



A Dignity Memorial® Guidance Series

XIII

CARING FOR *a veteran:*

UNDERSTANDING THEIR UNIQUE NEEDS AND YOUR OWN

WRITTEN BY PAT MC GUIRE

Dignity®
MEMORIAL



Dear Veteran Caregiver,

I AM A GRIEF COUNSELOR who has worked with thousands of veteran's families over the past 20 years. These family members have shown me the inner workings of military life from a perspective that has opened my eyes to the difficulties family members of veterans have faced or may now be facing. The words on these pages are derived from the lessons that veterans' loved ones have taught me—words that might help you in the days ahead.

As a person who loves a veteran, you may find that you need the same things non-veterans and their families need when a loss is experienced: comfort, sympathy, emotional support of friends and family, knowledge, coping skills, time, and healing. You may also discover that the military culture may create special grief needs. You may be aware of the importance of the service that your loved one provided for our country, but you may not be aware that you too have served.

THERE ARE SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING GRIEF AND THE MILITARY THAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT.

You may notice that the stoicism your loved one was taught in the military has had an impact on your whole family system. Just like veterans, perhaps you hide your grief behind a silent or angry facade, cavalier humor, an attitude of bravado, or an "I'm fine" wall of denial. Perhaps you are like the career Marine's wife who was described by a friend as "just as much a Marine as he is." When her mother died, they were in the middle of a base transfer. She attended the funeral and returned to carry on as planned. She made the move, got her children settled in their new schools, and buried her grief. Many years later when her husband died, the grief of her mother's death was right there waiting for her as well. Since it's never too late to grieve a loss, she was able (with permission and encouragement) to grieve both losses.



You may find that when there is a death in the family, your veteran may not respond to it the way you expect. A veteran's inability to grieve someone's death might be due to fear of unresolved grief from comrades who died in combat, and this fear can sometimes cause the veteran to detach from grief. One veteran's fifteen-year-old son was killed in a motor vehicle accident. To the dismay of his wife and other children, he was not able to grieve his son's death. Instead, he flashed back to his service in Vietnam and became obsessed with an incident that had taken place forty years earlier. He had been on a convoy and watched as one of the trucks ran over a local Vietnamese boy who was about fifteen. He was horrified as they were ordered to continue on their assignment as the young boy was left presumably dying on the road side. He worked through the guilt he felt over taking the young Vietnamese boy from his parents by writing them a letter of apology. Then, and only then, was he able to join his family in grieving the death of his own son. Even though the letter could not be given to the parents, it still helped to unbind the guilt he felt.

Another veteran who was given a terminal diagnosis stated: "*I don't want anyone with me through this. I don't want people to see me weak.*" He added: "*When I can't take care of myself, I'll just go out in the woods to die.*" As he journeyed from diagnosis to his final days, he made a different decision and slowly began allowing his Vietnam brothers to visit and to care of him. For many veterans, death has been violent and traumatic with no time to grieve or honor those losses. This veteran's courageous choice to be a gracious receiver allowed his brothers-in-arms to provide physical comfort in forms of repositioning, drinks of water, feeding, and even circles of prayer with tenderness and dignity. By using their camaraderie and overcoming their fear of vulnerability, they created a beautiful death for their comrade and a new concept about death for themselves.





If you have a loved one deployed to a combat zone and the Red Cross notifies them of the death in the family, they may decline the offer to return home for the funeral. One young Iraq war soldier was notified that his father had died. The young soldier was offered emergency leave from his combat assignment to come home for the funeral. He chose to stay with his troop. His family had difficulty understanding his decision. His decision was understandable. Stoicism is needed to face war each day. He said, "*I would feel like a deserter leaving my brothers-in-arms*" and "*I could not imagine going from active combat to my father's funeral and back into combat in a week's time. It would be an emotional bungee jump.*" Instead of encouraging the family to convince their son to come home, I encouraged them to understand his predicament and respect his decision. I also encouraged them to hold a small memorial service for the father upon the son's return from Iraq. I counseled them to be prepared for the expression of unmourned grief the son may have for comrades that had been killed. I let them know that grieving unmourned grief is beneficial and to view this as an



opportunity which would help their son with some of the complications that arise in the aftermath of war's losses.

