

She's a soldier first but her brain is in war

Women in the military are more prone than men to encounter potential PTSD conditions. First they are more likely to encounter rape and second while not serving directly in combat, they experience trauma from exposure to related combat activity.



Both rape and combat inducing trauma are PTSD – “post traumatic stress disorder” conditions that can neurologically alter the brain. As a consequence of PTSD provoking conditions, the brain responds with an abnormal, long-term stress response.

The three most common PTSD symptoms are –

- Reliving the event
- Avoidance
- Arousal

In reliving an event, the brain's **memory activity is retriggered**. Memories can be so strong that they are called “*flashbacks*.” It is as if one is back in the experience for real. These repetitive flashback episodes can be triggered by sound, image, come out of no where, occur as nightmares and appear beyond conscious control.

The brain can also **seek avoidance by appearing to shut down** with feelings of numbness and detachment. In contrast to the flashbacks, memory of the event may be vague or non-existent. There may be an avoidance of people or places or anything that might be a reminder. Feelings ranging from loss of hope and serious depression may also manifest.

The brain also **experiences states of hyper-arousal and hyper-vigilance**. The quality and depth of sleep and the ability to concentrate are most commonly affected. Also documented are quick and exaggerated responses, especially of anger. It seems that one is always

on alert and is easily startled by the slightest of noise or other conditionedm previously live-saving responses.

In a New York Times November 2009 article, Damien Cave profiled veteran Vivienne Pacquette.

She witnessed "... everything from a suicide bomber exploding a nearby tent to a mortar attack hitting the motor pool where her unit worked, where she saw friends blown up "beyond recognition."

Cave wrote that "Recalling the scene nearly five years later, Mrs. Pacquette's dark brown eyes began darting back and forth, as if looking for another rocket. She was in St. Croix, the island where she grew up, but her body stiffened like a wound coil ..."

Vivienne like many other female soldiers has a brain that is still in war.