

PROTECTING AMERICA'S DEFENDERS

Helping Veterans Fight A Hidden Enemy

by *Glen Gardner*

VFW Commander-in-Chief

(NAPSA)—America's veterans are helping past and present service members fight a subtle enemy that's devastating in the field and at home. That enemy is stress.

Despite the best of programs offered by the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration, since 9/11, more service members have committed suicide than the total U.S. dead from Iraq and Afghanistan wars. This tragedy is occurring partly because the need has overwhelmed the capacity of government and civilian mental health centers and partly because some people simply refuse to admit they need help.

More needs to be done to overcome the stigma that's unfortunately attached to seeking help, which Army Secretary Pete Geren called a significant challenge to the culture of the Army that places "a premium on strength: physically, mentally, emotionally."

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen asked his military leaders to set an example. "You can't expect a private or a specialist to be willing to seek counseling when his or her captain or colonel or general won't do it," he said.

Our government cannot battle this enemy alone, nor should a troubled young veteran. Every combat veteran has one thing in common that's very relevant to a new generation of warriors: We've walked in their shoes.

We need to lend a sympathetic ear, tell them that we were once 20-something and that we under-



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stand their fears and emotions. What's most important is that we were able to overcome our internal demons and successfully move on.

Trust is king, so ideally this needs to be done in one-on-one meetings and small groups away from military installations for privacy and to help eliminate real or perceived fears of retribution from civilian employers or military commanders.

We have to guide them to seek help with the maze of required paperwork that entitles them to professional help and compensation if service connected. The faster we do this, the better. Many suicides occur during the waiting period between claims filing and adjudication. VFW will do everything it can at the national level to speed up that process.

Our comrades in arms need our help. The VFW can be a vehicle for delivering it.