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POST TRAUMATIC STRESS AND EMPLOYMENT

By Dr. Richard Pimentel

Post Traumatic Stress is one of the two most common combat injuries of the current war on terrorism. Traumatic Brain Injury is the other.

If you have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress and are now employed or looking for employment, here are a few thoughts that might help you to be more successful.

You might be wondering who I am to be offering you such advice. I do not wish to make this about me. It is rightly about you. But you have the right to know who I am and where I am coming from.

I am a service connected disabled Vietnam Veteran. I was in the 101st Airborne Division and served in Vietnam 1968-1969. I sustained a significant hearing loss, a Traumatic Brain injury and Agent Orange poisoning while in Vietnam.

When I came home I graduated from college and was at ground zero of the 1970s civil rights movement for persons with disabilities which resulted in the passage of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) in 1990. For the last forty years I have advocated for returning veterans, taught employers how to hire disabled veterans, wrote books for job developers and rehabilitation professionals on how to place persons with disabilities in jobs and worked with the largest employers in the country to teach them how to provide accommodations for employees and applicants with disabilities.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER:

- 1. Disclosing information about Post Traumatic Stress to a current or prospective employer**
- 2. Concern about reactions that an employer may have about Post Traumatic Stress**
- 3. Positive personal adaptive behaviors**

1. Disclosing information about Post Traumatic Stress to a current or prospective employer

A growing number of professionals, including myself, have come to believe that Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) should not be called a disorder. This is why I use the acronym PTS instead of PTSD. PTS is actually very natural. Almost all of us have experienced or witnessed something horrible or frightening in our lives. Traumatic experiences can include anything that cause fear, intense pain, or horror. Examples range from car accidents to natural disasters to violent crime and combat.

It is very important to realize that we all deal with our difficult experiences in the most adaptive way we know. Most of us try to make sense of these events in some way, attempt to integrate the experiences into our lives, and then do our best to go on as unaffected as possible. For most people, the pain of a traumatic event causes a number of problems in the days and weeks after the experience — many sleep poorly, have nightmares, remember the event through intrusive memories, and feel generally anxious, jittery, and unsafe for a while.

The more dramatic clinical expression of PTS is simply an extension of this short-term suffering. With combat, often these painful memories are too complicated, too horrible, or there are too many of them to let them play out in a way that allows us to process them without outside or professional assistance. Too often, as in the case of combat, there is simply no time or opportunity to do so.

The problem is that many veterans today avoid dealing with it, sometimes for years. Once we learn to avoid, we get really good at it. For many people, this works for a while, but everyone has a limit. These experiences (often cumulative with combat), eventually demand that we pay attention to them, at last investing the time we need to move on with our lives. My hope is that veterans will find a way to do this sooner rather than later.

The symptoms of PTS are simply symptoms of that avoidance. We experience PTS in many ways, including through dreams, nightmares, intrusive images, or flashbacks. We feel anxiety, fear, and horror once again through general feelings of being unsafe, afraid, irritable, and hyper-vigilant. Things like loud noises make us jump. We feel numb, which is a defense mechanism that protects us from the cumulative effect of waiting all this time to finally REALLY FEEL the grief – or the loss, or the fear, or the terror or the horror or the exhaustion. Numb just seems easier. The problem is, numb, disconnected, withdrawn, and avoiding anything that reminds us of the event can cause dysfunction in our lives and too often dysfunction in the lives of our family, friends and loved ones as well.

Our biggest challenge we face, before acknowledging our PTS to an employer or to others, is acknowledging it to ourselves. If you have done this, congratulations! You are already more than halfway home; if you have not, do not give up. When you are able, seek assistance and professional help, it a vital step in finally coming home.

There are a number of things to consider to when deciding to disclose or not to disclose PTS to a current or prospective employer.

- a. Can the PTS negatively impact on any aspect of your job performance? If it will not, there may be no reason to disclose it. If it will, disclosing it can reduce or eliminate its negative impact and make you more successful.

- b. Will you need an accommodation or change in the work process or schedule to allow you do the essential functions of the job? If you will need some kind of awareness or adjustment from the employer because of the PTS, remember that the most effective way to get what you need is to ask for it.
- c. There is no law that requires you to disclose PTS to an employer. If you decide to disclose, it should be because by doing so it will benefit both you and your employer.
- d. What are the benefits of disclosing? The main benefit is that if you need a reasonable accommodation to be successful in your job. Self-identifying your disability jump-starts the communication process with the employer. One can determine what you need and how a reasonable accommodation will help you to be the best employee that you can be. Not bringing it up may make it more difficult for you to receive the accommodation you need. Without the accommodation it might be more of a challenge for you to be successful in your job.

