

Veterans' Day is celebrated in our country each November.

Every year, news coverage stirs memories of the veterans whom I have counseled.

They were all men and they served during World War II, in Viet Nam, Korea, Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan.

I am a rehabilitation psychologist; their stories are not always what one would expect.

One of them never left Washington, D. C. during the Viet Nam conflict. He was a musician, stationed there to attend military funerals held daily at Arlington National Cemetery. He was picked up each morning and driven to his job.

Playing his musical instrument at the funerals of young service members, one after the other, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, left him with a psychiatric disorder.

Each funeral intensified the guilt that he felt at not participating in active combat.

An army veteran told me a story about his unit's prevailing after a fierce gunfight. Afterwards, they rounded up prisoners. He realized then that the enemy soldiers they had been shooting and killing were between 10 and 12 years old.

Back home, he had a child that age.

Another veteran, a Navy Seal team member, told me how he had nearly killed a player on an opposing athletic team because the player had showed contempt towards a teammate.

During the war, he had learned to kill by breaking someone's neck with his bare hands.

After that, he led a sheltered life in a remote area, not wanting to be provoked again.

I knew immediately that a man I grew up with was different when he came back from Viet Nam. He had served as a cook in two of the most intense combat areas there.

He had been an athlete, a tennis player interested in health and nutrition.

Now he is a chain-smoker with a three-packs-a-day habit.

Although he is a college graduate, he drives a cab in a big city.

Picking up fares off the street late at night, he does not have a normal reaction to danger.

He smokes and drinks coffee continually, listens to all-night radio, reads books about religion and meditation voraciously and does not want to own a phone or a computer.

He is homeless. Like many other veterans, his family has steadfastly refused to help him

A career officer who had served with a Special Forces unit in Kuwait told me that his daughter had subsequently been born profoundly disabled. He attributed her condition to circumstances related to his service in the Gulf; as a result, she will be an only child.

Viet Nam veterans made similar claims about their own and their children's disabilities, attributing them to their exposure to Agent Orange.

Some veterans are addicted to alcohol and drugs.

A psychiatrist recently suggested to me, as we were discussing drug use in combat areas, that for some, it might have been related to doing what they had to do there.

Others got started on the path towards addiction while treating the pain of their injuries.

One veteran started drinking heavily while he was stationed in a remote part of Alaska. Nights there were long and dark. There was so little to do that he and his young buddies drank out of boredom. He ended up an alcoholic who later abused prescription drugs.

A plaque in front of the Veterans Administration Medical Center located where I live reads: The Price of Freedom Can Be Seen Here.

For those called to do the dirty work of freedom, the price is often extremely high.

We can all help our veterans to move towards recovery. Here are a few suggestions:

- Welcome veterans home and express gratitude for their service.
- Take them to a restaurant or a game, help them to get a car and a job; hire them; take them to visit relatives and friends; invite them to your parties and events.
- Do not impose your beliefs, priorities and preferred solutions on veterans.
- If they refuse your help, don't criticize; ask what made your offer unacceptable.
- Show respect and listen patiently. Many veterans are very angry.
- Get counseling to help keep your marriage or relationship with a veteran intact.
- Help homeless veterans to obtain real housing, not just daily shelter.
- Provide housing to homeless veteran addicts; it will be easier for the veteran to deal with his or her addiction later, from a place of safe and secure housing.
- To other veterans – maintain the loyalty to disabled colleagues that you had while serving together; unfortunately, many of you will never be able to stop fighting.