Episode 101- How to Talk about Veteran's Day, Moral Injury, ...

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SPEAKERS

Ted Bonar, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson, Tim "TJ" Ryan

JJ Janflone 00:09

Hey everybody, this is the legal disclaimer where I tell you the views, thoughts and opinions shared on this podcast belong solely to our guests and hosts, and not necessarily Brady or Brady's affiliates. Please note, this podcast contains discussions of violence that some people may find disturbing. It's okay, we find it disturbing too. Hey everybody, welcome back to another episode of Red, Blue and Brady. Today, Kelly and I are so very thrilled to bring you our second Veterans Day episode. We did one all the way back in 2019, which feels forever ago with Kyleanne Hunter and Ted Bonar called "So do you really want to thank a veteran?" Well, today, I'm excited to say that Ted is back with us, joining us, you know, in a very distant and safe way, along with a new friend and special guest, TJ Ryan. Together, all of us are discussing what it is to be a veteran, how do we talk about guns and masculinity or even guns and gender more broadly, and in a very important way, how can we help keep the veterans in our lives safe from harm? Now, I want to go ahead and I think I can speak for both Kelly and myself and say we want to jump right into it. There's so much to talk about. So Ted and TJ, can we go ahead and have you introduce yourselves to our audience,

T Ted Bonar 01:34

Hey everybody. My name is Ted Bonar. I'm a clinical psychologist, I live in Columbus, Ohio.

I'm the founder of the Clinical Readiness Project, which is a nonprofit organization with a focus on training mental health providers in whatever they need to be trained in. I've done a lot of work with military and veterans. I work with the PsychArmor Institute, which is another nonprofit that has a focus of bridging the civilian-military divide, also doing a lot of trainings with them. I'm a member of the American Association for Suicidology, which I might talk a little bit about, and I have a private practice here in Columbus, Ohio. That's me.

T Tim "TJ" Ryan 02:11

Yeah. Tim Ryan, I go by TJ. I was in the military for 13 years, got out 2017, around November. Most of my time in the service was then in the special ops community. And then I finished training and teaching new soldiers as they move through their job training courses. And then where I kind of get into the meat of things is, the end of my career was heavy in the mental health area. I was in the hospital for the last part of my career. And then in that time, I was in a play and documentary, "We Are Not Done Yet, which surrounds the healing ability or the the cohesion that can happen between individuals that share common ground over trauma. Yeah, 36-year-old, I have a 15-year-old daughter, and Virginia Beach, Virginia, is where I'm at.

 JJ Janflone 03:07

Well, and I, I really want to thank you for coming on TJ. And I do want to really encourage, if people aren't familiar with, "We Are Not Done Yet," I I'll link to it in the description of this episode. But I found watching it incredibly helpful in that like, because I'm a civilian, right, and I only have that experience. And so I think seeing documentaries like that, I think are really, really helpful to break down some barriers between I think what I imagined service and post service to be like, or trauma to be like, versus what it actually is.

T Tim "TJ" Ryan 03:38

Yeah, it's a good bridge for civilian-military understanding. And my hope is for more bridges for that. Thanks for watching.

 JJ Janflone 03:46

Anytime. Everyone should go, should go watch it. And I think that gives us a good, as you said, a bridge. It's a good intro into, I think, some of the things that we're talking about today, which is a conversation that I know I personally find, like I get uncomfortable about,

and I know that a lot of people find difficult or they find it awkward, which is talking about broadly, three big things, three big buckets: masculinity, gun violence, and firearms. And then within that, you know, to really kind of narrow it down, on veterans and suicide. And I'm wondering sort of, you know, Ted or TJ or both of you, if you could share, you know, why this conversation is sometimes difficult? I think, Ted from a clinician standpoint, why folks have a hard time talking about it, and then TJ, as someone who's been so open about talking about it, I'm sure you've had many people like me, who end up being like, "Hi, I don't know how to ask this but," or get kind of, you know, awkward middle school dance-ish about it, So.

04:44

And I'd like to defer to TJ. I'd like to hear from TJ before I talk about the clinical side of things, but I think lived experience has something to say here.

04:54

Yeah, sure. Well, my involvement and what I really want to express and share and hope my story, or me talking about this overall helps give light to, is the fact that there is a serious issue when it comes to military veterans. And veterans in general, they own a lot of weapons and firearms. It's a natural thing, or sometimes even expected of them. And then what seems to be pushed aside, active-duty or otherwise, the effect of, whether it be war, the effect of the hospital life, you know, working in the funeral services, or the morgue part of the military, like not necessarily meaning you're going over there. So all of those effects, plus the fact that you have a weapon equals bad things. And then obviously, that's what we're all talking about, right? But the experience I share is my personal relation with that, like having three ideations typically the last one, I'll share is, I sat down in the basement of my sister's apartment and was feeling very depressed over the separation from the military. It was within the first year right after I was separated, I stopped the medication that I was on, I refused to go to Veterans Affairs to get enrolled in services there, all because I was stubborn and hard headed and felt that I needed nothing from,you know, the military. And then that brought me to the third ideation, I sat down stairs, my sister's basement, my weapons case was probably about 12, no, like one or two feet behind me. It was locked three times. But still, there I had the keys right next to me. So technically, it really wasn't locked. But I was feeling at a point so that I almost, it was an out of body experience, where I imagined myself sitting up from the chair, and then very, in a very detailed way, going to the cage, opening it, loading the magazine, and putting the round in the chamber, taking a, a seat back down in his chair, and then placing the weapon to my temple and firing it. The worst, actually the second worst part about that ideation is I

