The Many Faces of PTSD: Challenging the Misconceptions

By Nick Patras MS, LPC

On November 11th we will celebrate Veterans Day in the United States and Remembrance Day in Canada, where we pause and reflect on the men and women who served their country. We often mistakenly associate Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a soldier’s issue. In fact, there are many faces that represent individuals struggling with complications associated with exposure to traumatic events.

Leading trauma expert Bessel A. van der Kolk wrote “traumatic events such as family and societal violence, rapes and assaults, disasters, wars, accidents and predatory violence confront people with such a horror and threat that it may temporarily or permanently alter their capacity to cope, their perception of biological threat, and their self-concepts.” While we have many veteran students on our campus, given Dr. van der Kolk’s thorough definition of traumatic events, there are countless people within our campus community who may have had previous trauma exposure causing them to struggle with a range of symptoms in the PTSD spectrum.

First, as a veteran and licensed counselor with advanced training in trauma work, I wholeheartedly support our veterans for their service and sacrifice. I am committed to providing the highest quality counseling services to our student veterans because I both understand the sacrifice that comes with a tour of duty as well as the real presence of traumatic events with deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan and earlier service in the Viet Nam war. The main message I hope to spread to our Vets is there is no stigma attached to reaching out for services when dealing with trauma related concerns.

Secondly, as one of many professionals working in the Counseling Center, I want to call attention to the fact that untreated trauma exposure can be debilitating and impact a student’s success in higher education. Our goal in the Counseling Center is to work with students to support them as they pursue achieving academic goals. College is the gateway to adulthood for traditional students and often the “reset” button for nontraditional students. PTSD symptoms can impact sleep, impede healthy relationships, foster dependency on substance use, and in some cases, cause negative behaviors that are disruptive in the classroom and social circles. These concerns can be helped in the counseling room with a supportive counselor as a guide.

Regardless of how a student was exposed to trauma, there is hope for a life without symptoms that are distressing. Past childhood abuse of any kind, current intimate partner abuse or violence, previous deployment in the armed services, or having witnessed horrific disasters or accidents do not have to be faced alone. PTSD does not have to be a negative diagnostic label. It can be thought of as an umbrella for a range of symptoms resulting from exposure to trauma. More importantly, there is strong empirical research to support treatment that can reduce or eliminate the symptoms.
Health Watch:

**Recognize symptoms that are the result of trauma exposure.** Pay attention to your body and mind.

**Accept that adjustment to life after exposure to trauma will take time.** Everyone will process exposure to trauma differently.

**Recognize when things are out of control.** If you are behaving in ways that make you feel uncomfortable or thinking disturbing thoughts, don’t dismiss those cues.

**Reach out.** Counseling is a non-judgmental, supportive, and student-focused process. You will decide what and how quickly you want to work on the distressing concerns.