Civilians can learn to understand the needs of military culture and to keep their hearts open and support the soldier's decision. It is never too late to grieve a loss. It is not unusual to plan a ceremony for a lost loved one only to identify one or two more losses. For one veteran, we started with a candle lighting ceremony for his brother who had just died and finished with nine candles. His brother's death brought up the trauma of learning that eight soldiers died in a helicopter crash minutes after returning him safely to the ground.

After years as a military family, you may find that you are pretty self-sufficient and able to manage most life events on your own. Loss of a loved one often requires special support and this might be a good time for you to learn to ask for help. Most of us are raised to be givers and asking for help is not something we find easy. Without someone to receive, there can be no givers. Our job is to recognize which half of this whole we currently occupy. Through our lifetimes, we will need to be both givers and gracious receivers. By graciously receiving, we grow in humility and continue to give by modeling for givers how to receive. And we continue to grow by opening ourselves to accept help.

Many family members at bedside have relaxed heavily into their chairs when they were officially given the job of gracious receiver. If you can grasp the importance of this lesson, you will be able to be present with your loved one and just "be." Allow professional staff to provide physical care while you provide your presence and love. You may have been caregiving single handedly at home for months or even years. Now is the time to allow others to do for you. Conversely, you may find that your veteran loved one may need to be educated about gracious receiving and given permission to allow others to do for them



when they are ill or grieving. Veterans are trained givers and may find it difficult to settle into receiving care. Explaining the job of becoming a gracious receiver and giving permission to receive help can allow veterans to open up to receive the love and support they need and deserve.

“Service brats” (children raised by active duty service personnel) may find that in addition to their grief over the death of the veteran, they experience grief over things they experienced during their childhoods. One woman realized that the hostility she had carried for her father stemmed from the many moves they had made as her father rose in rank when she was in first grade. She now realized that the little girl part of her still held her father responsible for the stress of attending five different first grades. She was able to identify this injured piece of herself and to reclaim it by forgiving her father for being in the military. They were able to heal this aspect of their relationship before his death and enjoy a closeness they had not known in years.

An adult daughter of a Vietnam veteran was hurt and angry. *“I dreaded the evening news when my father was described as a ‘trained killer’.”* Even Social Studies assignments on current events could be traumatic. Other students would report on the military “baby killers” and when she attempted to share her father’s point of view, she was told to “be quiet and sit down.” Another woman spoke of her rage when she was a small child and met her returning Vietnam veteran father at the airport. She witnessed her father’s humiliation of being spat upon by protesters and the negative impact of this experience on her family later at home. In her adult life, she needed to forgive the protestors at the airport, this country, and our government for decisions made and acts done that had personally hurt her. She was able to find forgiveness when she visited the Vietnam Wall Memorial.



Sometimes traumatic memories surface at the end of life. Your veteran might express regret about things he or she saw or did while serving in dangerous duty assignments. When this occurs, listen carefully and ask questions about what your loved one is feeling. Resist the urge to say things like, “*You don’t need to feel guilty about that. It was a long time ago.*” You may want to seek out one of the many hospices and funeral homes who are partnering with the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization’s We Honor Veteran’s program to provide veteran specific care and support. Hospice nurses, social workers, and chaplains as well as funeral home personnel receive special training and have expertise with veterans at the end of life. The book ***Peace at Last: Stories of Hope and Healing*** [Grassman, 2009] can also provide insight into posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at the end of life.

If PTSD is identified for the first time as your veteran is dying, the impact on your family needs to be factored into your bereavement needs. Your family members may feel relief: “*I’m so glad to know it has a name. I knew something was wrong but I didn’t know what. This makes sense.*” Other family members might feel guilty: “*I wish I would’ve realized this sooner, I would have_____ (listened more carefully, gotten him help, been more patient and understanding, etc.).*” Talk about your feelings with others and be careful about taking on unreasonable guilt for something you had no control over.

LOVING A VETERAN CAN BE COMPLICATED.

