

General does part to reduce mental health stigma

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 4, 2009 - Army Maj. Gen. David Blackledge is doing his part to reduce the social stigma attached to seeking mental health treatment for war-related stress.

The general suffered from post-traumatic stress after surviving a near-death experience during his first deployment to Iraq in 2004. Now he willingly shares his tale of recovery and hopes his example will help others in dealing with war's invisible wounds.

"I felt it was critical that we had senior leaders experiencing [post-traumatic stress] come forward," Blackledge, the Army's assistant deputy chief of staff for mobilization and reserve issues, said in an interview at the Pentagon last week.

The wife of a military member suffering from war trauma used Blackledge's story to spur on her spouse to seek treatment, Blackledge said.

"She said, 'My husband was suffering from this, and when I showed him the article in the paper about you coming forward, he said that if a two-star general can get help, then maybe I can too,'" he said.

Blackledge's story begins in Iraq in February 2004, when he was working there as a civil affairs commander. He was leading a team to Iskandariyah to meet with tribal sheiks when their convoy was ambushed with smalls-arms fire. The attack killed the interpreter sitting near Blackledge and blew out a tire on their vehicle, causing it to roll.

The survivors of the attack regrouped and escaped to a nearby checkpoint. Blackledge suffered a broken back and ribs, and other physical injuries. He was put in a body cast at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, and remained there for several days before arriving at Walter Reed Army Medical Center here.

"Within a day of me being at Walter Reed, a psychiatrist came to me ... and talked to me about what was going on. He also told me what to expect," Blackledge recalled. "I told him at the time that the ambush kept replaying in my mind."

The psychiatrist told Blackledge his re-experiencing of the incident was normal, and he provided the general with mental techniques to help gain control of his memories.

"He said to basically picture it as a movie, and when it intrudes, tell yourself, 'I don't want watch the movie right now,' and kind of click it off," he said, adding that the medical staffer also explained to Blackledge and his wife what they could expect over the course of rehabilitation.

The psychiatrist continued to work with the general, who began experiencing nightmares, hyper-alertness and other post-traumatic stress symptoms, he said.

The general added that the psychiatrist also was savvy enough to know how to record the medical information so that Blackledge would not risk harming his career advancement or prospects for future security clearances.

"It seemed logical to me, because there was a concern at that time about how these things would be recorded in your record," Blackledge said, noting that the process has improved significantly since his injuries.

Fifteen months after the ambush, Blackledge again deployed to command a civil affairs unit in Iraq. While at a meeting in Amman, Jordan, in November 2005, Blackledge was in one of the three hotels targeted in a coordinated bombing that killed 60 people and injured more than 100.

When Blackledge returned from that deployment, he again suffered from nightmares and hyper-alertness, as well as sleeplessness and a shortened attention span.

"This time, my concern was not my career, but, 'Is this how I'm going to be for the rest of my life?'" he said.

Blackledge again sought mental health treatment – this time at the Pentagon clinic – where a doctor explained that the therapy he'd begun after his ambush had been interrupted by the second deployment.

"He said, 'Let's start over again, and we'll guarantee you're much better at the end of it,'" Blackledge recalled.

In July 2007, the Army launched a chain-teaching program to help soldiers and their families identify symptoms and seek treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder and mild traumatic brain injury.

When Blackledge began incorporating his own experience into the lessons he delivered, he realized the ripple effect that speaking out can have.

"As I gave that instruction to my headquarters staff, I kind of interspersed it with what I'd been through," he recalled. "As I started inserting my own experiences, people started raising their hands and saying, 'I had that same thing happen to me.'"

Blackledge since has volunteered to help Army Brig. Gen. (Dr.) Loree Sutton, a psychiatrist who heads the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, in her campaign to urge post-traumatic stress sufferers to share their stories.

Related Sites:

Warrior Care Web Portal <<http://www.warriorcare.mil/>>

National Resource Directory for Wounded Warriors

<<https://www.nationalresourcedirectory.org/nrd/public/DisplayPage.do?parentFolderId=6006.com>>

Military OneSource <<http://www.militaryonesource.com/>>

Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury

<<http://www.dcoe.health.mil/default.aspx>>