included state and private hospitals, treatment centers or clinics and private physicians. [00:49.40.00] And we found that veterans were more likely to seek help for physical problems than to get treatment or alcohol or drug abuse or for mental health problems. Yet Native American veterans are entitled to this care. And it can make a big difference in their lives and the lives of their families. [00:50.00.00] The vast majority of Indian veterans who sought care from the VA in our study felt that the treatment they received was good or excellent for physical as well as alcohol, drug and mental health problems. Many, though fewer, of these veterans felt the same way about IHS services. Our challenge today is to reduce barriers [00:50.20.00] to care or to figure ways around them because there's no doubt that Indian veterans benefit from help once they get it.

After I took treatment I really became aware of a lot issues and a lot of things that had been plaguing me. Things that I didn't understand [00:50.40.00] I had a better knowledge and better understanding of some of these things.

Since I've been seeing the VA and learning more about my condition, you know, that light has turned into a tunnel. And now I know there's a [00:51.00.00] direction. And to me that's satisfying. It takes away the anxieties but it doesn't take the fears yet.

When my wife, you know, told me to—"You need help," you know, that's when I kind of noticed myself. I saw that I need help. Then when I came into [00:51.20.00] the VA hospital here [51:24] and then I went through this PTSD process, you know, that really helps me out, you know. Sort of like it changed my whole life, you know. They give me some tools to work with it, how to help myself. So that's really helped me out. [00:51.40.00]

But I did find that if I talk about it, if I can get it out, if I can externalize it, if I can just focus on that one most traumatic event I can talk about it and focus on that then I can learn a lot about it and be able to deal with it and in the process I can deal with all the other problems.

As you know, [00:52.00.00] our traditions include everything from diagnostic and herbal medicine to elaborate therapeutic practices. Prayer and ceremony tap the strength within the Indian family, Indian communities and our creator. And we've learned many Native American veterans draw upon these resources, on these sources of resiliency [00:52.20.00] to find the ultimate cause and cure of their illness.

My cultural identity I think is particularly important in the fact that I'm here today and I still have that, I still [00:52.40.00] hold that as something that's a treasure and part of my identity.

Native American church, you know, I—it helped me stay away from drinking, you know. I was medicating myself with alcohol [00:53.00.00] and it helped me stay away from that. And it put me back on the right road for, you know, for a while.

Then the whole restoration process in that (beauty way) setting [00:53.20.00] ceremony is one experience that restores that harmony back to where you can operate again within the four mountains here on Navajo and be able to continue where you had left off. [00:53.40.00]

For along time mainstream American medicine assumed traditional Native healing was in direct competition with it. We have learned that veterans seek help of both kinds based on its availability and their preferences.

For the first time, the VA has recognized the value and power of traditional Native [00:54.00.00] healing practices. One of the most dramatic developments in the VA is spelled out in an April 1998 Memorandum of Agreement between the VHA and the Navajo nation. The VA now reimburses for traditional tribal ceremonials performed on behalf of their veterans. [00:54.20.00] These are exciting times. Tribes value their veterans and are developing local programs. Scarce, yet desperately needed resources are being put into housing, emergency assistance, travel reimbursement and burial benefits for their veterans. [00:54.40.00] Plus, they're providing information, referral, recognition and advocacy, which are just as important.

With the Navajo Nation veterans, you know, there's always been respect there and honor.

The most important thing that we [00:55.00.00] accomplished as a committee was to hammer out the wording for the Memorandum of Understanding between the veterans, tribal veterans, the VA and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. And that because it allowed Indian veterans who lived on trust land [00:55.20.00] to borrow money from the VA to put a home on trust land.

The VA has undergone major changes in the last few years. It is emphasizing more patient oriented care and is focusing on quality. This new VA seeks to be more responsive to the needs of American Indian and Alaskan Native [00:55.40.00] veterans. And the VA is working harder than ever to make sure you know about the services and the benefits and can access them.

There are new ventures in telemedicine which were tried first in Indian country. They show amazing possibilities for linking veterans in remote areas [00:56.00.00] to needed resources. Specialized PTSD treatment within the VA, like Dr. Montgomery's, is critical

to stabilizing many Native veterans. These programs offer better access and treatment that respects our culture.

They suggested the PTSD Treatment Center in California. [00:56.20.00] So, they took three months [56:25] three months, well, that's a long time. And I wonder, you know, is it like a dormitory or a barracks. I kind of picture, you know, barracks where [00:56.40.00] bunks are lined up on each side of a wall and kind of run like the military. When I came here the VA Medical Center, not like (the pictures at all), the vision, in your vision. So, [00:57.00.00] when I got here I knew I would get help.

If you come to a program like this one here, you know, me, for me I praise the staff here. I praise this program here because it got me out of [00:57.20.00] something I didn't know about, you know. It made me realize who I really am, you know, and where I was coming from.

And there are new counseling and support services for spouses and other family members.

I went with Orlando [00:57.40.00] one time to the Vet Center because he was always stopping in there. And I got to meet some of the personnel. And they mentioned that I could come back without Orlando. And so I did. And I found that I could talk to them and they understood. And so [00:58.00.00] with that it was worth driving the 200 miles once a week just to talk about things that, you know, I mean they would understand and, you know, empathize.

I needed to understand that separation of no feelings and, you know—so [00:58.20.00] I let him know, you know, that where I can stand up for myself and my, you know, my own feelings. So, I think when I went to that, that's what helped me. Because where before it wasn't like I had to cower and, you know, because I feared what he was doing, you know. But I mean I know that I don't have to be afraid of him.

When you get [00:58.40.00] into that kind of program for yourself your mind kind of expands and you realize jeez, you know, this is the reason why I'm like this.

At this point all of us must step forward, veterans, family members, coworkers and friends. We ask everyone to make sure our people know about [00:59.00.00] these benefits. A partial list includes disability compensation, education, vocational rehabilitation, home loans, burial compensation and pensions for dependents and survivors as well as health care and life insurance. Veterans have earned these benefits in service to their country. [00:59.20.00] Visit the Veterans Center or Tribal Veterans program in your community or call the Veteran's Benefits Administration Information and Assistance hotline, it's toll free 1-800-827-1000. You may also contact the VA's National Center for PTSD located [00:59.40.00] in White River Junction, Vermont, call 802-298-5132. Its offices have wealth of information to share. We hope you'll take this first step. It may feel like a big one but it will make it a lot easier for all of those

subsequent steps to follow. [01:00.00.00] Lives may depend on it, your own or someone you love.

[end of audio]