The veteran you love (or used to love) may have gained a deeper appreciation of life by surviving combat; he or she may recognize each day as a gift. On the other hand, your veteran may have stuffed many feelings or experiences encountered during wartime, seemingly carrying on with their pre-war lives. A third group may be changed by their combat experience and be unable to effectively cope or cope in ways that adversely affect you and the rest of your family. Veterans in this last



category may have struggled for years with bouts of depression, anger, nightmares, joblessness, workaholism, being overly protective, overly responsible or controlling. Your veteran may have coped with bad memories and feelings by using drugs or alcohol; they may have isolated themselves in order to feel safe. Living in this environment may have caused you and your children to feel abandoned or abused. You may have understandably developed dysfunctional coping mechanisms to deal with their behaviors. This kind of lifestyle may precipitate divorce, creating multiple families by the time your veteran comes to the end of life. A common saying among Vietnam vets that overly simplifies this issue is: *"Most veterans with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been married three times."* You may recognize yourself and your children as one of the three different families at a veteran's death bed. Perhaps you are the first family: abandoned when the veteran first returned home from war and was unable to reconnect with you. You and your children may be angry. Or maybe when the veteran remarried and started a second family, it was with you. You and your children may have lived with abuse, drugs and alcohol, and developed dysfunctional coping mechanisms. After a second divorce, the veteran may have gotten into recovery and gotten help for his PTSD. A third marriage is



often to someone who already has children. If this is you, your children may reap the benefit of the veteran's recovery and think their stepfather is very special. Imagine this veteran's death bed with all of these family members present! You can appreciate the wide range of anger, estrangement, and forgiveness issues that may surface in this highly-charged emotional environment. If you find yourself in one of these scenarios, you might want to consider some of the following possibilities.

You have a unique relationship with your veteran. Even in complex situation like the one described above, your veteran loves (or loved) each family member in their own unique way. At times, all of these diverse family members are able to come together to share this time at the end of a veteran's life. I have seen families bond as they meet half-siblings for the first time, learning more about each other and their veteran's life. One young man came to the bedside feeling alone in the world, believing he was an only child. Within minutes, he met two sisters and an aunt and uncle he never knew existed. They were able to be open to one another. Greater understanding of his father's life emerged during this time and lasting ties were formed. This instance clearly demonstrates that although the past cannot be changed, new understanding can help to change the relationship to the past. This family and others have been able to open their hearts and grow through these times, gaining more family and love than when they started.

As might be expected, there can be outright hostility with no hope of mutual respect and cooperation. Multiple families may have a lot of judgment about one another. Guilt, shame, and blame are often the fuel that has been used to avoid the pain of the underlying loss of healthy relationships. You can anticipate that these feelings will intensify as your veteran gets weaker or more seriously ill. When feeling helpless and out of control, it is not unusual to become frightened and defensive. I encourage you to try something different. Choose to accept that "it is



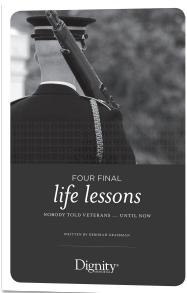
what it is,” and open up to a future that doesn’t match the past. Remarkable things can happen when you keep your heart and mind open. Just because the bait of hostility, jealousy, or anger is cast your direction, doesn’t mean you have to bite. Instead, let go of what was (what you wish it had been), and open up to what’s to come. Remember, anything can happen and it could be something good.

THERE ARE IMPORTANT THINGS YOU CAN SAY AND DO.

As much as we wish it could be otherwise, we will all die one day and so will our loved ones. Because this is such a painful thought, we may avoid thinking about this reality. Veteran families have taught me that the more we resist the reality of death, the harder we make it for ourselves and our loved ones. We may secretly recognize that the end of life is near, but “*I don’t want to tell him/her.*” Both the veteran and the family members may be holding this same secret. Repeatedly, veterans and their families have shown me the benefits of facing illness and end-of-life issues “together.” When you have shared your lives for so many years, doesn’t it make sense to share this sacred time too? “Won’t that hurt? Won’t we all cry?” Yes, you may cry, and it also hurts if you remain isolated in your pain. It is only by going through the pain of loss that you can come through it and find your “new normal” in life. I cannot tell you how many families have told me after a loved one’s death that: “*Although this is the most painful thing I’ve ever experienced, it was beautiful in ways that I can’t describe.*” One family who was avoiding the fact that their veteran was in the final weeks of life, sat at a bedside meeting... I asked him, to the horror of his family, if he thought the end of his life was near. He appeared relieved, answering, “Yes.” He went on to say that he felt ready to die. He expressed his sadness about leaving his family and his weariness with struggling for each breath. His wife and two daughters were surprised by his reaction to this question and initially tried to convince him that he was getting better. He was clear that although he would rather get better and go home, he



