Post Combat Risk-Taking Behavior

Presented by Military & Family Life Consultants
Agenda

» Definition of risk-taking behavior
» Statistics
» Understanding risk-taking behavior
» Post-combat invincibility
» Surviving post-combat stress
» Summary
Definition

» Risk-taking behavior:
  – Any voluntary behaviors that put an individual in danger of potentially serious injuries or death.

» Risk-taking behaviors include:
  – Riding a motorcycle at high speeds with or without a helmet
  – Driving a vehicle at very high speeds
  – Abusing alcohol or drugs
  – Driving while intoxicated
  – Various extreme sports
In some branches of service, more service members have been killed in motorcycle accidents than in combat.

Service Members returning from combat are 25% more likely to die from post-combat injury related deaths than those who served in the military, but did not see combat.
Combat training:

» Developing new identity – “combat self”
» Creating strong bonds – a sense of brotherhood
» Preparing for the worst case scenario – kill or be killed
» Emphasis on remaining hyper-vigilant and looking at all situations with suspicion
» Conditioned for quick reactions and decision – reacting on impulse or reflex
» Ability to clear mind of other distractions – focus on mission at hand
The Combat Stress Reaction: A normal reaction to the continued state of alertness and hyper-vigilance required in a combat zone

Fight or Flight Response:

» A threatening or potentially threatening event occurs

» Chemicals are released in the body causing a flight or fight response

» Fight or flight increases arousal and intensifies the initial response

» Endorphins are released

» Emotional and physical pain are reduced
The Important Role of Endorphins
» The body’s natural opiate
» Released during an attack – real or perceived
» Numbs the physical and emotional pain
» Necessary for survival

Post Combat
» Endorphins are reduced
» Withdrawal from endorphins occurs
» Possible feelings of letdown or depression occur
» Desire to engage in risk-taking behaviors increase
» Quick to anger, short fuse or low frustration tolerance
Post-Combat Invincibility

» Invincibility and the “combat rush”
  - A conditioned emotional response to trauma
  - Feelings of power and excitement during combat
  - Creates a feeling of invincibility – “I survived combat, therefore I can survive anything in civilian life.”

» Post combat:
  - Civilian life may seem boring
  - A desire to recreate the combat rush (this can intensify with multiple deployments and exposure to violence and death)
  - The desire to recreate the combat rush can lead to risk-taking behaviors
  - The sense of brotherhood disappears as units re-organize and adjust after a return from deployment; i.e. – assignment and unit changes
Surviving Post-Combat

Service members are especially vulnerable to risk-taking behaviors during the transition to civilian life.

It’s important to have a plan in place while making this transition.

The following slides will provide safe suggestions for channeling the desires for risk-taking behavior.
» Have a plan
» Stay busy
» Find safe and structured ways to exert physical and mental energy
  – Take a motorcycle safety course and join a motorcycle club
  – Engage in competitive sports such as: baseball, football, basketball, paint ball, martial arts, boxing
  – Engage in non-competitive sports such as: Jogging, biking or working out at the gym
  – Build a network of friends and confidants
  – Have diversity in your life; find that balance
Surviving Post-Combat *continued*

- The powerful role of support
- In combat
  - Bonded with buddies
  - Built in support system
  - Shared experiences
- Post-combat
  - Separation and loss of support from buddies
  - Surrounded by others who can’t relate to combat experience
Finding support:

» On an installation
  – Seek support from others who have experienced combat
  – Approach command about forming support groups for combat vets

» Off the installation
  – Stay connected with buddies or others you know who are combat vets by:
    • Sending emails or writing letters
    • Contacting others by phone or text messaging
Realize there is a reason the body reacts by creating the desire for risk-taking behavior.

Repeated exposure to combat creates a continuous fight or flight response and release of chemicals such as adrenalin and endorphins.

Surviving post-combat requires devising a plan, staying busy and engaging in safe and structured activities.

Support should be an important component of the post-combat plan.

If these suggestions don’t work and risk-taking behaviors continue, seek help from a behavioral health professional.
» Military Community Services
» Chaplain and Local Clergy
» Military OneSource  (800) 342-9647
» TRICARE   www.tricare.osd.mil
» Behavioral Health Services
» Defense Centers of Excellence
http://www.dcoe.health.mil/