

Time May Heal Memories

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newwave@tulane.edu

New research by two Vietnam War veterans suggests that, contrary to the widely held views of mental health experts, repressing painful battlefield memories may actually be helpful to some people who have experienced combat trauma.

It may be healthy for veterans to repress war memories, says Tulane professor Charles Figley. It is a lesson that may be applied to people struggling with post-Katrina memories. (Interview by Fran Simon)

The study by Charles Figley, director of the Tulane Traumatology Institute, and Joseph Boscarino, senior investigator at Geisinger Health System, is published in the June issue of the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*.

Figley, who served in Vietnam as a Marine at the same time as Boscarino, believes this study is a wake-up call to all those who care about combat veterans.

"These men and women deserve our respect in recognizing that they often know better than we do in how to manage their stressful memories, in most cases," says Figley, who holds the Paul Henry Kurzweg Chair in Disaster Mental Health at the Tulane School of Social Work.

The researchers' findings are significant since exposure therapy, which encourages patients to relive painful or traumatic events, is a prevailing practice in psychiatry. Yet, for some patients, this therapy may inadvertently cause a resurfacing of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, putting patients at risk for health problems, the researchers say.

Previous findings have shown that PTSD may cause premature death from heart disease, elevated white blood cell counts and higher erythrocyte sedimentation rate

levels (both indicators of disease) or other illnesses such as rheumatoid arthritis.

Based on this, Boscarino and Figley approached their study believing that repression of traumatic memories would be associated with increased mortality. However, the researchers found that having PTSD along with a repressive personality trait did not necessarily lead to premature death.

"While the dominant therapy model for PTSD should not be abandoned at this point, emerging research suggests that it might need to be seriously re-evaluated, at least for some PTSD patients," Boscarino says. "More research is clearly needed."