

PTSD
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topics, Simons said. "We have a whole series of questions that provide a rating to their various moods, and we ask about their symptoms," he said. "It's programmed to ask them questions at a random time throughout the day, and it records data. We are able to quantify things."

The veterans are asked about their experiences at the moment, Simons said.

"We start off asking where the person is at in a given point in time. Are they at work or at home? What is their social environment like? Whether they are with people or not?" he said. "We also ask questions about experiences that might have reminded them of the war."

The real-time information, along with the randomness of the calls, provide a much clearer picture than asking veterans to remember past moods, Simons said.

"People have all kinds of biases in how they recall information. If you ask them today, 'How was your week?', in part they will be influenced by how they are today," he said. "By knowing how they are feeling in each point in time, we can quantify it as opposed to getting your perceptions about a more remote time."

After one to two weeks, the South Dakota veterans come to the USD campus in Vermillion or to a VA office in Sioux Falls to download their data. The veterans are also interviewed, giving researchers a chance for face-to-face interaction.

The Florida veterans visit offices in their state, Simons said, noting Gaher has contacts among the Florida researchers.

"By having both South Dakota and Florida, we have a wider variety of subjects and we're able to have a sufficient number of people," Simons said. "It's more inclusive and adds to the study."

The researchers will start recruiting subjects in the near future, Simons said.

"We have referrals from within the VA system and are also using advertisements and local media," he said. "Another way is we try to access various veterans groups directly. We're trying to cast a wide net."

The study will hopefully create better awareness of PTSD, defined as a reaction to severe stress, Simons said. In that respect, the research can create a wide-ranging impact for future generations.

"This study will help veterans not only now but in the future," Simons said.

PTSD Groups Focus On Suicide, Mental Issues

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In 2011, a total of 283 U.S. soldiers took their own lives — and that figure was already nearly matched at the half-way mark of this year, a South Dakota National Guard official says.

As of Aug. 10, military statistics showed 191 active Army soldiers had taken their own lives during the calendar year, according to SDNG spokesman Maj. Tony Deiss. In addition, 54 Army National Guard soldiers had committed suicide as of July 13.

"Suicides are occurring across every segment of the force — active, Guard and Reserve; officers and enlisted soldiers; deployed, non-deployed and those who have not deployed; as well as Army civilians and family members," Deiss said.

"There has been an effort by all branches of the military to address the recent issue of increased suicide rates in recent years, especially this year."

Deiss did not have specific statistics about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, the SDNG and other military branches encourage their members to seek help if needed, he said.

"We reassure our service members that, by coming forward and admitting they are having issues with PTSD, that their career is not in jeopardy or will reflect negatively on them," he said.

"We want them to come forward, get the help they need and continue to be valued members of our organization."

The military has emphasized helping its members deal with their mental needs, Deiss said.

"Our number one priority in the SDNG is taking care of soldiers and airmen and their families, and making sure we are doing what we can to ensure our service members are getting the help they might need with any emotional issues is very important," he said.

Resources are available for service members struggling with thoughts of suicide, depression or mental health issues, Deiss said. Those resources include

chaplains, military and family life consultants and mental health

professionals.

"We also have a State Suicide Prevention Program Manager and Transition Assistance Advisor to assist service members returning from deployment, not to mention a number of support help lines that service members receive," he said.

The SDNG has made the suicide issue part of its formal program, Deiss said.

"In recent years, the Guard was required to have at least one hour of suicide awareness and prevention training during the training year," he said.

"Over the next several months, we are having a suicide stand down, where Guard units will complete a total of eight hours of suicide awareness and prevention training and briefings."

BACK TO SCHOOL

The issue of suicide, depression and mental health is not limited to current military members.

The University of South Dakota, like other colleges, offers services for student veterans facing the double challenge of transitioning to civilian life and to a campus atmosphere.

Bruce Kelley and Justin Smith, with the USD Center for Teaching and Learning, are co-authoring a book on preparing a campus to assist veteran students. The book is coming out next year through Stylus publishing.

They note the results of a recent national study of student veterans (Rudd, Goulding & Bryan, 2011) that explored the psychological symptoms, symptom severity and suicide risk of these veteran students. What researchers found, in the words of the author, "was alarming":

- 24 percent of the sample experienced "severe depression";
- 35 percent of the sample experienced "severe anxiety";
- 46 percent experienced significant symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder;
- 7.7 percent have made an attempt to take their own life;
- 46 percent of the sample reported thinking about suicide.

At USD, Smith wants military veterans to know they have a friend on campus. Veterans comprise about 450 of the 10,000 students on the Vermillion campus, he said.

Smith serves as project director for the federal Fides (Latin for "promise") grant that assists veterans transitioning to campus.

"It's about communication, about reaching out and helping them tell their story, he said.

But that's not always easy for either the veterans or those around them, he said.

"Just last week, one of my students came into my office and said, 'I'm not telling my story. I've walled off that part of my life,' he said.

As the conversation continued, Smith learned the student had actually shared his combat experiences with someone and was upset at the reaction.

"The other person had said, 'I completely understand where you are coming from,' because they were both veterans," Smith said. "But my student didn't think the other person could understand because they had been in completely different places."

Smith sees the experience as a valuable teaching moment.

"Hopefully, even though people don't share those same experiences, they have the capacity to empathize and imagine what the veteran is going through," he said. "But one piece of advice that I would give family and friends: drop the assumptions. Try to ask questions that don't carry a lot of assumptions that 'it must be like that.'"

