

Battlefield Compassion and Post-traumatic Growth in Combat Servicepersons

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Although civilians view a battlefield as having few redeeming qualities, many service members report returning from service as deeply bonded and stronger, better people. In this study, researchers explored service members' battlefield experiences and positive, compassionate acts within the framework of PTG.
- Service members reported growth in terms of appreciation (gratitude), personal strength, empathetic caring and a desire to help others. Veterans also gained a greater appreciation for life and the culture they inhabited while serving. When asked to reflect on other positive experiences, veterans cited bonding experiences and post-service friendships.
- Service members linked military values and compassion to care and selflessness with comrades, also referring to the importance of protecting one another and sticking together, as well as the importance of compassion in helping civilians and serving as examples of good, caring people.

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ABSTRACT:

“The literature is replete with studies related to the negative outcomes of serving in combat. However, for some military servicepersons, healing could be assisted by understanding the positive experiences and outcomes related to combat service. This study surveyed 59 servicepersons to identify acts of battlefield compassion, as well as other positive military experiences. In addition, participants were asked to identify personal changes as a result of compassionate experiences and to give an overall rating of their time in combat. Results are compared to the post-traumatic growth (PTG) literature and reveal that participants identified positive changes associated with experiences of compassion.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

The results of this study show that many military service members have experienced PTG as a result of their service, including positive reflections on bonding experiences, post-service friendships and significant personal maturation. Participants in this study cited their learning experiences and reflections of military values of honor and pride as providing positive growth, describing themselves as returning from service as stronger, better people. This study provides several anecdotal accounts of compassionate experiences, including veterans helping and being helped by other service members physically and emotionally. In one case, a 40-year friendship developed from one service member helping another, although in several cases participants viewed emotional help and listening, especially concerning problems at home and coping with battlefield deaths, as more important than physical assistance. Community members and families should keep this in mind when discussing service with veterans, as many only discuss the possible negative impacts of service with veterans and may unintentionally render these more positive impacts invisible. Clinicians working with veterans and military families should make a point to discuss positive growth with veterans, and provide space for veterans to discuss with their families any positive growth they feel they have encountered. The availability of veterans-only spaces and community groups may be particularly beneficial to veterans as a place to reestablish current bonds and establish new post-service friendships with other veterans. Social workers and rehabilitation counselors should explore positive memories and experiences with service members, utilizing a strength-based perspective, which may be useful in alleviating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and depression.

FOR POLICY

Policy makers should work with clinicians and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide systematic training for discussing PTG among former service members. Since strength-based counseling can be a potentially beneficial treatment for service members, clinicians should be fully capable of providing this care, especially if they work in VA hospitals. Policy makers may also wish to fund community service organizations for veterans as a way to connect to and establish additional post-service friendships, create bonding experiences with other veterans and a way to build on PTG and personal maturation. Policies funding organizations in which veterans are not only connecting with other service members, but also serving civilian communities, may be highly beneficial for veterans in making use of their personal growth and compassion as a result of their military service.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the future, researchers should further examine PTG and battlefield trauma-related compassion, and variations in these experiences by time in service, generation or era of service and gender. Including more female service members will allow researchers to examine gender effects, providing insight as to how male and female veterans experience PTG and where any differences occur in their battlefield experiences. Future studies should utilize random sampling to create a representative sample, in-depth interviews and measures to increase survey completion for participants. Results of this study show no significant differences in positive change based on PTSD, depression, hearing loss or orthopedic difficulties, which may not be the case in a larger, more representative sample. Researchers will also need to explore the relationship between specific battlefield experiences and certain areas of growth. For example, previous research has found a correlation between perceptions of life threat to specific growth in appreciation for life, which can serve as one specific area of future study.

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