could, like most veterans probably can, or no, like the combat side of veteran can imagine is the the effect of the round, you know, on the skull and the matter for how it would be against the fireplace that I was sitting right beside. And then it went to my sister and her boyfriend, hearing that noise, having to come down, and I started to imagine feeling and emotion, it all played out, how she would be traumatized and how the effect would play out on her. And then it would go to my daughter, they would call my daughter and tell her what's going on, so on and so forth.

07:50

The scary part, the worst part about it was, at some point, I felt that everybody would just be getting on with their lives. And, you know, they would get past it, and it would all be pushed to the side. Thankfully I realized, that that's what took me out of it. Like I, I knew that wasn't true. I knew that wasn't true about my daughter, she would never forget about it. My sister, holy crap, that scene would have been horrible. Hell no, you know. Like, so like, it pulled me out. And then I, after that, I realized I had a really, really bad problem. And I had, no, I knew I had the problem, I needed to re engage. So then I, my partner and I, we went to the VA. Almost immediately after that I got enrolled, and then immediately back into a trauma focused one-on-one therapy, psychologist. I intentionally, right now don't -- I have three weapons, two pistols, and a shotgun -- those weapons are three hours away from my current location right now. And there's several times that, you know, I'll mention when we're talking about here, like, I have thought, right now, about going to get those weapons. Not in a suicidal ideation way, but maybe in a way for protection. Or no, actually backing away for protection, feeling like I need it for that, for that reason. But then it always stopped me knowing that if I do put that weapon in my hand, the chances are now higher of someone being a a victim of gun violence. And I make that decision to keep the firearms far away from me. I do revisit the thought of going to get them, but I am proud, and I can admit that I'm not ready for that just yet. And it's not a good idea. And that is the experience and the message that I like to put out to a lot of veteran service members, who still aren't over that stigma about mental health. And, you know, I don't, I don't want to see them drowning like I was. So I hope that that's what this helps with.

T Ted Bonar 09:49

TJ, I, I really want to say how much I appreciate you sharing your story. It means a lot to me. And I really want to honor it. I think it does help. I think it helps, there's a lot of different parts about your story that, that help the listener understand both what some of the risks are and what the challenges are for a service member or veteran, as well as what can help somebody when somebody's having a tough time. You know, JJ's first question was, you know, just talking in general about veterans and suicide, which is one question.

And then the second question is, why is the conversation difficult? You know, I think the conversation is difficult, because we, as a society, ask people like you and others to go and sacrifice and put your life on the line, and be a service member and do this venerable thing. And, and we do. Like, our culture asks that of the armed services and, and we thank veterans. And the truth is, there is a risk and a loss of life and a risk of a loss of life to that service. And that's something that's hard to reconcile, it's hard to individually say, I asked you to go do this. And then me have a reality that you are therefore in danger, right. And some of that is pretty well recognized. Most service members will say that, that they know of that, they know of that risk when they sign up for the services to serve, that they're not necessarily talking about suicide, right? Most people will say, I know that I'm putting my life on the line to serve my country. And what's, maybe not unspoken by them, but just simply unrecognized in that conversation is, there's also a risk of suicide to being a service member. And that's just hard for our society to reconcile. It's just hard for us to say, Okay, now let's have that conversation. So, JJ, I think it's a great question. And TJ, I appreciate you being so willing to share that story, because we need to talk about it, right? And if I could just take a minute to talk about the specifics of why it's so helpful, why your story is so helpful, you know, the risk of coming home after a long service time -- the first year of separation is the time when people are most at risk -- that's when we, that's when there's an elevated, a significantly elevated rate of suicide, is in that first year of post service. So in that sense, it doesn't shock me, right? I don't predict it for anybody. But it fits, right? It's, you know, it's a massive readjustment of somebody's life, in so many different ways. In their, in somebody's identity, and somebody's way of life, and where you live, and what you do, and what is your job, and how does the relationship that you may have been in for a long time? It's, it's much different after service than during service. And and, you know, I'm not even talking about, you know, deployments. Though, of course, you know, it's not hard to see how deployments would be a challenge, to come-and-go and enter and re-enter and all that stuff. And then you get down to even more of the risk of firearms and, and how, how that affects, and increases the risk. And the knowledge of firearms, the training of firearms, and what it means to have a weapon for a service member or veteran, it's just expected, as you said right, for many people. So there are risks that are identifiable in your story. Which doesn't mean that anybody missed it, or you missed it or something. That's just, there's, there's just like, there's just a truth to it. And then you started talking about some of the things that we, in the clinical world, are trying to do better with, as far as how to help people in the moment. What are, what're somebody's reasons for a living? And you walked through, like, what would happen if, if this, if you went through with what you were thinking about. What would happen to your family? What would happen in the moments afterwards? And then, and that helped you, right, manage that, that one of the hardest moments that a person can have, that helps you manage that. And then you make the decision to say, "the weapons are not safe right now," which also reduces the risk. And you get through that moment, and then get some

