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Liberty University

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## Student talks about serving in Iraq at PTSD awareness event

February 01, 2009 | Teresa Dunham

*"How was Iraq? Did you like it over there?"*

Liberty University student Jesse Hogan can't count the number of times someone has asked him those generalized questions.

"I didn't mind answering questions for people that were specific things. The thing that made me mad and got me really frustrated was when people were asking me because they thought they needed to ask me. They really didn't want to know anything," said Spc. Hogan, 22, who served with the Army National Guard in Iraq.

Speaking candidly to students at a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder awareness event as part of LU's Military Appreciation Week in the fall semester, Hogan tried to bridge the gap of understanding between civilians and returning veterans.

He told the group gathered in the Arthur S. DeMoss Learning Center that vague questions made him feel like no one really understood what he was going through when he first came home, and often the questions made him want to be alone.

Nowadays he's enjoying everyday life, but he admitted that it wasn't easy when he first came home. While he was in Iraq, he longed to see his friends and family again — but the excitement quickly wore off when he returned to the U.S.

“I felt like I was losing control over here, and things were slipping out of my hands. I was disappointing people. I wasn’t meeting people’s expectations,” he said, explaining that his life in Iraq involved highly structured missions that he could succeed at by following a checklist of motions.

Human relationships weren’t so easy to navigate, he said, and he was having trouble flipping the switch from soldier to ordinary life. People wanted him to be OK right away, as though they could “fix him” or explain to him what was wrong, but Hogan said what he really needed was space.

“It takes time to switch over and realize I’m a civilian now,” he said. “I needed people to have a lot of patience with me, and sometimes that was in short supply.”

An anxiety attack at work earlier this summer gave Hogan the message that he had some issues to resolve, and he made a conscious effort to open up about his experiences and begin sharing his thoughts with friends, family and other veterans.

“Sometimes it just takes time,” he said.

Fellow student Jeffrey Harrison, who also served with the Army National Guard in Iraq, said he was diagnosed with PTSD when he returned — but he didn’t seek treatment for it.

“I would say that they were wrong,” he said of the diagnosis.

If he’d sought counseling, he said it would have gone on his record.

“I just felt like it was something I could deal with myself,” said Harrison, who believes he is transitioning well.

Putting the brave student testimonies into perspective, LU assistant professor of psychology Dr. Clay Peters started the evening with a lecture about the symptoms of PTSD.

Soldiers serving their country in Iraq and Afghanistan often think about home — but he said even after they’re back, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder sometimes keeps them from feeling like they’ve really “come home.”

Part of what makes the transition so hard is that soldiers are trained to be highly alert; they’ve lived with the constant knowledge that they could die, and some of them have seen friends injured. Other elements, such as the extremely hot climate and culture shock, can also contribute to the stress that builds in soldiers over time, he said.

Peters said major symptoms of PTSD are flashbacks, avoidance of situations that remind the soldier of the experience, hyper vigilance and emotional numbness — and the number of soldiers who experience PTSD is high. One in six soldiers coming back from Iraq and one in four coming from Afghanistan experience some form of anxiety, depression or PTSD.

“In your quiet time, pray for these people. We’re safe because of what they did for us,” Peters said. “We’re at a great Christian university, but if these men and women weren’t out there fighting for us, how long would this be a great Christian university? What would be our country?”