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Disorder Still A Struggle For Vietnam Veterans

POST- TRAUMATIC STRESS TAKES TOLL ON MANY

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Soldier's heart, battle fatigue, post-Vietnam syndrome, the names for post-traumatic stress disorder have been around as long as there has been war.

The treatment, at least for Vietnam veterans, is getting better, veterans said.

"Many veterans with

PTSD have suffered in silence for a long time, but they don't enjoy life anymore," said Allen Eason, coordinator of the post-traumatic stress disorder clinical program at Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks in Fayetteville.

Waiting out the symptoms of chronic post-traumatic stress doesn't make it better, Eason said.

Family members usually recognize the symptoms early.

Denial is the number one problem with post-traumatic stress, Jack Jones said.

Today, the Centerton resident works with support groups for veterans.

He arrived in Vietnam in 1965 as a Marine Corps lance corporal. He left six months later as a sergeant.

Jones was in the infantry, but when a radio operator was killed, he took over.

It was a dangerous position.

"They figured you could call in support, so they shot you first," he said.

It wasn't a gunshot that sent him home.

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appeal in 2004 that became a five-year process.

"It was horrible," he said.

Being turned down the first time is standard, Hale said.

The average appeal still takes more than a year, said Stele James, director of veterans service for Benton County.

Most of the applications for post-traumatic stress benefits he sees are from Vietnam-era veterans. James said part of the reason is there are more Vietnam veterans than recent combat veterans. Vietnam veterans are retiring from their careers and have more time to think about the past, he said.

Younger veterans worry a post-traumatic stress diagnosis will keep them from getting jobs, or show up on future evaluations. Medical records are confidential by law, James said. Stigma is a problem. People get the picture that post-traumatic stress is only about depression and violence, he said.

"That's not all of us," said James, who served in Iraq in 2004, 2005 and 2006 with the Arkansas Army National Guard.

Today it's safe for Vietnam-era vets to admit to post-traumatic stress, Jones said.

For enlisted soldiers it's not, he said. It could mean a medical discharge and ruin a career.

Younger soldiers know they will be redeployed, Jones said.

"If you're going back, you keep your PTSD. That's what keeps you alive," he said.

They might come home and not want to get too close to family because they know that next time they might not come home.

Just because a veteran has experienced combat or trauma doesn't mean he or she has post-traumatic stress, Fast said.

Some people may just have difficulty adjusting to civilian life, Eason said.

Transitions home are different for soldiers from different combat eras, Jones said.

During World War II soldiers went and returned as a unit, and the boat trip allowed them to process some of what they saw together, Jones said.

During Vietnam, a soldier could be slogging and shooting his way through the mud one day, then fly home and be sitting at mom's kitchen table like he had never left the next. Raised in a world of "thou shalt not kill," the returning soldier didn't know how to explain a world where every decision, every day, was his life or death. The lack of support can lead to isolation, he said.

"Don't judge me until you walk a mile in my combat boots, and I won't judge you," Jones said.