

Behavioral Resources And Institute for Neuropsychological Services

the BRAINS Express

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Surviving Holiday Stress Following a Combat Deployment: Strategies For Soldiers, Their Families, and Community

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Edited by: Rochelle Manor, PhD & Michael Wolff, PsyD

Branden Lyon, ACSW

“The holidays are going to be great this year!” Who hasn’t said this phrase out loud or to themselves this time of year?

If you are a military veteran returning from a deployment, or a family member or friend of a veteran, there is a lot of reason for optimism. The winter holiday season is a great time to reconnect with loved ones. Yet, no matter how much everyone wants the holidays to go smoothly, there are usually bumps in the road.

During my years of treating military veterans and their families at the Department of Veterans Affairs in Grand Rapids, and here at BRAINS, I have found that the holiday season presents unique stresses for veterans, other trauma survivors, and many families in general. Fortunately, with a little planning and good communication, it is possible to limit the potentially negative experiences to have an enjoyable holiday season.

Common Adjustment Reactions During the Holidays

If you ask, most people will agree that

the holiday season is at least a little stressful. They will also be able to give a pretty good list of reasons why: frequent gatherings, shopping for gifts, parking at the mall, traffic, etc. For veterans and trauma survivors, however, these stressors go beyond minor inconveniences. These stressors can directly trigger common adjustment reactions that negatively impact the lives of the veteran or trauma survivor and his or her family and friends.

The following is an abbreviated list of some of common adjustment reactions that have a high likelihood of affecting veterans returning from combat deployment during the holiday season:

- Feeling withdrawn or detached (“emotionally numb”)
- Unusual irritability or anger
- Not being able to trust others
- Needing to be in control all the time
- Being on guard (hypervigilant) all the time
- Being easily startled
- Nightmares and/or “flashbacks”
- Trouble concentrating
- Acting more aggressively
- Trouble sleeping
- Excessive drinking or drug use



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- Sweating, rapid heartbeat or breathing when thinking of the war
- Feeling nervous, helpless or fearful
- Feeling sad, guilty or abandoned

Most returning veterans will experience at least a few of these reactions for a short period of time. This does not necessarily mean they have a more serious mental health condition like Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. However, if these reactions continue for more than a few months and have a significant impact on the veteran's work, school, and/or relationships, then it is a good idea to seek out the opinion of a licensed mental health provider.



Perhaps the most frequent reactions veterans experience involve anxiety. Anxiety can take many forms and have effects that are not always obvious. Most returning veterans report that they feel increased anxiety around groups of people. In an urban combat zone, more people gathered in one place meant the veteran had less control over his or her environment and, thus, was in more danger. It will take time to “turn off” this

anxiety and, in the meantime, it is often a major barrier to enjoying holiday gatherings. Because of this, limiting the size of get-togethers is best whenever possible.

Emotional numbing is another common reaction. When confronted by very disturbing or traumatic experiences (as in combat), most people will experience feeling “numb” for a time. This typically results in difficulty feeling the happiness or joy that most expect to feel during the holidays.

While it may be tempting for family and friends to work even harder to help the veteran have (or show) these emotions, such efforts frequently lead to arguments and misunderstandings. Many veterans report that they feel tremendous pressure to “fake it” at these times. Instead, what a veteran generally needs is space to have these emotions on his or her own time frame (especially if the veteran just recently returned from a deployment). Recovery will be quicker when the veteran is given time and his or her feelings are not judged by family and friends.

Designing an Effective “Holiday Plan” to Minimize Effects of Common Reactions

Common adjustment reactions can also be aided by designing a “holiday plan” to limit the potential for these reactions to occur during

the holidays and minimize their effects on the lives of the veteran and his or her family and friends.



A “holiday plan” involves coming up with a strategy to handle the stressors that are likely to trigger common adjustment reactions for the veteran.

All successful holiday coping strategies begin with good communication. This means talking about the veteran's needs and concerns as well as those of immediate family and sometimes even friends. Begin by acknowledging that the holiday season is stressful and that the need for a plan is not any one person's fault. Everyone involved is almost always working extremely hard (and creatively) on ways to cope, so effort is generally not the problem. The trick is to focus everyone's effort in more effective ways. Below are three key ways to do this.

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Manage Expectations

The veteran and his or her family and friends should try talking ahead of time about their expectations for the holiday season. Even if there is disagreement about some things, they should attempt to be on the same page as much as possible. Asking each other the following questions can help with that:

- What is important to each of you?
- How do you hope the holidays will go?
- Are all of these hopes realistic?
- What are you looking forward to and what are you dreading?
- Are you each looking forward to the same gatherings or events?

