



“Remember that the hardest part of the Hero’s Journey is not the departure from the common world and not the descent into Hell. The hardest part is the return to the Tribe and Community.”
—Edward Tick, psychologist, *War and the Soul*

Often, the hardest part of a warrior’s journey is not the experience of leaving civilian life or suffering in military service and battle. Many times the hardest part of the journey is coming home to the people and places that they once knew. In ancient times the warrior returned to their tribe. Today, the veteran returns to their local community, family groups, social networks, co-workers, and community organizations. Yet the struggles of the return home remain the same. The readjustment of the warrior back into life at home can be complicated by fear of judgment, misunderstanding, not feeling welcomed, difficulty finding meaningful roles, finding a sense of

trust, redefining home, & more. Carefully witnessing the stories & struggles of the warrior can assist the warrior as she and he rejoins their communities.

Witnessing Veterans Stories: A Guide for the Community

Coming home from combat or military service in general only *begins* the day a Soldier, Sailor, Airman or Marine returns to his or her family. The journey home can be a challenging road with many readjustments to civilian life. Much will have changed during their time of service and events will change service members and all of their family members. Welcoming a veteran home should never end on the day he or she arrives home nor just after the parade. While less than 1% of our population currently serves in the military, war affects us all. He or she has served for us all and we must be respectful of this. We need to honor their commitment to serving our communities both here and abroad. They deserve nothing less.

Witnessing stories of service can be a good way to welcome a service member home. Telling and witnessing stories are good ways to communicate knowledge, share history, and connect us all.

We as community members, families, friends, supporters, employers, and teachers have the opportunity to witness veterans’ stories in many situations and settings. Here are some tips to help you witness a veteran’s story with respect and compassion, no matter the time or place:

1. Just BE There

- Be fully present.
- Be focused on the *person* sharing as much as the *story* you hear.
- Don’t offer any drive-by sympathy—it’s better not to initiate the conversation in the first place.
- Be free of judgment
- Don’t push for details and especially *don’t* ask if a service member has killed someone.
- Let them be aware of your interest in hearing their story or stories, and then be respectful of the one(s) the service member or veteran chooses to share.

2. Be Real and Engaged

- Be yourself (don't try to adapt your language to your veteran unless you are comfortable with that language).
- Conduct yourself with attitudes of acceptance, authenticity, and respect as you would any person meet.
- Let the person know you are engaged with your eye contact and body language.
- Don't be afraid to ask for clarification or explanations. Military is filled with shorthand, acronyms, jargon, and so forth. Veterans are usually happy to educate others.
- Recognize that you will never fully know what they have experienced in war. You don't have to apologize for this or pretend it is not the case. You can just express that you want to learn about their experience.
- Just because a veteran trusts you enough to allow you to witness their story *does not necessarily mean*:
 - They expect you to take the place of a mental health professional
 - They need your validation, sympathy, or agreement.
 - They want to tell you everything about themselves or their military experiences.

3. Be Aware of Emotions (Yours and Theirs)

- Remember, being emotional is often seen as a sign of weakness in military culture. Refrain from an overly emotional reception (e.g. facial expressions). Avoid unnecessary displays of sympathy, etc.
- Try not to over identify emotionally with veteran's story, often a nonchalant manner is valued among veterans.
- Assume nothing in terms of what emotions are attached to events being discussed. Listen neutrally, and let the veteran be your guide to how it feels.
- Don't tell somebody what they "ought" to be feeling, or what they "ought not" to be feeling (e.g., guilt). Use neutral, non-judgmental phrases like "Sounds like you feel..." or questions ("am I hearing that you felt...?").
- The process of telling stories is not without emotional risk to the person doing the telling. They can find themselves panicking, dissociating, or becoming intensely anxious, sad, fearful or angry.

- Offer “grounding” when needed: when somebody is reliving something too intensely, it can be useful to remind them where they are, who they’re with, even WHEN they are (e.g., 2009, not 1969), and that they are now safe and supported.
- Consider your own tolerance for extremity: You may hear content that is shocking, disgusting, horrifying, and hard to swallow. Witnessing can be difficult and you may experience intense emotional responses. Take care of yourself, speak up if the storyteller is getting too graphic for you, and talk to another trusted person about your feelings later.
- Know where your back-up is: Witnessing traumatic narratives can involve needing to get help for somebody who becomes overwhelmed by what they are reliving. Know how to summon or engage mental health assistance, even if in some cases that means knowing where the closest ER is.

4. Be Aware of Your Own Reactions/Politics/Viewpoints

- Be apolitical. The veteran may share political views as part of their story, but this does not mean they want to discuss politics.
- Do a self-check in terms of your own attitudes/beliefs/opinions about war, the Commander-in-Chief, politics, soldiers, military culture, etc. To the degree that you have strong opinions or beliefs, it’s probably wise to “lean” a little in the direction opposite to your beliefs.
- The veteran *may* have strong opinions and anger with some aspect of their military experience, how the government treated them when they got out of the military, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), etc. Let them know that you hear them, but don’t feel you must get angry with them to support and witness their story.

5. Be Aware of the Setting

- Witnessing takes place in public and private settings. However different settings can require different sensitivities
- Be aware of the people and environment around you. Take account of you and the storyteller’s comfort level. For example, many veterans do not feel comfortable in crowds or open public spaces.
- When being aware of your and the veteran’s surroundings consider:
 - Are there others present that the veteran feels comfortable with?
 - Are you too isolated? How safe do you feel?
 - Is the setting too formal? Informal? Public?
 - What is the time of day? Are their important time constraints?

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PROJECT



Mission Statement: *The Vet Art Project creates opportunities for veterans and their family members to work in collaboration with artists from all disciplines to create new art about war and service for public performance and viewing. The goals of the Vet Art Project are to support our veterans, create stronger voices among our veterans, provide new opportunities for artists, and offer a venue to hear the voices of our veterans, and foster discussions about how war affects us all.*

*Founded by artist Lisa Rosenthal, this grassroots network of artists offers creative arts workshops, community discussions, and public performances of new art by veterans, and by veteran and artist collaborative teams, followed by talkbacks with veteran participants. Inspired by psychologist Edward Tick's book *War and the Soul* (www.soldiersheart.net), Rosenthal is growing the Vet Art Project across the United States and around the world. More information at www.vetartproject.com.*