

HEALING TOUCH BENEFITS MILITARY FAMILIES AND VETERANS

By Nanette Sagastume, RN, HTCP

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I am excited that Healing Touch Professional Association is emphasizing volunteer outreach to veterans and military families. As the wife of a Vietnam vet and the mother of an Iraq vet, I am well aware how much military persons and their families are uniquely vulnerable to constant stress. Through my own experience, I have learned how Healing Touch can help heal the invisible wounds of war and enhance the wellness of both military personnel and their families. I offer my story as a graphic example of the chronic and multiple stresses that many military families and veterans face.

It was more than a decade after the Vietnam War before Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was a recognized condition. Yet my husband, Mario, had been experiencing many of the symptoms for years (1). Though he has been a high-functioning individual with only mild to moderate PTSD at any given time, even this milder level of the disorder has had a lasting effect on our family. There are other symptoms that affected our family, but my husband's angry outbursts probably have had the deepest impact on the soul of our family, causing us to walk on eggshells. I wish I had known about Healing Touch in our earlier years!

When our son, Daniel, entered the Marine Corps (graduating from boot camp four days before 9/11), our family suffered a kind of collective anxiety disorder for the next four years. Fear for my son was an undercurrent throughout my day and encroached upon my awareness even during the night. The instant communication of satellite phones, internet streaming, embedded reporters, etc. also heightened my anxiety level by virtually placing me, at times, on scene. When my son called home following the decimation of his platoon as a result of a suicide bombing, his stunned, graphic description of the scene caused

a post-traumatic reaction of my own that lasted for months.

Though the military family is on a non-stop emotional roller coaster during combat deployment, homecoming does not always resolve everything. The returning warrior may have altered sleep patterns or changes in behavior which are disturbing both to the vet and the family. However, the military person is not necessarily the only one with adjustment issues upon coming home. Our family found we had our own survivor guilt, knowing that our son came home while others did not. We had grief for our own experience as parents of a son in harm's way, grief for his experiences, and we, too, mourned the friends he lost. It is not always over when it is over.

Even though I had close associations with other military families during this time, I believe that no one can adequately comprehend the anguish of having a loved one in combat until it happens. Indeed, it has been said that sometimes family members experience more stress than those who deploy (2).

So true. Mario declared that the anguish of having a son in combat was far worse than the fear he experienced being in combat himself. The current wars aggravated his PTSD symptoms. We found this was occurring for many of his veteran friends as well. My husband has shared that in the forty years since he was in Vietnam, not a day goes by when he does not think of it. Over the decades he has come to believe that his PTSD will never be gone. He has tried to manage it rather than let it control him and, generally, has done fairly well with this effort. Lately it has been harder to do so.

Even though our son has been out of the military for seven years, Mario has begun to have more combat nightmares, more bouts of depression, more temper tantrums. He is not alone in symptom exacerbation. The Veterans Administration reports

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that, although many vets may have functioned well throughout their lives, many find that as they age, they think more or get more emotional about their war experiences. The VA calls this Late-Onset Stress Symptomology (LOSS)—an apt acronym, to be sure. (3).

For a more comprehensive, first-hand account of the military family experience, I invite the reader to refer to my book, *We Also Serve: A Family Goes to War* (4).

For the first thirty years of our marriage I was unaware of Healing Touch. I was drawn into the Program by my friend, Susan Patrio, HTCP/I, only in the last ten years. I was fortunate that she was able to offer me sessions throughout these difficult years.

For me the most dramatic session occurred in the last months of 2001. With the anxiety over possible future terrorist attacks, as well as, the resulting uncertainty regarding my son, I was a perpetual bundle of nerves. Though I had done lots of self-work, my emotional motor was purring endlessly and my own efforts were not enough to calm me. After a few sessions of Healing Touch, I asked Sue to “bring out a canon” - she chose to do Level 3 work. The day after this session I noted a distinct shift - a welcome, if unfamiliar, calm which permeated my being and stayed with me for at least a month. This respite from extreme anxiety helped me to activate my “reset button,” bringing my anxiety to more bearable levels. Despite solo efforts, Healing Touch is even more powerful when another assists!

Most of the time all that was needed were Level 1 techniques. A simple *Chakra Connection*, *Mind Clearing*, or *Magnetic Clearing* were my favorites. Occasionally, the *Chakra Spread* was used.

When working toward my certification in Healing Touch, many members of my military family support group were willing volunteers for the one hundred documented sessions that were required for Level 5. Like me, they, too, found the relaxation that the above techniques provided to be the most beneficial aspect of the sessions.

Likewise, whenever I have worked at Stand Downs for the

veterans, these basic techniques offer much relief. I am amazed at the number of instances when a single twenty-minute Stand Down session can reduce chronic pain to a level not experienced in years.

The VA has embraced some complementary and alternative modalities (CAM) and does offer some of these at its various clinics. There is an arm of the VA, the War-Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) that offers various mind/body therapies, including mindfulness meditation and even an energy modality, Reiki, as part of its ongoing research at its three national WRIISC centers (5). The availability of CAM at regional VA clinics, however, is variable.

As Healing Touch increases its visibility at veterans' functions, such as Stand Downs, it would be wonderful if Healing Touch became one of the modalities officially offered at VA clinics. The more we take Healing Touch to veterans perhaps the sooner this will happen. There may be opportunities to catalyze this relationship by bringing HT to existing veterans' activities. I have had the unique opportunity to offer sessions of HT at the annual reunions of my husband's Marine Vietnam veterans' group and to organize a Healing Touch station at my local Stand Down. The veterans have been overwhelmingly enthusiastic about their HT experiences.

I know that Healing Touch can benefit families and veterans, no matter how remote the combat experience. As is becoming evident, the invisible wounds of veterans and their families can last a lifetime. As HT practitioners, we have an opportunity to offer the possibility of a mind/body “reset,” to facilitate wellness and to improve the quality of life for our veterans and military families.

REFERENCES

1. For Information about PTSD and its symptoms: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/what-is-ptsd.asp>
2. Hopewell, Elizabeth H. RN, MSPH, FNP-C, “*Today's Home Front*,” in *Advance for NPs and PAs*, (Volume 3, No. 1, January 2012), 29.
3. <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/ptsd-older-vets.asp>

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4. Sagastume, Nanette, *We Also Serve: A Family Goes to War*, (Bloomington, Indiana, iUniverse Inc., 2011). Available for online purchase through iUniverse, Amazon, or Barnes and Noble.
5. <http://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/WARRELATEDILLNESS/about-us/what-we-do.asp>

About the author:



Nanette Sagastume is a retired nurse practitioner and a Healing Touch Certified Practitioner with a practice in Chico, California. She has a special interest in serving military families and veterans. In 2001 she started a support group—

still going strong—for family members of those serving in the military. She recently completed a memoir of her experiences as the wife of a Vietnam vet and the mother of Marine deployed to Fallujah, Iraq in 2004. *We Also Serve: A Family Goes to War* is available for online purchase at iUniverse, Amazon, and Barnes and Noble.