2. Concern about reactions that an employer may have about Post Traumatic Stress

Professionals in the field of disability employment have long observed that supervisors and co-workers feel more comfortable and confident about working with persons who have mobility, sensory, and physical impairments than they do emotional impairments. They are familiar with physical impairments. They think they can understand being blind because we all have the experience of being in the dark. They understand missing limbs or being unable to walk or hear. These disabilities are obvious, often stable and generally predictable. The persons who have them, have needs that are frequently just common sense. There is little or no blame, nor judgment, attached to the people who have these impairments.

Emotional disabilities are generally not obvious or simply understood. There are many myths, misconceptions and stereotypes that are associated with emotional impairments. This often causes discomfort, uncertainty and fear in those who work with persons who have these impairments. Post Traumatic Stress is the rule here, not the exception. The public frequently believes that Post Traumatic Stress is an unnatural overreaction to a stressful event. Too often, the blame is attributed to the person with Post Traumatic Stress rather than the stressful event itself.

It seems ironic that we give medals to veterans who after being physically wounded in battle, continue to fight the enemy, protecting and saving their fellow comrades, before seeking medical attention for themselves. Yet, when they are emotionally wounded in battle and put off treatment for themselves so they can continue to fight, protect and save their comrades, some judge them as being weak. I see them as being heroes. They should not feel shame, they should feel pride.

That being said, there is no reason that employer concerns cannot be resolved with a common sense approach and an understanding of the dynamics of how attitudes and prejudices are formed.

The disability community has a long history of confronting and changing people's attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes about the employment of persons with disabilities.

They do not do this by trying to debunk prejudices or replacing one negative stereotype with a more positive one. That would be just as inaccurate and wrong as the original stereotype was. Instead, what we have learned is that:

- Every disability has such a wide range that no single belief about it could be true for every person who has it.
- Even at any specific point in the range, the differences of how each person is uniquely affected by their disability is so different, that again, no stereotype would be accurate for everyone in the group.

- In the absence of any qualifying or specific information about the person with the disability, there is a tendency to assume they would exhibit the most severe or “worse case” in their impairment.

The solution that works is not to give more information about the disability but to give specific and accurate information about the person who has the disability. This is necessary but is also easier said than done for a number of reasons.

The first reason is that it is hard for anyone to talk about a disability. Military culture discourages complaining and giving excuses or showing any weakness. When I got my first job after college I never told my employer I was hearing impaired. I was afraid they would not hire me if they knew about my hearing loss and after I was hired I was afraid its disclosure would hurt my career.

It wasn't until after two years and three promotions that I had to ask for an accommodation to use our new phone system. To my surprise, they had no problem with providing it. In fact, they said knowing I could not hear well explained a lot. They had just thought I was arrogant, not deaf.

I share this story for a very important reason. I worked for nearly two years without the tools I needed to be at my most effective because I wrongly assumed that my employer would react poorly to my disability. I was wrong.

Many veterans with PTS find themselves in this same situation. Two years ago I was giving a training at a large military facility that hired discharged veterans in civilian jobs. I had two groups that I trained separately: Veterans with disabilities and their supervisors. I asked the groups two related questions.

I asked the veterans with disabilities how many of them had a disability that was at some level affecting their performance on the job but were reluctant to talk to their supervisor about it. About 80% of the veterans raised their hands.

Later I asked the supervisors how many of them had veterans that they believed had some kind of disability that they believed was negatively impacting on their job performance but the supervisors were reluctant to ask them about it. Again about 80% raised their hands.

It seems obvious that if no veteran is willing to talk about their disability and the need for an accommodation in an employment situation, the results would not have a positive ending. When I asked the supervisors if the veterans came to them and brought up the disability, would the supervisor feel awkward or relieved? They said relieved.

I later brought back both groups together and told them what happened. I asked them to consider talking to each other. Many of them did right away. Most did eventually. Jobs were saved, missions were accomplished and lives were improved. If you have a need for an accommodation on the job because of PTS, do not let your fear of a reaction keep you from communicating with your current or prospective employer.

