

USFS Pacific Northwest Research Station: Urban Science Initiative
Restorative Experiences for Returning Warriors:
soldier stewardship for mental health and the environment
February 4, 2010 :: Kathleen Wolf, kwolf@uw.edu

1. Military Service and Stress Disorders

U.S. soldiers (of the armed services branches and the National Guard) are currently serving in two conflict arenas. War experiences initiate stress disorders in many returning troops. Also, current wars are marked by higher level of psychosocial injury than past wars as field medical response is better, leaving soldiers alive but physically and emotionally traumatized. There are numerous media accounts of the personal and social challenges of post traumatic stress and other disorders associated with experiences of field battle experience.



U.S. Army soldier considers a bombed HumVee

In 2004 The Army's first study of the mental health of troops who fought in Iraq found that about one in eight reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. These stress disorders appear to increase after the tour of duty. A 1999 study of PTSD in Gulf War veterans increased significantly over time, with a rate of 3 percent for men, 8 percent for women immediately upon return from the war, climbing to 7 percent for men and 16 percent for women followed up 18 to 24 months later. Post Iraq incidence may be worse, as soldiers are assigned extended and multiple tours of duty. Of particular interest is the reaction of women. In Iraq and Afghanistan for the first time women take on jobs in ground combat. As of June 2008, 19,084 female veterans of Iraq or Afghanistan had received diagnoses of mental disorders,

including 8,454 women with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress -- and this number does not include troops still enlisted, or those who have never used the VA system. Initial studies of male and female veterans with similar time outside the relative security of bases in Iraq showed that mental health issues arose in roughly the same proportion for members of both genders.

2. Nature and Healing Experiences

More than 40 years of social science research indicates the extensive and wide-ranging psychosocial benefits associated with human experiences of nature, be they passive or active. The studies specifically point to the healing potential of nature experiences. Hospitals now incorporate "healing gardens" on site as surgery recovery is proven to be faster with nature contact. Physiological stress reduction is associated with passive views of nature. Horticulture therapy is applied to situations that involve children, the elderly, and rehabilitating adult patients. In response to stress response in soldiers the Veterans Administration has recently stepped up its counseling services. Soldiers are highly trained in mind and body, and integrated mind/body therapies may be more effective than "sedentary" counseling practices.

3. Linking Healing and Stewardship

The Puget Sound region contains numerous military bases representing multiple armed services within urbanized places: Army (Fort Lewis near Olympia), Navy (Bremerton), and Air Force (McChord near Tacoma). Numerous organizations and agencies (588 in King and Pierce Counties) host, sponsor, and organize environmental stewardship programs and projects. The proposed research is to explore the feasibility of bridging environmental stewardship and warrior therapy. The first step would be to develop a theoretical framework for a program of action and therapy, in collaboration with interested organizations and health professionals. Soldiers have a can-do attitude, an outlook much appreciated in the stewardship community. Combining the proactive exertions of stewardship groups and those who have served our nation may provide extensive personal and community benefits within the warrior community.