TIPS ON WITNESSING: For Those Who Want to Lend An Ear When a Veteran is Ready to Talk

John Mundt, Ph.D.

1) Assume nothing in terms of what emotions or beliefs are attached to the events being discussed. Listen neutrally, and let the veteran be your guide as to how it feels and what it means. Don’t tell somebody what they “ought” to be feeling, or what they “ought not” to be feeling (ie, guilt). Use neutral, non-judgmental phrases (“Sounds like you feel...”) or questions (“Am I hearing right that you felt...?”).

2) Do a self-check in terms of your own attitudes/beliefs/opinions about the war, the Commander-in-Chief, politics, soldiers, Marines, National Guard, military culture, etc. Then check your politics at the door. To the degree that you have strong opinions or beliefs, it’s probably wise to “lean” a little in the direction opposite to your beliefs. Don’t assume that all veterans feel the same way about these things.

3) Be alert for “triggers” and stimuli in the immediate environment that may serve as reminders or cues for vivid reliving and re-experiencing by the veteran. Think “all five senses”: what are the ambient sounds, smells, sights, physical sensations, temperature? How confining is the space? How easy is an exit? Remember that we civilians can become “immune” to subtle background noise that we hear every day, but it may not be innocuous or innocent to the trauma survivor who is in an unfamiliar place.

4) Consider your own tolerance for extremity: You may hear content that is shocking, disgusting, saddening, horrifying, and hard to swallow. You may also experience someone sobbing, crying, raging, cursing, shaking. Witnessing is messy, and not everybody is prepared for what it can involve.

5) Remember that “PTSD” is really a problem of RELIVING or RE-EXPERIENCING, more than it is a problem of REMEMBERING or “bad memories”. The process of “telling stories” is not without risk to the person doing the telling. They can find themselves panicking, having a powerful flashback, or becoming intensely anxious, sad, fearful or angry. Be prepared, and have a back-up plan for how you will get help for somebody who needs it. The next three of these tips have to do with that planning:

6) Offer “grounding” where possible: when somebody is reliving something too intensely, it can be useful to remind them where they are, who they’re with, even WHEN they are [ie, 2019, not 1969 or 2003], and that they are now safe and supported. Give them something to read that is neutral and without emotional content (even the boring fine print on a receipt or warranty, or an advertising insert has proven effective in moments like this!).

7) Know where your back-up is: Witnessing to traumatic narratives can entail a situation in which there’s a need to get help for somebody who becomes overwhelmed by the power of what they are reliving. Know how to summon or engage mental health assistance, even if in some cases that just means knowing where the closest Emergency Room is. Have the number for the Suicide Prevention Lifeline for veterans handy (1-800-273-8255, and press “1” for veterans).

8) Consider “timing” and “place” issues: this work should probably not be done in isolation, late at night, alone on a park bench, etc. You may need assistance in securing emergency help for a person in crisis. Do not ever attempt to physically stop a combat-trained individual who is upset and agitated from leaving: get out of the way, and if you have safety concerns then call emergency personnel. Whatever your role is (friend, loved one, counselor), you’re probably not a safety officer; stick to what you know.

9) Finally, take care of yourself. There is such a thing as “vicarious traumatization” that impacts some counselors who work with combat vets, rape victims, concentration camp survivors and other survivors of trauma. You’re not helping anybody if you traumatize yourself or burn out. Consult with others, indulge in healthy things that soothe you, get some exercise, anything that can help you to decompress and to clear your head after hearing someone else’s extreme experiences. If you’re a counselor, remember that we need to model for our clients such things as pacing oneself and good self-care.

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