

Navy News Service NNS8709. Help When Nightmare Demons Visit
By Rudi Williams, American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON (NNS) -- The emotional effects of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks at the Pentagon and New York's World Trade Center will be felt for a long time by people everywhere, according to Veterans Affairs medical officials.

Those who were at the scene or who have lost loved ones, as well as those who saw or heard about the attacks through the news media, undoubtedly have had and will continue to have strong reactions, said officials at the Veterans Affairs Education Division of the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Palo Alto, Calif.

Such traumatic events create fear, grief, horror, helplessness and the feeling of being overwhelmed, they said. People may be bothered by nightmares or upsetting thoughts and pictures that come to mind. Young children may be upset, distracted or out of sorts. These are normal reactions to stressful events, and they usually get better with time, they said.

Their feelings, the VA mental health officials said, are akin to the emotional trauma of war suffered by combat veterans and former prisoners of war.

Former prisoner of war (POW) Norman Duquette of Cedar Falls, Iowa, who spent 587 days in North Korean and Chinese POW camps, said his nightmare demons never go away. The nightmares don't appear every night, but when they do, he's scared himself awake wet with sweat, screaming -- and tears streaming down his face, he said.

Duquette's ordeal started when he took off from Kimpo Air Base on Jan. 26, 1952, in a RF-80 aircraft on his 87th combat photoreconnaissance mission. His plane was hit by flak and crashed in enemy territory.

He calls one of his recurring dreams, "My 'Hey' Dream." In it, he has spent many years in a Chinese prison camp, fighting for his life and hoping he'll return home to his wife and children someday.

He said his only sight of the outside world is the sky he sees through a small window about eight feet above the floor in his underground concrete cell. The cell reminds him of many places he was held during interrogation and solitary confinement by the Chinese. In his dreams, his captors insist on absolute silence.

While staring at the sky through the tiny window, Duquette hears his guards rustling about. He hears distant English-speaking voices approaching.

"They're Americans, and they're looking for American prisoners who have been left behind," Duquette said. "I decide, in my dreams, that if I can yell an American word loudly, they'd know an American is being held nearby.

"The word I select is 'Hey!'" he said. "If I can only yell that word, the Americans will hear me and I'll be found. But, in my dream, I try and try to yell, but nothing comes out."

Then, from deep within him, and with all his strength, he's able to scream -- "Hey!"

"I scare myself awake, along with my wife and every other member of the household within earshot," he said.

VA mental health officials said family members, loved ones, friends and co-workers can help whether they're affected by traumatic events themselves or helping others through a difficult time:

- Remember that everyone has his or her own pace for processing trauma. Listen to and respect the other person's pace and ways of dealing with the situation.
- Talk to or spend time with people. Coping with stressful events is easier when people support each other.
- Follow your own natural inclination with regard to how much and to whom you talk.
- If talking does not feel right, other forms of expression such as journal writing, hobbies, art or other enjoyable activities are often helpful.
- Find something positive you can do. Give blood. Join efforts in your community to respond to this tragedy. Talk to your children and other loved ones to make sure they are OK.

Help children by:

- Letting them know you understand their feelings.
- Telling them that they really are safe.
- Keeping to your usual routines.
- Keeping them from seeing too many frightening pictures of the events.

Know when to seek help. If a person is still upset two months after the attack, he or she may need to get extra help coping. VA offers the following Web sites where those who need help can get help:

- National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, <http://www.ncptsd.org/>. This Web site provides general information about trauma responses, research and treatment. It recently posted information about self-care, treatment, veterans, primary care clinicians and phases of responses in the aftermath of terrorism.
- PTSD Alliance, <http://ptsdalliance.org/home2.html>. Provides educational information on PTSD to patients, families and professionals. Also call (877) 506-PTSD, toll-free, to receive a free package of information about PTSD, including a video.
- The Sierra-Pacific Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center, <http://mirecc.stanford.edu/>, offers video streamed presentations and journal articles on post-traumatic stress.