

Purple Heart Backgrounder on Top Challenges for Veterans

The Challenges Veterans Face

While Purple Heart provides programs and services in many meaningful areas, four common challenges for combat-wounded veterans -- suicide prevention, Post Traumatic Stress (PTS), brain injury and women's health concerns – have become priorities for support. These timely issues are a battle for veterans, even when off the battle field.

Recently, Purple Heart donated \$500,000, allocated over a five-year period, to the University of Washington Division of Pain Medicine to develop leading-edge technologies to assist veterans with treatment for PTS, traumatic brain injury, and acute and chronic pain. These advances will equip healthcare providers with the tools necessary for reducing the risk of veteran suicides and deaths.

Following is information about the key challenges that veterans face, as well as the solutions that Purple Heart provides them.

Suicide Prevention

Many veterans suffer traumatic stress during combat, while others experience a sense of hopelessness when returning home and transitioning back into relationships, employment and education. Unfortunately, an alarmingly growing number of veterans are turning to suicide as a tragic antidote to these emotional struggles on and off the battlefield. In fact, almost 8,000 veterans are thought to die by suicide each year, a toll of about 22 per day, [according to a 2012 VA study](#).

Providing mental health support is a huge priority for Purple Heart. Suicide-prevention measures established in the past few years, such as the highly successful Veterans Suicide Hotline (800-273-TALK), have saved lives., and counseling is made available in rural and urban locations through the National Service Officer Program.

Post Traumatic Stress (PTS)

While stress is a natural reaction to experiencing traumatic combat-related events, not everyone copes with stressful situations in the same way. Usually, the stress is temporary; but, sometimes, a traumatic event makes such a strong impression that healing isn't possible. When that happens, the stress and the memories of that event impact a veteran's ability to perform day-to-day functions, interact normally with family and friends, and keep a job. Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) develops when stress reactions persist or worsen.

Recently, Purple Heart donated \$500,000 to the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund, to jumpstart the construction of centers to help veterans with PTS. The centers will provide the medical care that wounded men and women need so badly -- to treat the invisible wounds they will battle for the rest of their lives. The centers will include some of the following features to help veterans with PTS: a clinic area with psychiatric testing and treatment; sleep lab with computer monitoring systems and music therapy; a multi-purpose environment for meditation and focusing exercises; and a family room with connecting with family and taking a break from treatment.

In addition, Purple Heart member and author Tony Seahorn shares his story in a patriotic book about soldiers and PTS, "Tears of a Warrior: A Family's Story of Combat and Living with PTSD." Seahorn writes from his experience as a young army officer in Vietnam who was wounded in action and continues

to recover from the physical and emotional scars of combat. Purple Heart provides this book free of charge to the VA, which then makes it available to veterans and families who are undergoing treatment and counseling for PTS – helping educate them about the symptoms of PTS and offering strategies for living with the disorder.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) occurs when a head injury impacts the function of the brain. Combat-related causes of TBI include damage caused by explosive devices, falls and vehicle accidents. Most reported TBI cases among veterans have been traced back to Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Symptoms can appear immediately or weeks to months following the injury. Pentagon officials have estimated that up to 360,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans may have suffered brain injuries, including 45,000 to 90,000 veterans whose symptoms require specialized care.

Through its donation to the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund and the construction of its centers, Purple Heart is also helping provide medical care and support for TBI. In fact, these centers will be the core of the Armed Forces' efforts in researching, diagnosing and treating TBI and related injuries. The center will include some of the following features to help veterans with TBI: a clinic area with chiropractic treatment, neuro psych testing and acupuncture; physical therapy for training and an open gym; multi-purpose environment for exercises and additional physical therapy; and a family room for resting and connecting with family members.

Women's Health Issues

Women are the fastest growing group within the veteran population, and currently, there are approximately [1.8 million women veterans](#) (8 percent of the total veteran population). In fact, the VA estimates that [by 2020, that number will increase to 10 percent of the total veteran population](#). And women are also more likely than men to develop PTS after experiencing a trauma. In addition, sexual harassment and assault can happen during war, peacetime, or training – also impacting their physical and mental health. As a result, women's health issues are becoming a gender-specific priority among veterans.