

How lessons learned from battlefield traumas could help fight covid-related stress



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Help for Heroes online toolkit could help with covid-related stress

HE is a former army medic who treated patients from the point of injury through to their aftercare and understands the challenges and long-term effects of serious injury more than most.

David Dent was seriously injured in Bosnia and Northern Ireland and says battlefield experience could help NHS staff overcome covid-related stress. He believes the emotions felt by frontline NHS during this past year mirror those of forces in combat.

As concern mounts around the long-term impact of the pandemic on the mental health of frontline healthcare workers, the Lanarkshire veteran is highlighting military

charity Help for Heroes' online support toolkit which he says could become invaluable.

The free online package of support, Lessons from the Battlefield, now includes self-care guides for loved ones as well as healthcare heroes and veterans.

Mr Dent, from Law Village, Lanarkshire, served as a Regimental Nursing Officer and Critical Care and Trauma Nurse specialising in battlefield trauma in the British Army.



Lessons from the Battlefield could help with stress felt by healthcare staff

During the first lockdown Help for Heroes highlighted the need to ensure long-term support is in place for UK health workers fighting coronavirus. Now it has updated its free resources to not only support health workers dealing with traumatic experiences and suffering stress-related disorders, compassion fatigue and burnout, but also added guidance, tools and tips for their families too.

This includes how they can look after themselves, how they recognise signs that their loved one is struggling with their mental health and how they can encourage their loved ones to seek help, as well as support them through any treatment.



Help for Heroes ambassador David Dent with former Royal Marine turned TV presenter JJ Chalmers

Lessons from the Battlefield has been designed for, and co-created with, wounded veterans, and their families. The charity, which continued to support wounded veterans and their families throughout the pandemic, despite a 30% drop in regular income, said the relevance to NHS staff and their loved ones lies in the strong

parallels between the experiences they are facing today and what veterans have faced on the battlefield, and what wounded veterans' families have gone through in supporting their loved one through mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Help for Heroes ambassador Mr Dent, 54, joined the army in 1993 after training as a specialist intensive care nurse at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. He was first injured in Bosnia in 1994 during a missile attack. He initially thought he had suffered a shrapnel injury to his back but, a few years later, it emerged he had undergone a traumatic brain injury and later diagnosed with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a progressive disease found in people who have suffered a severe blast injury. He was later further injured in Belfast while trying to extract a casualty from a dangerous situation and is now a wheelchair user as the result of his injuries.



David Dent during his time in Bosnia

Mr Dent said: “Psychological injury can be critical, long term and have a significant impact on an individual’s life and recovery. The psyche of a soldier, like those in the caring professions, is to brush it off, bury it deep and soldier on, because you have people relying on your effectiveness.

“This is an approach that does not work long-term, it’s like running on a broken leg - you may still be able to move and to a casual observer this may be OK, but the bone needs to be fixed, bleeding stopped and rehabilitation to take place. The path to getting better is not a straight one and has ups and downs and sometimes you even go in reverse.

“The signs of psychological injury are similar to that of physical injuries, but more difficult to spot. The quietness, withdrawal, anger and frustration may only manifest as being a bit quiet or short tempered. The fall out on loved ones and the stress of negative mental health consequences on relationships are too frequent.

“People who need to recover need understanding, empathy, their loved ones need to be present and supportive, not looking for a quick fix. Seeking professional help is one of the most courageous and important steps and is a sign of strength, not weakness. If your loved one can’t or won’t, encourage them - or do it for them.

“With work and openness things can and will get better, but usually it takes time and a team, an effective unit all playing their part, from the individual, the people significant in their lives and professional support. It can get better, and people come out stronger as a result of surviving their life experiences.”

Sarah Jones, head of psychological wellbeing at Help for Heroes said: “Help for Heroes does extensive work with not only supporting wounded veterans but also in understanding the need to help their families so that they are able to spot signs of mental health issues in their loved ones and be in the best place to support them. We understand what NHS staff and their families are going through; the pandemic has drawn out in the same way that conflicts are, keeping resilient is hard and the likelihood of mental health issues grows.

“Mental health issues don’t only impact on the person going through trauma but on their families too. From our work with wounded veterans, we know the family is a vital part of an individual’s support network and can be a driving force in encouraging

them to access professional help. We realise our expertise could help those who need it most right now.”

Lessons from the Battlefield: A Self-care Guide for our Healthcare Heroes and their Loved ones” can be found at <https://www.helpforheroes.org.uk/what-we-do/lessons-from-the-battlefield/>.