

Iraq PTSD

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Many U.S. soldiers who have returned from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are suffering from serious mental disorders, according to a new study published in the July 1, 2004 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. The study surveyed 3,671 members of two Army Combat Infantry Units and one Marine Corps Combat Infantry Unit about their wartime experiences, their psychological symptoms and whether they had sought any treatment. Soldiers were given anonymous questionnaires to complete 3 to 4 months after their tours had ended; injured and other non-active duty soldiers were not surveyed. This was the first investigation into the mental health of soldiers recently returned from an ongoing war, and the results are troubling.

The study, which was sponsored by the U.S. Army and conducted by doctors and psychologists from Walter Reed Army Hospital in Maryland, found that nearly 17% (or almost 1 in 6) of Iraq veterans surveyed reported diagnostic symptoms of major depression, generalized anxiety or Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). More Iraq veterans suffered from these psychological disorders than Afghanistan veterans, of whom approximately 11% (about 1 in 9) reported symptoms. PTSD was by far the most common psychological ailment found among returning soldiers. Just over 6% of Afghanistan vets reported symptoms of PTSD; about double as many Iraq veterans—almost 13%—met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.

It is only in recent decades that PTSD, known as "shell shock" and "combat [or battle] fatigue" during the First and Second World Wars, has come to be recognized as a psychiatric disorder. PTSD can afflict people who have experienced extremely terrifying or intensely traumatic events such as being attacked, injured or raped; witnessing violence; or inflicting it on someone else. Some symptoms of the disorder include recurring flashbacks and nightmares, insomnia and sleep disturbances, panic attacks, emotional withdrawal, and spontaneous crying. PTSD sufferers are at greatly increased risk of alcoholism and drug addiction, severe depression and suicide.

The Army study attributed the different rates of PTSD symptoms between Iraq and Afghanistan veterans to their different combat experiences, and found a direct correlation between combat exposure and PTSD. Among those who had been deployed in Iraq, 89% of the Army soldiers and 95% of the Marines surveyed reported being attacked or ambushed; 93% of the soldiers and 97% of the Marines were shot at; and 86% of the soldiers and 92% of the Marines received incoming artillery, rocket or mortar fire. Army combat veterans of the Afghanistan war reported fewer such experiences: 58% were attacked or ambushed, 66% were shot at and 84% received artillery, rocket or mortar fire.

There were other significant differences between veterans of the two wars. 77% of the soldiers and 87% of the Marines surveyed either shot at or directed fire at enemy soldiers in Iraq, versus 27% of Afghanistan veterans; 48% of the soldiers and 65% of the Marines

said they had been responsible for the death of an enemy combatant in Iraq, versus 12% of Afghanistan veterans; and 14% of the soldiers and 28% of the Marines reported that they were responsible for the death of an Iraqi civilian non-combatant, versus only 1% of Afghanistan vets. Almost all the Iraq veterans surveyed—95% of the soldiers and 94% of the Marines—had seen dead bodies or other human remains, compared with 48%—or less than half—of the Afghanistan veterans.

Of greatest concern to the researchers was the discovery that returning combat soldiers feared they would be stigmatized if they sought or received professional care for their mental health problems. Of the Army and Marine veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan whose survey responses indicated mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and PTSD, fewer than half expressed interest in getting help. Well over half of these vets said that their unit leaders or fellow soldiers would blame them (51%), have less confidence in them (59%), or treat them differently (63%) if they requested mental health care. 50% thought it would harm their military careers. Fully 65% of vets with mental health symptoms believed they would be seen as weak if they asked for help.

"This finding has immediate public health implications," the researchers write in their paper. "Reducing the perception of stigma and the barriers to care among military personnel is a priority for research and a priority for policymakers, clinicians, and leaders."

References:

"1 in 6 Iraq Veterans Is Found to Have Stress-Related Disorder." Anahad O'Connor. *New York Times*, July 7, 2004, page A12.

"Combat Duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mental Health Problems, and Barriers to Care." Charles W. Hoge, et al. *New England Journal of Medicine*, July 1, 2004, page 13.

"Acknowledging the Psychiatric Cost of War." Matthew J. Friedman. *New England Journal of Medicine*, July 1, 2004, page 75.

Resources:

"PTSD." (www.ptsdalliance.org) Homepage of the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Alliance, with information and resources for people diagnosed with or at risk of PTSD.

"The Price of Valor." (www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040712fa_fact) A July 2004 *New Yorker* article by Dan Baum about the psychological trauma experienced by combat soldiers; cites the Army survey and other studies.