It is okay if your answers to these questions differ. The key is to identify any differences and talk about how you are going to approach them. Remember that even small events are important to talk about.

For example, maybe in the past the family has always gone to the mall together the last Saturday before Christmas to finish shopping. This type of busy, crowded scenario almost always increases a veteran's anxiety and might be worth some compromise.

When dealing with situations like this, be especially mindful of anything that feels like it has to be "perfect." This may include trying to find the perfect gift for a child or

designing the perfect moment for the whole family to welcome back the veteran. These types of expectations are often unrealistic and can increase the pressure the whole family feels.

Be Flexible

Try to be flexible by identifying "can't miss" family gatherings or other events versus events it might be possible to skip. Talk about ways you can manage the stress of being at those "can't miss" events (especially larger ones). For example, think about quiet corners where the veteran can get away for a few minutes if he or she becomes overwhelmed. Establishing a signal ahead of time that the veteran can use to let a family member or friend know if things are getting tense is also a good idea. You might even consider taking two cars to an event to give the veteran an exit strategy and avoid an argument about when to leave.

Create New Traditions

Maintaining and reconnecting with long-standing holiday traditions is an important part of readjusting to civilian life. However, it is also true that many things may have changed for a returning veteran as well as those who stayed home. Rather than trying to fit this new life into old

patterns, now may be the time to begin building some new traditions. This is limited only by your imagination.



One example I have seen work for some military families is spending less on gifts and doing more family activities like volunteering for a charity. Many returning veterans tell me that material things mean less to them after seeing how

people struggle to survive in other parts of the world. Volunteering can offer the veteran a way to spend time with family and friends and share his or her new perspective (and wisdom) with them.

Making the Holiday Season More Enjoyable

Designing a holiday plan which includes new traditions, offers flexibility and manages the expectations of a veteran and his or her family and friends,



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can go a long way towards maximizing everyone's enjoyment of the holiday season. It can also provide an important stepping stone for veterans who are readjusting to their civilian lives. This type of planning is not just useful for military veterans and their families, but can be helpful to almost any trauma survivor who may be experiencing the reactions or symptoms described above.

If you are working on a holiday plan, keep in mind that understanding what triggers adjustment reactions in each individual is extremely important. Then, it is just a matter of communication about those triggers and finding ways to limit them. Finally, remember that approaching the holiday season with a plan may not make the holiday season perfect, but it will allow you to maximize your enjoyment and spend more time focusing on the most important goal, being together with loved ones.

For more information on creating a holiday plan or addressing common adjustment reactions in a veteran or

trauma survivor, please contact us at BRAINS, LLP. Happy Holidays!



**Internationally-
Acclaimed and
Best-Selling
Author
Asperger
Syndrome Expert**

***Liane Holliday Willey, EdD
Consulting Locally***

BRAINS announced that Liane Holliday Willey, EdD, has joined the organization as a professional speaker, consultant, and family advocate.

A Rockford, MI resident, Willey is an internationally-acclaimed author, consultant, and motivational speaker on the subjects of Asperger's, learning disabilities, communication disorders, and interventions for people with pervasive developmental disorders. She shares a passion for helping people understand that diversity is just not about skin color or gender, there are mental health, behavioral, and sensory issues to be considered as well.

Dr. Willey is the author of four books on Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) that either have, or are on their way, to becoming best-sellers in the field. She is a consistent media expert that has been featured in *USA Today*, *Psychology Today*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *ABC News*, *News-*

week, along with a myriad of national and international radio programs.

"BRAINS has been a huge fan of Dr. Willey for years, utilizing many of the resources she has developed to help the individuals and families we serve on a daily basis," said BRAINS co-owner and founder, Dr. Michael Wolff. "It is a distinct pleasure to bring her level of expertise alongside our existing team of professional clinicians. Our hope is to expand our level of services into a realm that few facilities locally, regionally, and even nationally, have ever known."

As a popular keynote speaker, Dr. Willey has developed an extensive network of international professional contacts, as well as a viral following on www.aspie.com, a site dedicated to the understanding and support of Asperger syndrome.

"Trust me, I have seen a lot of clinical models around the globe that attempt to serve the neuropsychological problems that our world is facing today," said Dr. Willey. "But BRAINS has an all-inclusive model – assessment,



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counseling (individual, group and family), psychiatry, neurofeedback, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, group therapy, and tutoring – all under one roof. We have a blessing in our own West Michigan backyard – and our community needs to *understand* that, and experience it first hand!”