knew that his death was near. Then, they cried, acknowledged this truth and openly expressed their love for him. Their time at the bedside transformed from a time of pretense that “he’s going to get better,” to actively living the final days of his life to their fullest. They reported after his death that: “This was a precious time for our family” and “I’m so glad we didn’t miss these special moments.”



The companion to this pamphlet is ***Four Final Life Lessons Nobody Told Veterans...Until Now***. It is designed to bring end-of-life veteran issues out of the dark into the light. Use the pamphlet to bring healing to your veteran and your family. If you do not have a copy, contact your local Dignity Memorial® provider for a copy or download a copy on their website (www.DignityMemorial.com) or on the Opus Peace website (www.OpusPeace.org).

Sometimes contention or legalities may limit your ability to visit at the bedside or in some cases to attend the funeral. Even without legal rights, the needs of your heart are still important and there is more than one way to meet these needs. Social workers, nurses, and chaplains can often be of assistance with both your anticipatory grief (the grief you feel “before” the death) as well as the grief you feel after the death. You might be like a woman who loved and cared for the lonely veteran next door to her for the past five years only to be dismissed from the bedside by a newly-reunited daughter or another daughter who was banned from her father’s bedside by his current wife and her children. This daughter found assistance when she came to me for bereavement support. She acknowledged that she had not been a perfect daughter and that her jealousy and actions toward her father’s stepchildren had caused a lot of trouble and pain for everyone. She understood why she was banned, yet she had a deep need to talk with her



father and to say goodbye. I recognized the healing this would bring for both father and daughter. I assisted her in writing a letter to her father. In the letter, the daughter took responsibility for the things she had done. She shared the good, the bad, and the ugly of her relationship with her father. The resounding message of her letter was that she was sorry she had responded in anger to his attempts to reach out to her. She forgave him for not being the father she wished she had. She thanked him for the “exquisite moments” they did have. She told him of her deep love for him and that although she would miss him when he died, somehow, she would be okay when he was no longer physically present. This allowed her to let go of all the ways their relationship had not been what she had hoped it would be. She was able to make peace with what it was. I reminded her that people die, but love never dies. Her relationship with her father was changing, dramatically, but it would never end. This letter was a gift to both father and daughter.

Although you may not be able to have the time and access you feel you need and deserve, you can still find ways to honor the relationship you shared. Take advantage of VA memorial services, military ceremonies, and other remembrances as opportunities to express your love and feel your grief for this person. You can create your own services. One veteran’s “next of heart” was denied information by the legal “next of kin” about the interment ceremony at the National Cemetery. When he recovered from his deep hurt over this intentional slight, he arranged a second informal service at the graveside with their many friends. They were unable to arrange military honors, but there were tears, stories, and loving support. This may not be the way you hoped it would be or the closing you expected, but remember: no one can take away the relationship you shared with your veteran.

You and your family may find opportunities for healing by learning about the seven tasks of living and dying healed:



“Forgive me,” “I forgive you,” “thank you,” “I love you,” “good-bye,” “let go,” and “open up” [Byock (1997) Grassman (2013)]. The first two tasks are about forgiveness. Each of us does things in our lives that hurt one another and so there may be room for forgiveness in your relationships. When you are preparing for a loved one’s death, you often realize their importance in your life and want to express gratitude for the specific ways they impacted you. In some families, there are few verbal expressions of love and the words “I love you” can be a gift of great magnitude. The hardest of these tasks is often “good bye.” However, this can be just the permission your loved one needs so that they can let go of this world and open up to the next. Sometimes people hesitate to say goodbye because they mistakenly think their loved one will not die if they don’t say goodbye. Death is not a choice; it is a fact of life. Don’t miss this opportunity to say goodbye and to let your loved one know that somehow, you will get through this and live. Additionally, the need to “let go” of what was and “open up” to what is now is a process that can be applied to navigating any change or transition we face at any time during our lives, such as job changes, lost hopes, chronic illness, and aging.

