It’s All About Connection

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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 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