



It's All About Connection

April 28, 2014

Nancy Short, LCSW



VA
HEALTH
CARE | Defining
EXCELLENCE
in the 21st Century

HOW WE ARRIVED AT THIS

- Discussion regarding abandoning my previously titled presentation “The Changing Face of War” due to a similar topic at the conference and my decision to speak frankly about how what I do fits the conference topic.
- The wearing of multiple hats, as most conference participants, I too wear multiple hats in my job at the Salem VA Medical Center.
- My foremost job is to facilitate the transition of returning combat Veterans into civilian life and into the VA system.

CONNECTIONS ARE VITAL

- My job varies from outreach to answering phone calls or meeting with Veterans and family members; from providing the number for the GI Bill hotline to talking with a suicidal Veteran standing on a bridge.
- I survive on connection, which will be the focus of my presentation.
- **Connection is what I do.**

CONNECTIONS ARE VITAL

- I must first connect with the Veteran or family member, then I must make the proper connection to the resources, information and/or services they are requesting.
- Lastly, my job is to develop these connections among providers and community agencies.

WHERE IT STARTS

- We as humans CRAVE connection—we are hard wired for it.
- Seeking this connection can look very different:
 - Maybe it looks like being a part of a military unit and the comradery that comes with it
 - It could look like being a member of a support group
 - It could be in the arms of a lover
 - It could be connection with a beloved pet
 - It could be with art, music, nature

WHERE IT CAN GO

- However, when the wires get crossed (through a variety of means), this connection may look very different
 - May use substances to help facilitate discussion, this works in the short-term but it is not a real connection and it also has physical, psychosocial and possibly legal consequences
 - Lack of connection may end up in domestic violence and other criminal activity
 - PTSD is a problem with emotional connection surrounding a traumatic event
 - This is a lack of healing and/or cognitive issues as a result of the trauma
- Lack of connection can lead to isolation and hopelessness

SO HOW DO I CONNECT?

- Honesty: don't be something you are not
- Be genuine: Veterans are trained in BS detection, they will know if you not being genuine or honest
- Connection leads to vulnerability: You have to put yourself out there, but do this with caution—do not dump your problems onto the person you are trying to help
- Discharging “less than” thinking:
 - We all have thoughts that somehow we are “less than” others
 - We didn't serve in the armed forces
 - We served, but weren't in combat
 - We were in combat, but didn't get injured
 - We were injured, but didn't die

SO HOW DO I CONNECT?

- Don't assume: don't think that just because you are a Veteran or family member you will have an automatic connection.
 - Some providers who are Veterans receive the most complaints.
- All connections must be genuine, regardless of status.
- Listen: Don't judge
 - Identify that you recognize their emotions and experiences
- Show connection through your actions
 - Your actions are steps towards building trust
 - If you get someone
- When giving bad or negative news, give options and also help problem solve

SO HOW DO I CONNECT?

- Show connection through your actions
 - Your actions are steps towards building trust
 - If you get someone a \$30,000 prosthetic limb, they know they can count on you for assistance
- The following statement is extremely powerful
 - “No, I have not walked in your shoes, but I am willing to stand with you now and walk this journey with you”

THE NEXT LEVEL OF CONNECTION

- Developing a web of connections for Veterans and family members, to refer them to for resources and services
- But first, we have to connect with each other
 - This conference is a wonderful example of this
- When we are connected to each other, the referral process is easier and more streamlined for the Veteran/family member

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

- Your work/research helps provide people like me with resources
- Research helps develop policy/funding
- You need to make the connection with what you do and the Veterans/family member you are helping
 - By doing this research, I'm helping identify a gap in services, which will in turn help obtain funding for these services
 - VT Needs Assessment: impacts Veterans in Southwest Virginia
 - Virginia Wounded Warrior Program—fills gaps in services
 - Helped TBI research come to the Salem VAMC
 - Helps providers identify education that family can benefit from

CONCLUSION

- Don't focus on the things that separate us, find ways to connect with each other
- If you are always looking for someone with the exact same experiences as yourself, you will lead a very lonely life