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**Additional Information about Combat Stress,
written to supplement the Film “Cover Me.”**



COMBAT STRESS INFORMATION

Combat Stress is a normal human reaction to combat experience. This normal reaction is emotionally based and needs to be carefully watched because it can progress to the more damaging Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), particularly if the stress is not properly managed. Unfortunately, Combat Stress is often difficult to recognize in yourself and others tricky because it is both invisible and unpredictable. Nonetheless, it is crucial for Marines and their families to learn to identify Combat Stress because they are in the best position to intervene when necessary to limit the damage it can cause.

Marine Corps training is extremely rigorous and thorough. Because the training teaches Marines to override their emotions to execute their missions, it can make Combat Stress hard to acknowledge. Therefore, understanding the common causes of Combat Stress, having an idea of how it works, and knowing the signs and symptoms may help Marines and their families save a life from this invisible danger from within.

Causes

1. Continuous exposure to danger/never feeling safe
2. Contact with enemy
3. Being wounded, causing or seeing deaths or injuries around you
4. A close buddy killed
5. No way to wind down/let off steam or have fun
6. Isolation, not talking about the events that got to you
7. Thinking or feeling that nobody else can understand your experience

Characteristics

1. It is unpredictable: it can happen after a single event or a combination
2. With constant exposure to causes (above) your ability to deal with it is likely to decrease
3. A Marine who is badly stressed cannot give 100% no matter how hard he tries
4. It can briefly incapacitate you
5. Fighting unready can injure fellow marines.

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Warning Signs & Symptoms

1. You repeatedly think or say; "I can't believe I survived that!"
2. Much harder to stay Ready, faking it
3. Constantly worrying about combat or home
4. Exhausted and can't sleep when get a chance
5. Appetite off; diarrhea or vomiting
6. Everything annoys you, irritable, angry
7. Reluctant to fire your weapon or going berserk & shooting at everything
8. Insubordinate over silly stuff, risking court-martial
9. Addictions or excessive use: drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling etc.
10. Seeing things you know are not there

Mechanism Analogy

Although Combat Stress has been recognized by various names for centuries, it is so complicated that the research is not yet sufficiently advanced to understand the precise mechanism in all cases. We know that it can affect all kinds of people in very different ways and it can also skip certain people in the exact same situation. Nonetheless, for anyone in combat operations, and for their families and friends, the basic information about emotions and practical analogy below might help you to understand enough about the emotional process of Combat Stress to respond constructively.

Emotions are evoked all day long by all kinds of events, big and small. There are three main ways of dealing with them. Sometimes we just store them, (set them aside, block them out, or forget about them.) Frequently we actively process them (figure out what we feel, why and what we want/can to do about it.) Fortunately, many emotions just fade away with time, (i.e. low grade automatic processing, often based on having dealt with these feelings hundreds of time before.)

Combat operations overload the emotional processing system like a 12 pack of beer overloads your bladder. You can hold (store) the feelings for a while, but sooner or later you have to process the emotions out. Otherwise you can swamp your system and then all kinds of bad things can start to happen. When Marines and/or other combatants are staying in the fight, they need to get very efficient at processing the emotions whenever and however they can so that they are never overloaded for long. Families can help this emotional processing by encouraging their Marines to talk about their emotions, whether combat related or not. Families and friends often know where the sensitive areas are and can gently bring up the issues they know about. This helps the Marine to empty more emotional "storage space" for new combat events.

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Coping Mechanisms: Prevention is your best bet to avoid PTSD

1. Prevention includes:
 - a. Identify how you manage stressful emotions before deployment
 - b. Clear up any emotional issues back home that you can before deployment
 - c. Develop ways to unload excess stress emotions while deployed
 - d. Unwind whenever practical
 - e. Stay as rested as you can
(Research shows you handle stress better rested)
 - f. Write regularly (journal, notes, letters): facts, thoughts & feelings
(Research shows that journaling 20 minutes 3 times a week makes a significant difference in physical and emotional symptoms after traumatic experience)
 - g. Talk openly to others in your unit,
 - h. Talk to friends you trust
 - i. Take any opportunity to get away to a safe place with buddies
2. Avoid:
 - a. Isolation
 - b. Alienating yourself from your fire team, squad and platoon
 - c. Voluntarily deploying again before you have a chance to unwind enough to clear your emotional system.
 - d. Delay voluntary deployment if your family says you are not back to normal
3. Support fellow Marines
 - a. If you suspect a buddy's suffering from Combat Stress, talk to him
 - b. Check if he's sleeping, eating, and behaving *normally for him*
 - c. If 2 or more of you agree he's at risk, ask your chain of command/chaplain to check him out too.
 - d. Use internet for resources

It is imperative that you take the same approach to Combat Stress as you would to physical wounds: deal with it fast and get back in the fight or if recommended, move on to a successful life.

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