These steps can be equally effective in bringing healing after the death of a love one. The seven steps can be used when a loved one has died and you have not been able to make peace before they died. A veteran came to me for counseling after the death of his sister. He had not gone to see her before her death because *“I didn’t want to see her weak and ill.”* After her death, he could not forgive himself for abandoning her. During one counseling session, I had him write a letter to his sister. He expressed his remorse and shame for lacking courage to see her. He wrote of his great love for her and the tremendous hole he felt in his life without her. He acknowledged his denial, *“If I didn’t see you, I could pretend it wasn’t true.”* In a later session, I had him write a letter back from his sister to himself. At first, he told me this was impossible because she was dead. Later he





agreed that perhaps her love for him could write a letter to him. He began writing and this was a very tearful, healing session as his sister's love forgave him for not being there. He began a new chapter in his relationship with his sister. He was beginning to learn the job of bereavement: Letting go of the world with his sister in it and opening up to the world without her physical presence. These are dramatically different worlds and this is hard work, but he was beginning to believe that love never dies.

When your loved one dies, you may find yourself entangled in a dispute over the veteran's "stuff." This is frequently an area that creates conflict because many people confuse love with "stuff." It may be difficult to determine what rightfully belongs to whom. There are ways to avoid this problem. One veteran thoughtfully distributed family treasures to her family members while she was still well and healthy. She took "living well" to the next level by "giving with a warm hand." A well-decorated combat veteran outlined in his will who would receive his war medals and other important keepsakes.

Unfortunately, "stuff" is not always wrapped up so neatly. One common contention after the death of a veteran with a multiple-family constellation is: "Who gets the flag?" Only one flag is provided for each veteran, yet there may be more than one person who feels they are entitled to it. In these situations, it can be helpful to work with the local hospice, funeral home, VA or Veterans Service Officer to arrange for the provision of more than one flag. If that is not possible, consider purchasing an extra flag and having it presented at the funeral or other setting. This act can prevent the escalation of hostile feelings. Other family members might have anger or bitterness about their veteran not getting a medal, service-connected disability, or pension. These feelings can interfere with effective grieving: "*Dad was wounded in combat and he never received his Purple Heart. They lost his records.*" This veteran and his entire

family were bothered over this injustice for many years. After his father's death, one son doggedly pursued his father's records until the Purple Heart was later awarded. This act helped the family begin to move through their grief. In a similar situation in which the Purple Heart could not be obtained, one of the nurses made a "purple heart," ceremonially pinning it on him while citing the heroic deeds that he had done. The bereaved family's tears identified this act as extremely meaningful and healing.

**IF YOU ARE TOLD, "THERE'S NOTHING ELSE WE CAN DO,"
RECOGNIZE THIS FOR THE MYTH IT IS.**

This statement may lead you to feel helpless when you are not. There are many ways you can respond meaningfully to your veteran as they near the end of their lives.

For all of us as we age and particularly as we approach the end of our lives, the conscious mind gets weaker and the unconscious mind gets stronger. That's when suppressed memories might surface. Unbidden wartime memories can be particularly troublesome. These recollections might appear as raw memories, nightmares, or flashbacks (acting as if the memory is actually currently happening). There are several things that you can do to help. Encourage your loved one to talk about wartime memories that surface. *"But he never*



wanted to talk about them before,” I often hear. I then educate family members on the changing needs of the veteran: *“It used to be easier not to talk about them, but his needs are changing and it might be harder to not talk about them now.”* I explain the importance of listening and also how hard it can be to listen to ugly wartime stories that may now be evoking tears – tears that the family has not previously witnessed from their stoic veteran. I prepare them for this and let them know the healing value of simply providing quiet, supportive witness. If they still think they are unable to listen, I offer them the option of having another family member, friend, or professional caregiver who will be able to provide this kind of healing support.



