

*Sunday May 12, 2013*

## **No touch-screen cure for PTSD**

By Jim Taylor

I suppose I should be pleased – the federal ministry of Veterans Affairs is finally taking Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) seriously.

In the first and second World Wars, PTSD was called “shell shock,” “battle fatigue,” or even “cowardice.” If they were lucky, victims got some rest-and-relaxation time to recover, before being sent back into battle. Otherwise, treatment tended to consist of commands to “get over it!”

Last week, Veterans Affairs announced that it was funding a new smartphone app to help veterans – and others – cope with PTSD.

A Canadian Press story stated that the app – called PTSD Coach Canada – “provides users with information on PTSD, self-assessment for symptoms, information about health care, and where to find support.”

The story continued, “It also contains tools – ranging from relaxation skills and positive self-talk to anger management – that can help users manage symptoms and the stresses of daily life.”

And that’s all good. I think. As far as it goes.

But given their record, I have a queasy feeling that Veterans Affairs will use this app to weasel out of responsibilities.

To veterans disabled by depression, withdrawal, lethargy, loss of interest in activities, loss of appetite, weight, and sleep, behavioral aberrations, recurring suicidal thoughts, and feelings of hopelessness and despair, Ottawa will say, “We gave you an app to deal with PTSD, didn’t we? Now get over it!”

### **Effects of traumatic stress**

Face it – PTSD is a long-term disability. It can’t be treated by tapping icons on a touch screen.

The name describes the problem – post traumatic stress. The victims have been through situations that they cannot erase from their memories. For war veterans, it may have been narrowly escaping death. Or watching comrades get killed and maimed. Or it may have been the killing and maiming that they themselves did.

When William Busbee came home from his third tour of duty in Afghanistan, according to a *Guardian* story, he began compulsively washing his hands.

"Mom, it won't wash off," he said.

"What are you talking about?" she replied.

"The blood. It won't come off."

Just over a year ago, Busbee committed suicide. Sitting in his car, while his mother and two sisters screamed outside his locked doors, he put a bullet through his head.

Over 6500 U.S. veterans have now taken their own lives after leaving the services – more than all the active combat deaths in both Iraq wars and in Afghanistan. It’s now estimated that a U.S. veteran ends his life every 80 minutes.

The picture is no brighter for those still in active duty. Last year, the military lost more members to suicide than to active combat – 167 suicides, 166 combat deaths.

Those figures led Melanie Haiken to assert, in *Forbes* magazine, “For every soldier killed by enemy combatants, 25 veterans kill themselves.”

These are American figures. Because Canadian agencies seem unable to agree on their data, comparable Canadian figures are hard to come by. I get the impression that about 30 per cent of Canadian soldiers returning from Afghanistan, and before that from Kosovo, sought treatment for PTSD.

A smart-phone app trivializes this reality. It attempts to mitigate symptoms, instead of dealing with the cause. It's like offering lozenges for smokers' cough instead of attacking tobacco addiction.

## Causes of traumatic stress

For the military, the cause of PTSD is obvious – war. Quit going to war, and you'll solve the problem of PTSD.

Unfortunately, PTSD is not limited to the military. I contend that anyone who is not a psychopath has experienced some degree of PTSD, at some time. Most recover; a few never do.

It might have been a tragic car accident. A life-threatening illness. The untimely death of a spouse or partner, a child, a parent. A natural disaster...

Some figures claim that over 30 per cent of the citizens of New Orleans experienced some form of PTSD after Hurricane Katrina.

Again using U.S. figures, 467,321 persons in 2011 were victims of a crime committed with a firearm. It's hard to shrug off the impact of a bullet ripping through your body.

Anyone who has been through such experiences knows that there is no quick cure. No pill will restore life the way it used to be. No magic button will wipe clean that hard disk in the back of your mind that keeps spinning, spinning...

Treatment, at the moment, seems to take two tracks.

One attempts to simulate the experience, in a safer setting. It's like getting back on a horse after being bucked off, or taking the wheel again in an empty parking lot. It lets you regain some shattered confidence.

The second track focuses on talk. You talk about your experiences – perhaps with a professional therapist, perhaps with empathetic friends – until the trauma becomes a memory, until the pain becomes a memory of pain, and even that eventually becomes merely a memory of a memory.

Treating PTSD, regardless of the cause, requires a lot more than tapping icons on a touch-screen.

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## YOUR TURN

The death toll in the garment workers fire in Bangladesh has now topped 1,000. I feel sick when I think of all those people crushed, trapped, screaming in pain, within inches of each other, listening to each other die in the rubble. To talk about hope in that kind of situation may have been polyanna-ish.

Steve Roney pointed out a factual error – the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire was in New York, not Toronto. Steve kindly called the error “a slip of the pen,” but I'm no longer sure whether the slip was mine or Doug Saunders'.

Steve also questioned my analysis of causes of improvement in Asian sweatshops: “It wasn't international pressure. International pressure is going to be about equal internationally, on Korea, China, or Bangladesh. The difference is accounted for entirely by development. With development, better jobs become available, and the garment factories must improve worker conditions to compete for labour.”

Brooks Henderson was also pessimistic: "Unfortunately the likely change will be to move on to some less developed place where working conditions will be no better."

Me, I'm guessing the next place will be Myanmar/Burma.

Lee d'Anjou also drew attention to the Triangle fire, from a different perspective: "The International Ladies' Garment Workers, which set many precedents, obtained -- and knew how to use -- considerable sympathy after the unspeakable fire at Manhattan's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Rose Schnederman said to middle-class women gathered at a memorial for the 150 young immigrant women killed in a fire they could not escape:

"I can't talk fellowship to you who are gathered here. Too much blood has been spilled. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. The only way they can save themselves is by a strong working-class movement."

Vic Sedo lamented our consumer mentality: "If we could only stop buying clothing for at least two years. Do without the new stuff. Go to Goodwill or Value Village. That might send a message. If we can't live without new stuff for a few years, there's something wrong."

My friend and mentor Alan Reynolds wrote, "Your knowledge of and interest in the Indian subcontinent shows. I find these columns especially interesting and helpful."

"Great piece," wrote Isabel Gibson. "One of Stephen Covey's principles of effective people was that they align their 'circle of concern' with their 'circle of influence': they try not to fuss about things they can't change. Conversely, within their influence range, they take an interest.

"Globalization has thrown us for a loop -- we know about stuff we can't possibly change; we act and can't ever know the full outcome. A lot of humility is in order..."

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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