

Fireworks can bring bad memories

Veterans suffering from PTSD may not enjoy the celebrations.

By Denny Boyles / The Fresno Bee

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Carl Shepley was a teenager the last time he watched fireworks on the Fourth of July.

That holiday, in the late 1960s, came before Shepley was sent to Vietnam, before three helicopters were shot out from under him and before he watched his best friend die in his arms.

"I tried, a few years ago, to go watch fireworks," Shepley, now 56, said. "But before they even started, I was disgruntled. I was angry. I had to get out of there. Now, for me, Fourth of July fireworks are just out of the question."

But for some veterans who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, such as Shepley, the bright lights and sharp cracks used to simulate historic battles make celebrating freedom impossible.

"For those with PTSD, the sounds and sights associated with fireworks may trigger memories of actual combat," said Dr. Hani Khouzam, a psychiatrist at the Veterans Administration Medical Center. "Up to 50% of our soldiers who have seen combat might have some level of PTSD, and for them, fireworks can be a dreadful experience."

Seanna Herring-Jensen has worked with veterans for nearly 15 years, and has seen the effects fireworks, loud music and even certain smells can have on combat veterans.

"We had a young man who came back from Iraq and didn't want to be around crowds, even his family," Jensen said. "He stayed in his room for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and then came out finally on New Year's Eve. One firework was set off, and he hit the ground. He ended up in the hospital because that was all it took to trigger memories of the war."

Shepley, who returned from Vietnam in 1972, wasn't diagnosed with PTSD until 1987. By then, the disorder had permanently altered his life. He couldn't hold a job, couldn't maintain a normal relationship and couldn't live around people.

"I had to move into the mountains, and on the Fourth I go farther up, so I won't even hear anything," Shepley said.

"I've talked to younger vets, guys coming back from Iraq, and they are going through the same thing."

The advantage for those younger veterans, Khouzam said, is that the military medical system now trains physicians and nurses to recognize PTSD early on.

"The earlier you can diagnosis it, the less severe it will become," Khouzam said. "You can teach them what their triggers are, and they learn to avoid them."

Triggers don't have to be sound, Khouzam said.

"They are connected to the senses," Khouzam said. "Anything you can sense can be a trigger for PTSD. We can teach them to deal with it, and teach their families how to help them, to remind them that they are in the present."

For Shepley, whose PTSD went undiagnosed for 15 years, medication has proved to be the best option. He hopes that by talking about his experiences, he might be able to help younger veterans have better futures.

"I'm still fighting that war," Shepley said. "I hope it can be better for them. For me, the Fourth is just another day, and I'm happier when it's over. I hope the younger guys can learn to still enjoy it."

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