What if you do not know what accommodations you might need or what accommodations are available to you?

There is a free website available to you and your counselor or job developer called the JAN – Job Accommodation Network. The address is: <http://askjan.org>. When you go on the site you can talk to an advisor or search their database of disabilities including PTS. It will list all the ways that PTS can impact on job performance and the accommodations that employers have successfully used for employed persons with PTS.

You can use the service as an individual. There is a section to advise employers and a section to advise job developers and counselors. It is a completely free service. I encourage everyone reading this to go to this site and explore the information they have on PTS. It lists every disability and the work solutions for them imaginable.

3. Positive personal adaptive behaviors

We think of accommodations as things that:

- Employers provide such as talking computers, accessible workstations, flexible schedules and equipment.
- Schools and instructors provide accommodations such as lecture notes, having someone read a test to you, or extra time for an examination or test.
- Society provides accommodations for people through accessible public spaces, shopping assistance in retail stores, access to public services and transportation.
- Adaptive behaviors are the things that each person with a disability learns to provide for themselves through the things they do every day.

What kind of things have you learned to do to become more successful with what you want to do? Persons with PTS practice adaptive behaviors in every aspect of their everyday lives: their social lives, recreation, workplace and education.

Your counselor or health professional can advise you about how to adapt your life to reduce the negative effects of PTS.

The following are a few examples of things that some veterans with PTS have learned to do:

Triggers: Triggers are things that remind us of the traumatic events that we have experienced. When this happens we often feel the emotions associated with the event, have physical reactions similar to the ones we experienced during the event and thoughts similar to the ones we would have if the event was actually happening.

Triggers can be very personal and often unique for each veteran. Some are more common to all combat veterans such as loud noises and unexpected events. A trigger can be as simple as a smell, a phrase or an otherwise innocent sound. Adaptive behaviors for veterans with PTS include identifying their personal triggers, how they might avoid them, how they react to them and what they need to do to work through them when they happen.

A counselor can help you to identify these triggers and develop a plan to work through them. I am sixty-nine years old, have not been in combat in nearly fifty years and still will not sit with my back to a door in a public place. When I walk in a park I am scanning my surroundings and developing a plan of what I will do if I am ambushed. I live in one of the safest cities in the United States.

Sometimes a reasonable accommodation at work can be as simple as where you are sitting, having people not startle you, or allow you to take a short break in a secure place where you feel secure to decompress when you feel unsafe. These are all accommodations that employers are willing to make for valuable employees every day.

Hypervigilance: One of the definitions of hypervigilance is, “an enhanced state of sensory sensitivity accompanied by an exaggerated intensity of behaviors whose purpose is to detect threats. It is also accompanied by a state of increased anxiety which can cause exhaustion. Other symptoms include: abnormally increased arousal, high responsiveness to stimuli, and a constant scanning of the environment for threats.”

There is another word for this. It's called "guard duty in a combat zone." When a veteran feels unsafe it is a very common reaction that can happen at work, in public places like a restaurant or movie theater or mall. It is troubling and exhausting. At work it is distracting, disrupts concentration and interferes with doing the job.

There are accommodations and adaptive behaviors that veterans are using to overcome Hypervigilance.

- Working in a secure safe space is one of them.
- Headphones or hearing aids that reduce unnecessary background noise without blocking what the user needs to hear, is another.
- Taking a short time out to focus and relax can help.
- Avoiding situations where feeling unsafe will trigger this reaction, is another.
- Service dogs that are trained to sense when veterans go into this mode and distract the veteran and help calm them down have been shown to be effective.

Anniversary Dates: I was born in 1948. I will never forget the day that President Kennedy was killed, the day my first child was born, the day the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, and the day that I lost my best friend in an ambush in Vietnam. That last one caused me problems for over twenty years. I learned to predict how I would feel responsible and guilty. After years I learned to schedule work around that week and explain to people that I might be a little distant during that time. Everyone understood but only after I learned to give them a "heads up" about it.

I first had to learn to give myself a "heads up" about it before I could process what was happening.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

“The government may have brought us back but we, through our hard work, can bring ourselves home. Veterans have returned from war after losing many things. Some have lost their limbs, their vision, their hearing, and their health. Others have lost their way. We have not lost our hope, our honor or our courage. We will never lose those who will honor us by standing with us every step of our way. Their hands reach out to us; even now we only need the courage and confidence to reach out and grasp them in return.”