



Beating Spiritual Isolation



Spiritual Isolation. In trauma's aftermath, problems trusting and feeling alone and disconnected are common. And coping with a traumatic event can be even more difficult when Service Members feel like others can't understand what they've experienced or how they've changed. As a result of being injured or having seen others hurt or killed, a Service Member may feel angry or vulnerable. Wanting to withdraw or isolate typically follows. This sense of isolation can get even stronger after returning home, because there may be fewer people around who have had similar experiences.

Why do Service Members isolate after a traumatic experience? Some Service Members isolate to get some privacy and to avoid the discomfort, fear and anger they feel around other people. Avoiding others or certain situations can seem like a good idea in the short-term, but it can create problems over time. The problem with avoiding people or places is that avoiding doesn't allow **new learning** to occur. In other words, the reality is this: the situation back home is not unsafe the way a deployment was, and "going it alone" is not necessary.

Along with being disconnected from other people, some Service Members feel spiritually isolated or alienated. "Spiritual alienation" means moving away from what is spiritually meaningful, sacred, or divine. Service Members who are struggling with their relationships with their God or higher power may struggle in other aspects of their life too, especially if their spiritual connection was a source of support and guidance in the past.¹

Thoughts that Increase Isolation

Service Members and other trauma survivors may feel even more disconnected and alone if they are thinking in "all-or-nothing" ways, such as, "The world is never safe" or, "I can't trust anyone." All-or-nothing thinking is seeing things in black and white. However, there usually is a middle ground. Another way to look at the situation might be, "Something bad happened, but that doesn't mean the whole world is unsafe," or, "I can't trust **everyone**, but I can trust some people with some things."

Having thoughts that it is safer to be alone is normal. When people are alone, they often feel less vulnerable and more in control. At the same time, while being around other people may increase some risk, it can also be a great source of support and protection from harm, along the lines of having "safety in numbers." Also, even though the desire to withdraw may be strong, isolation and avoidance do nothing to teach a person that things are different now. In the end, it can hurt more than help. Isolation can leave people feeling alone, afraid, and disconnected from others and from their sense of purpose.



Why Connect?

Spiritual fitness involves connection with other people, with a higher power or God, and with nature. It can be challenging to reconnect with others after deployment. But in the long run, spiritual fitness can improve your quality of life and help you with recovering and rebuilding healthier life conditions.

¹ Nelson-Pechota, M. *Spirituality and PTSD in Vietnam Combat Veterans Part I, Introduction and Overview*. Retrieved from http://www.vietnamveteranministers.org/spirituality_intro.htm on 20 July 07.



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Why Connect? (cont.)

People who participate in spiritual activities or experiences often feel part of something “bigger.” They tap into these experiences in a variety of ways:

- Spending time with other people at worship or spiritual events.
- Participating in other communal spiritual activities (*like meditating with others*).

The sense of being part of a bigger picture can also happen in other settings which are not normally considered to be spiritual, but which create connection, including:

- Having a good talk.
- Playing sports with other people.
- Working on a group project.
- Walking/running for a cause (*like support for troops, school funding, cancer*).
- Volunteering.

Connecting with others helps you to build community. This can be especially nourishing when your community is focused on something that is valuable and meaningful to you.

Along with connection with other people, some Service Members have found that they tap into a spiritual experience when they connect with animals, or with nature. Being surrounded by life in all its forms can create a sense of being a part of something larger than oneself, and increase feelings of connectedness.



Tips for Beating Isolation

If you are tempted to isolate, you may have to push yourself to spend time with others. Remember: being around others is important for spiritual and personal well-being. Withdrawing from people affects spiritual fitness because spirituality is about **meaning** and **connection**. Without connection, life can start to feel meaningless and uninspiring. Avoidance doesn't actually solve problems; it just puts them off for a later date, and may even make the problems worse.

Here are some ways to beat isolation:

- Make plans ahead of time to socialize with others. Stick to the plan even if your impulse is to be alone.

For example:

- Set a plan to make at least one phone call a day, even for just five minutes.
- Commit to leaving the house for at least thirty minutes a day and go to a location where you will find other people (grocery store, post office, bank).

- Start by spending time with people you trust, in places where you're comfortable.
- Go places where you're around people but don't have to interact a lot, like a meditation or a religious service.
- Start with short outings. Then, with each outing, increase how long you stay out.
- Do things with people where your attention is on the activity instead of the person, like playing a game or sport, or going to see a movie.
- Practice increasing your comfort zone and taking small risks with someone you trust.



Next Steps

Taking steps to beat spiritual isolation can help you increase your spiritual fitness and help you stay strong as you adjust to the transition back home.

To discuss spirituality more and get some support, consider speaking with someone in person. Chaplains are on duty and on base “24/7.” Chaplains can help Service Members address the pain that comes from spiritual struggle. You can talk to a chaplain about your experiences and about your relationships with others or with God or a higher power. Chaplains provide support that relates to your health as a whole, including your deeply held values and beliefs. Chaplains will discuss how to build relationships that offer meaning and hope in the midst of your spiritual questioning.

It is important to know that chaplains do not take the place of other healthcare professionals. Most chaplains are not trained to do in-depth psychological counseling, although some chaplains have specialized training as counselors. Psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family therapists, can also be helpful to talk to about your spiritual life.²

2 My HealtheVet Spirituality Center and Healthy Eating Self-Management. Published: April 2, 2007.