Agitation may accompany traumatic memories. Sitting in silence and placing your hand on your loved one’s heart is called the hand-heart connection and can have a calming effect on both of you. Placing your loved one’s hand over your own heart at the same time magnifies the connection; the non-verbal communication is often profound.

One young man had been abandoned by his father at the age of two. Thirty years later, his father reached out from his



death bed to reckon with his failure as a father and ask for forgiveness. His son had been searching for his father and was thrilled when he was contacted. Not only had he forgiven his father, but he traveled to be at his bedside. When he arrived, his father was no longer conscious. He was given a crash course in the tasks of “living and dying healed” and was told about the hand-heart connection. He was instructed to place his hand firmly on his father’s heart and to hold his father’s hand on his own heart. Grateful to have something to do, he was encouraged to sit silently in this way and focus on the connection between himself and his father. When I checked on them after ten minutes, not a word had been spoken, but each of them had tears streaming down their cheeks. I checked again later and found both with eyes closed and smiles on their faces. The veteran died the next day. Rather than sitting awkwardly and helplessly at the bedside, this son reported the peace and connection he felt during his time with his father. The wound of abandonment that had plagued him throughout his life had begun to heal. He was able to learn that it is never too late to achieve the tasks of living and dying “healed”, and that it can even be accomplished non-verbally.

PERHAPS YOU ARE EXPERIENCING THE CHRONIC SORROW THAT CAREGIVING CAN CAUSE.

If you are caring for a veteran with PTSD, physical or mental disability, or long-term illness, you may be exhausted from providing care. There is a special grief called chronic sorrow that comes from living with significant losses with no foreseeable end. Chronic sorrow explains the experiences of many veterans and their caregivers as they experience one loss after the other with no stable periods to allow time for grief and adjustment.

Perhaps you have been your veteran’s full-time caregiver for many years. You may have relied on your veteran’s disability check for support. Now, as death nears, both you and your veteran may have high anxiety about how you will survive the



loss of financial support. At times, I have seen families trying to cope with this situation by seeking futile care to keep their veteran alive. At other times, I've seen veterans fighting death so they can continue to provide financial support for their family. A better alternative is to acknowledge the financial situation as the practical consideration it is. Ask for social work services to help your family with financial strategies and resources.

SELF-CARE: AN ESSENTIAL, OFTEN OVERLOOKED, REQUIREMENT FOR SUCCESSFUL CARE OF YOUR VETERAN

As your veteran's needs have increased, so have yours. You are probably acutely aware of your veteran's needs; unfortunately, you may only be dimly aware of your own increasing needs. You might be surprised at how much better you can feel if you make just a few, simple inner shifts:

- Give yourself permission to have needs and to validate the toll that caregiving takes. There is no need to maintain a stoic front with yourself. The part of you that is tired can actually receive some energy when you let go of denial and acknowledge the hardship it is carrying. You can then even thank that part of yourself for the load it is willing to carry!
- Accept your limitations. You can't be everything, at all times, for all people—including your veteran. It is okay to say “No”—even to your veteran. Although this may be difficult at first because you don't want to disappoint others or you want do everything possible to maximize your veteran's quality of life, the reality is: You have limits. Surprisingly, you will probably find that respecting your own limits will actually end up liberating you in small ways that have big rewards—both for you and the veteran.





- Ask for help. This may strike a blow to your pride when it subtly or not-so-subtly tells you that you are inadequate or incompetent if you can't do it all by yourself. Chronic illness and prolonged caregiving are humbling experiences. Let this be a time of growing humility. When others say, "*Let me know if there's anything I can do to help,*" tell them what they can do! Be specific: "*If you could come over once/month for a few hours so I can get out, that'd be great*" or "*If I could give you a list of groceries I need, that'd be a big help.*"

- Don't get squeezed out of your own life. You have probably allowed your life to gradually be stripped away from you. You may have barely even noticed that this has occurred. Your veteran needs you. You need you. Don't take "you" for granted by ignoring or overriding your needs. Be willing to closely scrutinize ways you can add little daily pleasures that give you comfort and provide something for you to look forward to. As much as you think that your veteran's world will fall apart for the time that you take for self-care, it probably won't. Even



if things don't go well, this isn't a signal to not do self-care; it's a signal to brainstorm other solutions that include your veteran's and your needs.

