

HELP! _____

I'VE BEEN
TRAUMATIZED BY
COMBAT

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Help! I've Been Traumatized By Combat

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INTRODUCTION

I remember my first conversation with a military member who had come back from Operation Iraqi Freedom. What struck me about our conversation was his seemingly arrogant attitude as he spoke about the bad guys he had killed and all the cool destruction he had seen. I became so unsettled that I actually created an excuse to walk away from him.

As I think back to my time with him, what bothered me most was that combat had not disturbed him in the least. In fact, he thought some of the gruesome scenes he had seen were funny. He had no sensitivity, no heaviness of heart, and no grief over the tragedies of war. I remember thinking to myself, “This guy is not normal.”

But what is normal for someone who has faced combat? Is it normal to exhibit no signs of distress? Is it normal to be able to say you genuinely are not affected by what you have seen

or experienced on the battlefield? That can't be. The normal person who has faced combat should not only be deeply affected, but also show at least a few signs of distress. In fact, as a chaplain and counselor to military members, I become more concerned about the ones who don't show any signs of distress than about those who do! Combat should deeply affect you. It should bother you; and it should not be surprising if it causes you now to be a little jittery at the sound of cars backfiring or even children screaming on the playground.

The truth is, however, you might not feel normal. I am fully aware that for some people, even for committed Christians, the stresses from combat can become so overwhelming that it begins to debilitate you, preventing you from carrying on in life. Relationships are affected, addictions begin, sleepless nights are frequent, and sometimes thoughts of suicide seem attractive.

If this is true of you, you may even be asking where God is in all of this. What you experienced was blatantly evil and painfully difficult. You know this is not how the world is supposed to be. You long for a world where this type of pain and suffering doesn't exist anymore. Life might look so dark and so bleak that you barely see light at the end of the tunnel. You probably just want it

all to go away so that you can (somewhat) cope and move on with life—or at least, so that people would stop nagging you to get help!

I realize that there are countless pamphlets and books on the topic of combat-related stress, some of which are very helpful. But I want to do something a little different with this mini-book. Yes, I want to be a part of helping you cope and move on with life, but I also want to have a conversation with you about what God's Word has to say about your situation. I want to help you understand your situation from his perspective. I want to show you from God's Word that not only are you responding normally to what you experienced, but also you are right to think that things aren't the way they should be.

I ask you to take a little journey with me, one that will take seriously all the challenges you're facing, offer practical help, and point you to the One who, I am confident, is our ultimate hope. He not only knows firsthand what it is to be a victim of evil, but also has provided us with all the resources to restore our souls and bring us from the darkness of combat back into the light of life.

Is My Body Acting Normally?

“**W**hat is your major malfunction?”—it’s a question military members often sarcastically ask one another. But it’s not the most appropriate question when you are experiencing serious distress in your soul, especially in the aftermath of combat! Ironically, though, it may be a question you’ve asked yourself with all the challenges you are confronting: “What is my major malfunction?” Or, put a little more tamely, “What’s wrong with me?”

A Familiar Story?

I recently met with a soldier who was recovering from his time in the Middle East. He began by telling me of his first time in Iraq. He was tasked to do regular Humvee patrols of the streets. As the gunner, he saw skirmishes here and there, but his biggest threats were IEDs, which meant he constantly scanned the roads for out-of-place objects.

On one seemingly calm day, he was driving with three of his buddies, scanning the area as usual, when their vehicle suddenly exploded. There was panic, screaming, and everyone rushed away from the flaming vehicle. They somehow all made it out of the vehicle—and no one was hurt!

At the time and soon after the incident, he felt okay. He felt he was able to move on. He suppressed his feelings and wrote them off as nothing to worry about. But, over time, especially after returning to the States, he noticed that what had happened was beginning to affect him in various ways.

Like many military members who came back from Iraq thinking they were done with war, he was soon deployed again—this time to Afghanistan. Again, he was tasked to the gunner mount position while conducting Humvee patrols. But on one particular occasion it didn't turn out so well. Once again, they were driving through the streets just as they had in Iraq—and that's the last thing he remembers about it. His next memory is of waking up in Walter Reed Hospital in Maryland.

He felt fortunate not to have incurred any burns or loss of limbs, but he had suffered a terrible jolt to the head. Soon after his wounds healed he began to suffer from tremendous anxiety and

now, whenever he drives, even in his hometown, he constantly scans the streets for roadside bombs. He told me about the nightmares, the fear of crowds, reacting to the sound of gunfire in the distance, memory loss, and eventually how he had become severely depressed.

What's Your Story?

His story may or may not be similar to your story. In fact, what you faced may have been much more horrific. But what I have observed among combat veterans is that no matter what you faced in combat or what rank you are, you often share the same types of physical and relational challenges.

I can't count the number of times I have been asked, "What's wrong with me?" What the person usually means is, "Why is my body acting the way it is acting? Why do I have these thoughts? Why can't I carry on a normal conversation anymore?"

What is the answer? Why do you wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat? Why the sleepless nights? Why does your hand seem perpetually to shake? Why do you jump at the sound of a loud noise? Why do you have outbursts of anger? Why can't you turn off the horrific memories in your head? Why don't you

feel like doing anything? Why don't you want to talk to people? Why do your closest relationships seem to be falling apart? And why don't you trust anybody anymore?

Let me begin by saying that you aren't crazy. In fact, as I said at the start of this mini-book, many of your reactions are normal. Combat is unlike anything else. You went through an incredibly traumatic event on the battlefield. You saw and experienced things most people are never exposed to, so being physically and relationally affected is not a surprise.

God Created You As a Physical Being

“Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”

(Genesis 2:7)

Nothing in the entire human body compares to the extraordinary complexity of the brain. One of the most fascinating things about the human brain is its ability to hold memories. That we can recall and visualize some of our earliest childhood memories—like our first camping trip,

our first McDonald's ice cream cone, or even our excitement at seeing Mickey Mouse for the first time—is truly remarkable.

Along with those fun childhood memories, we especially remember important memories, like the consequences of putting our hand on the hot stove, playing with fire, or sticking our tongue on a frozen light pole. We certainly learned our lesson from those events because our brain now automatically sounds the danger alarm when we get too close to the stove, we light a match, or we see a frozen pole! Why? Because God created our brains to embed memory patterns to alert us when we are about to do something that will hurt, especially for those painful life-altering events.

In the same way your brain retains life-altering childhood memories, it also holds significant memories of war. When you went into harm's way and did the things you had to do and saw the things you had to see, your brain immediately embedded a memory pattern to keep you on the alert (which in many ways is a good thing!). More than likely, those memories are still fresh in your mind, and your brain may still be on the alert.

The slightest thing (maybe even things you wouldn't think of) may automatically sound the alarm in your brain—sometimes even when you

are asleep! As a result, you duck when you hear a loud bang, or you prepare to fight an intruder when you hear the slightest noise outside your house, or you take a side street when you see something suspicious on the road ahead, or you wake up on the alert from dreaming about combat. It's also why you may have a hard time trusting people: you probably had to distrust everyone in order to keep safe.

All that means is this: Your brain is acting the way God created it to act. Nothing is abnormal. You are simply experiencing what it means to be a physical being, except that now you are facing the challenge of how to live normally in a peaceful environment with a brain that is wired for a combat environment. How do we fix that?

To begin fixing it, we have to realize that God has created us to be spiritual beings, too. Trying to separate your physical challenges from your need of spiritual help is like trying to separate skydiving from your need of a parachute. To truly work through some of your physical challenges, we must work through some of your spiritual challenges as well.