

Veterans of a Pandemic like A Military Deployment

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ABSTRACT

As a military emergency medicine physician, this pandemic is glaringly similar to a military deployment. Combat veterans are used to being isolated from their loved ones, practicing in low-resource settings, not knowing what each day will bring, and fighting the same enemy. Social distancing, Personal Protective Equipment, uncertainty, and fear of dying are not foreign to service members.

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INTRODUCTION

Those in the military can attest to the “hurry up and wait” mentality where we have plenty of time between moments of chaos. Long stretches of boredom and brief times of heightened stress are commonplace in the midst of this pandemic. Now, instead of leaving the barracks with a rifle and radio, I leave the house with a mask and scrubs. On the start of mask removal policies, it’s understandable that people are getting restless and willing to take more risk to see their loved ones.

THE PARALLELS BETWEEN THIS PANDEMIC AND A MILITARY DEPLOYMENT

In some ways, this pandemic is more challenging than a deployment. Before we deploy, we typically have time to prepare. We update our will, organize our finances, and plan for someone to mow the lawn. We even have the security of a monthly paycheck. There is also an end date; we know exactly when we are due to go home. Americans were not afforded the opportunity to prepare for this unexpected disaster. Enduring these adversities requires constant vigilance with no end in sight of this uncertainty.

COMPLACENCY AND UNCERTAINTY ARE ALSO THE ENEMY

It’s well known amongst service members that the beginning and end are the most dangerous times of a deployment. It is not uncommon to hear about an uptick of combat-related or accidental deaths in the first and last few weeks of a deployment. During a deployment, we know there could be an attack on base at any time, but towards the end when complacency is high safety measures aren’t stringently followed. Oddly, when the stakes are high, it is easier to remain vigilant. However, if every day is routine, peaceful, and quiet, it’s harder to maintain the necessary discipline.

Similarly, wearing a mask and social distancing is no easy habit. It’s understandable why some take the risk of having dinner at a loved one’s house because the benefit of seeing friends and family in person outweighs the small risk of contracting the disease. To be sure, I am not going against the science and validity of wearing masks and social distancing, but we need to acknowledge the unsaid difficulties.

RESILIENCE IS A TEAM EFFORT

The good news is we are in this together. Under shared stressful times, people often form a deep bond with each other. This phenomenon occurs among survivors of disasters. Likewise, service members survive deployments by sticking together as a team. If there is no trust among each other, the mission will fail. This camaraderie is absent in return to civil society. This partially explains the higher rates of suicide among veterans: the so-called “invisible wounds.” Even though the enemy is not always visible to the naked eye, it does not mean we have to suffer in silence from these invisible wounds.

A CALL TO UNITE

Now more than ever, it’s vital for the success of our recovery to maintain social connectedness. How well a community connects is directly proportional to how well it recovers. We can take action now to mitigate the negative mental health effects of this crisis, which are arguably more contagious than the virus itself. Do not be a ‘Fobbit’ someone deployed at a forward operating base (FOB) who sits in their room watching movies all day in their bunker. Instead, find your courage and be that person who says “I’m here for you. We got this. Let’s fight this.” I imagine after this pandemic, we will all be veterans of this war on COVID-19 and, hopefully, will bind together as a nation and a global community fighting a common threat.

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