Today there are more services for veterans' caregivers than ever before. VA medical centers have Caregiver Support Coordinators. They are experts on caregiver issues and are knowledgeable about VA and non-VA resources. They manage a menu of options to support qualified veterans including in-home care service, respite care, needed equipment, home and automobile modification, peer support, and caregiver support groups. This kind of support will allow you and your veteran to have more time and energy for your bereavement and emotional needs.

Many families have provided care and support for their beloved veteran for years with little or no recognition. Many healthcare agencies use a patriotic angel pin to honor our unsung heroes—veteran caregivers. The pins are on a card that reads:

"Caregivers are important too! Because we know that you have also paid a price for our freedom, we honor you and acknowledge the many ways you've been impacted by the military and also the many ways you have provided care to our veteran. We are grateful."

YOUR VETERAN'S EXIT STRATEGY SHOULD INCLUDE LEGALLY NAMING NEXT OF KIN AND LEARNING ABOUT DEATH BENEFITS.

It is important to identify the veteran's legal next of kin. This person is the one who has the right to make decisions for your veteran when the veteran is unable to do it for themselves. Your veteran may have asked you to make decisions for them. They may believe that since you are their "next of heart" that you will be able to act on their behalf as "next of kin." This may not be the case. Too often, I have seen a beloved "next of heart" of the past 15-20 years banned from the bedside by



family members who have been estranged for many years. This can be prevented by finding out now who is the person who can legally make decisions. If the legal next of kin is someone other than you, or someone from whom the veteran has been estranged, you may find yourself disenfranchised at the time of the death, funeral, and burial. A good social worker or lawyer may be able to help you sort through these issues before they become more complicated.

THERE ARE BENEFITS AVAILABLE TO YOU WHEN YOUR VETERAN DIES.

Dignity Memorial® providers have compiled a comprehensive booklet, **Veteran Planning Guide**, available by calling 866-508-5834 or on the web at www.DignityMemorial.com. If your loved one dies in a VA hospital, the Decedent Affairs Clerk will be the person to contact to make arrangements for your loved one's body. They will need a copy of the veteran's discharge papers and will be able to provide additional helpful information. If your loved one dies in the community, the funeral home will be able to direct you to services. There may or may not be other death benefits available to you depending on your veteran's specific service classification. Government rules covering these issues can be complex, so if you have questions about veteran's death benefits, contact the Veterans' Administration directly. The Veteran Service Representative at your local VA may also be able to assist.

NOW, TAKE TIME FOR GRIEVING, REMEMBERING, AND HEALING.

These military stories sometimes have a lot of loss and pain. They also have a lot of love and healing. These are stories of life, patriotism, and sacrifice. When you see an American flag wave, hear the national anthem, or buy a poppy on a street corner on Veteran's Day, know that YOU and YOUR veteran are part of what makes our country the beacon it is for the world and allows us to live in freedom.



Honor your grief. Those who grieve well, heal well. It is never too late to grieve a loss. Allow yourself to participate in celebrations and memorials. Visit national monuments and talk to other veterans and their families. Allow yourself to feel the pride of being an American. Allow yourself to acknowledge those things that have hurt you. Allow yourself to feel your pain and to move forward in your life knowing that you and your veteran are part of something larger and better than any one of us individually. And, mostly, know that YOUR sacrifices have mattered as well.

To obtain more copies of this booklet, please visit **www.DignityMemorial.com** and click on Find a Provider to contact the location in your area. Your local Dignity Memorial® funeral service provider offers this booklet and several others at no charge to the community to support and comfort those coping with, or helping others cope with, grief and the complex emotions accompanied by grief. Alternatively, you can download a copy on the Opus Peace website (**www.OpusPeace.org**).

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