How are the changes in the Michigan Math Curriculum affecting the students ?

Dean Fritzeimer M.Ed.

With the additional requirements added to the math curriculum in Michigan this year, students are likely to need some help beyond the classroom. The new requirements for graduation correlate to some advanced math normally taught in Algebra II. There is help available for students of mathematics.

Individual help can aid students in building their confidence with math, because it can be tailored to meet the student's particular needs. I understand their frustration; being a certified Mathematics teacher with the experience of teaching and tutoring all levels from Elementary math to Calculus, children through adults, at both private and public schools, colleges, and GED programs.

No matter what the age or level of education, math is a subject where

people typically develop attitudes early in their academic career. Students at all levels and schools may have negative thoughts to the mere mention of the word 'math.' First of all, students need to develop positive thought processes in regards to math, in order to make steps forward in learning.

We must try to remove the natural negativity regarding math. With positive interventions, students can think of math as a useful part of their skill set. Making math apply to the real world is the main goal. Utilize techniques such as using a manipulative, games, sports, statistics, and many more. These help develop a conceptual understanding and relating it to something they know.

How are the changes in the curriculum affecting your math student? Some are probably starting to become more apprehensive to the additional math skills that are required to graduate. There is no reason to continuously fight this problem of math frustration. The solution is to overcome it with individual attention.

Mt. Fritzeimer is offering individualized tutoring through The EnCourage Institute
616-530-2224
<http://EnCourageInstitute.com>



Why is it so Hard to Make Friends?

Brad Bridges, LMSW

BRAINS is offering a unique group for children who have difficulty making friends, being bullied, or generally fitting in. The group is intended to teach kids how to “fit in” by using fun, social activities typical for their age. The sessions will be videotaped, then watched as a group to receive immediate feedback from peers.

This group differs from other social skills groups that focus on teaching basic social skills. Instead, participants will see themselves acting in real-world situations and receive immediate feedback from peers and the group leader.

This group is intended for children who have learned basic social skills through school, counseling, or social skills groups, but have difficulty using the skills effectively. Children with anxiety, ADHD, Asperger's Syndrome/PDD NOS, or other diagnoses



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are welcome, but no formal diagnosis is necessary.

- Intended for boys age 12-14
- Will meet Thursdays from 5:00-6:15 pm for six weeks beginning December 3 (will not meet December 24 or 31)
- Cost: \$210 for six week session

Sign up Soon - Space is Limited

bbridges@brainspotential.com

BRAINS Offers FREE Parent Supports Groups for Autistic Spectrum Disorder Children

The 2nd Saturday of each month, parents and family members influenced by ASD are welcome to join Brad Bridges, LMSW and Tom Denczek, LMSW for discussion, education, intervention talk, and support. These two separate groups cover younger children through adults. Please contact Brad, Tom, or support staff for more information: 616-365-8920

BRAINS Foundation Update

The BRAINS Foundation is an innovative organization that has come to fruition after a year of intensive work with community and the Foundation Board. The Foundation intends to increase the accessibility for services in the areas of Psychological and Neuropsychological Assessment and Physical and Occupational Therapy in the first year.

In the future, we hope that all our services will utilize students who are training through the Foundation to become fully licensed professionals in their field. Joining with Helen DeVos Children's Hospital Department of Psychology, we began this Pre-Doctoral Neuropsychological Training Consortium in June of this year.

Ultimately, this means more families and children can be served with substantially fewer dollars. Take a look below

Population Served to Date:

- Average # of Wage Earners in the Family: 1.07
- Average # of Family Members in the Family: 3.44
- Average Age for Individual Served: 12.84
- Average Annual Income for families: \$15,078.49
- Average Out of Pocket Cost per Hour: <\$3.00
- Percent of Individuals Receiving No Cost Care: 86%

The BRAINS Foundation is actively seeking relationships to establish funding for these programs. If you are able to make a donation, please send funds to:

BRAINS Foundation
3351 Eagle Run Dr. NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49525

Recognition of your donation with a tax deductible receipt will be sent to you.

If interested in assisting the Foundation in a more formal manner, The BRAINS Foundation would appreciate the chance to develop this relationship. Please call: 616-365-8920 and ask for Drs. Manor or Wolff.

Federal Tax Exemption Number:
37-1545165



BRAINS & BRAINS Foundation wish your family and you a wonderful holiday season!