Many veterans may find it difficult to talk about their experiences, but it's not a taboo topic, Smith said. "I don't think veterans want to be treated with kid gloves. You can talk about (combat) if there is a way it comes up naturally," he said. "Most veterans believe they were just doing their job. They don't want to be put on a pedestal. They need a space where they can feel free to be themselves."

A NEW HOME FOR HELP

At USD, veterans are finding a new home for dealing with the transition home.

The Student Veterans Resource Center (SVRC) will celebrate its grand opening Tuesday. An open house runs from 1:30-3:30 p.m., with USD President Jim Abbott offering remarks at the 2 p.m.

ribbon cutting ceremony.

The facility is located at the Temporary Student Center 117D on the USD campus.

"This is a great resource for our student veterans and for students attending USD who are still active in the military, as well as their families," noted Jason R. Dean, USD veterans coordinator. "The Student Veterans Resource Center represents USD's commitment to our student veterans and provides them with a location necessary for academic and personal growth."

Resources provided by the office include benefits assistance, study space and a setting for veterans to share their military experience with other students on campus.

The center provides an important area for social support, Smith said.

"(Veterans feel) this disconnect from other college students, many of them 18 or 19 years old, who have different priorities in life," he said. "The veterans are not only chronologically older, but they also have a different maturity and life experiences when they come back from the service. They may be very career focused, and sometimes they are raising a family."

The opening of the SVRC will offer one more outreach on campus, aid Brendan Whalen, president of the USD Veterans Club.

"Each branch of the military has their own transition assistance class that is mandatory to attend before separating from service," he said. "There are also resources through the VA such as the Vet Center which help with counseling and transitional services."

Other resources include the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Legion, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), and Disabled American Veterans (DAV). The Student Veterans of America (SVA) lobbies on behalf of educational benefits and can assist with help needed in navigating the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

In South Dakota, callers facing a crisis can dial 211 from any phone for a help line and talk with a person on the other end, Whalen said.

"Most important in

combating suicide and PTSD is building a strong network of friends and family to support any veteran battling these crippling diseases," he said. "This is one of the main goals of the USD Veterans Club: to provide a strong and immediate support network for all members who are facing any crisis."

REACHING OUT

Smith recommended talking about veterans as everyday persons — fellow human beings who have faced extraordinary circumstances.

"My experience in teaching a veteran-only class at USD is that though they may be quietly proud of the service to our country, they often struggle against public perception that characterizes them in a negative light," he said. "Presenting them as a hero or someone to be pitied misses the mark and sets up more barriers to rejoining their community. First and foremost, we must present them in a way that invites connection, not being set apart because of their line of work."

"I think a key to preventing more military suicides is creating spaces in our community where they feel they can share their story and believe someone else can empathize with their experience," he added.

"That means building a relationship, which carries risks, Smith said. "A big key for any relationship is building trust over time, meaning you do what you say and say what you do," he said.

Veterans and active military members need to know they have support, Smith said.

"We want them to know, you're not alone," he said. "There are people in your life that care and want to know what you need."

For more information about the USD Student Veterans Resource Center, contact the Veterans Services Office at (605) 677-8833 or veterans@usd.edu or visit www.usd.edu/veterans.

For crisis assistance, visit online at <http://www.helplinecenter.org/211communityresources.aspx>.

For more information on the PostSecret project, visit www.PostSecret.com.

SECRET
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The secrets Warren receives range from lighthearted to deeply serious and arrive each day in his mailbox or his e-mail inbox.

One that he shared last week came from an airport baggage handler. It read, "You called me an idiot, so I sent your bags to the wrong destination. Whoops! I guess you were right!"

Another wasn't a card, but an e-mail telling Warren that its sender had made a card, but the finished product had made them feel horrible, so they tore it up and decided no longer to be the person who carries that secret.

"I love that story," Warren said. "I love how it shows the transformative power that secrets have over us, but also how it demonstrates that sometimes when we think we're keeping a secret, that secret is

actually keep us. And it can undermine your relationships with other people. It could be blocking us from being who we truly are in ways we can't see or identify until we face that part of ourselves that we're hiding."

Warren began PostSecret in November 2004, when he printed up 3,000 postcards and drove through Washington, D.C., handing them out to strangers.

While he concedes the idea sounds crazy, it wasn't long before he knew he had hit on something.

"That first week, I had maybe 100 visitors to the PostSecret Web site, the next week 1,000, the next week 10,000, and soon the idea began spreading virally across the country and around the world," he said.

Since 2004, Warren has released five books filled with PostSecret cards and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the National Suicide Hotline through his Web site.

After the project caught on,

Warren said he "realized that I had accidentally tapped into something that had been there the whole time, something full of mystery and wonder that I still don't fully understand to this day."

One secret he received three months into the project reinforces this idea for him. It is a simple photograph of a door with several holes in it, with the inscription, "The holes are from when my mom tried knocking down my door so she could continue beating me."

"(The day I posted it) over a million people visited the Web site, and I started getting e-mails from young people ... around the world telling me their stories, sending me pictures of their broken bedroom doors, one after another," Warren said.

There was soon a column on the Web site that featured 20 of these pictures.

Warren said that while he received some criticism for posting these, he also received messages from people who had

been abused who said the pictures helped them understand they were not alone.


They also helped Warren understand he was not alone. He had two such doors growing up, he said.

"For the first time I realized there are two kinds of secrets," he said. "There are the kinds of secrets that we keep from other people, and the kinds of secrets that we hide from ourselves."

Warren said he now sees his own secret as the impetus for beginning the project.

"It was only through the courage and strength (others)

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