more support through the VA. That's a, that's a big success story. Now, in the ideal world, we find a way so that you, or a person like you, doesn't get to that point that you've described, right? We don't want everything to be about let's find a crisis and then solve it. And at the same time, you've described how a person can get through a crisis and survive it. And it's, it's really helpful. It's really helpful. So I appreciate it.

K Kelly Sampson 14:57

To echo Ted's language, just really appreciate you sharing your story, TJ, and I'm so glad that you're here, and that you're with us and that you're doing what you're doing, because I know that you're helping so many people. And so, I'm just, I'm just grateful for you.

JJ Janflone 15:11

I think that's, that's part of the thing that makes it hard, and I think it's even harder now that we're sort of in this world of 2020 where we're not physically here. Because, I mean, I don't, Ted knows this about me and Kelly knows this, but like, you dont know this TJ, like, I'm a hugger, right? And so, whether you wanted a hug or not, one was going to be offered to you in this moment. And it's, I think the inclination is, for a lot of people, is when someone says that they've had a moment of crisis, or they're in a moment of crisis is that we go, I think, naturally as humans go, "Okay, let's fix it. We've got to fix it in the next five seconds." And so when we're talking about things that are really complex and difficult, or that like, particularly like in a US context, like we don't have the language around mental health, that we should, you know. We don't have the language around soldiers, and even first responders, that we should. And so when I think when you mix all these sort of wonky concepts together, with this inclination to want to make everything perfectn I think people get frozen because they're like, okay, there's not like a, I don't have a greeting card that will magically make all of these problems better. And so I think the inclination for a lot of folks is just to not have that conversation. So I'm really thankful for all of you being here today, even though I can't give you hugs in person, because I think the only thing that makes it better as as continuing to have these conversations.

K Kelly Sampson 16:27

Yeah, and JJ and I both being civilians, I think one of the questions that we have is, in relation to what you share TJ, and what you outline Ted, what roles do we play in protecting our active duty soldiers and veterans, and how can we have these conversations better?

16:45

Well that's a, that's a good question. There is a, I would hope, or I don't know how to but what I would like to, is somehow impress on people, what it in fact means, you know, when someone actually volunteers their service, and what it actually means when they, you know, our government sends someone, sends our servicemembers to war, what they're, in fact asking them to do. And I don't, you know, movies are gory, but I don't think they're, you know, getting the message across of what servicemembers are asked to do, and the moral injury that it has on them. The service members themselves don't even have the wherewithal of the moral injury. So I would ask that the civilian population be more understanding, and not understanding, because I, I believe they are understanding and care about all the service members, and what they do, and the sacrifices they make. But I am asking you for the understanding of actually what we are doing. You know, I've been meaning to talk about 'thanking you for your service,' do you really know what you're thanking me for? That, I mean, and that brings upon that whole moral injury, and then, you know, sends my mind down the rabbit hole. So I don't know, but that's a reality check. And then, and the effect of, not only on the servicemembers the effect of the civilians, on you know, that are over there, the soldiers on the opposing side, like, all of those affected, throughout war. It's easy for all of us, over here, to not really be, you know, taking aback or stricken by the effects of war, because it's not happening in our backyard, but it's happening in theirs. So considering all of that, as opposed to looking at it, looking at them as just "the bad guys."

T Ted Bonar 18:53

Yeah, no, I I really appreciate that. I think so, you know, let me say I'm a civilian, right, I, it is important that I clarify that I have not served. I came into this work of being, making this a big part of my career on purpose. But it was by accident, if that makes sense. I ended up working at a VA hospital for a year, and it was in a training capacity. And I went there because, because the the training program was good, right? I didn't go there because I wanted to work with veterans, because I didn't know, and about six months into that training I was like, "Oh my god, this is what I want to do. This is what I need to do." And since then, it was, you know, not quite 20 years ago, but since then, I've thought a lot about the civilian-veteran divide, because it started right away, right. As a, as a clinician learning the ropes at a VA, you know, what's the most common question or what's one of the most common conversations I have is "Well, you didn't serve. What do you know?" Right, so I had to do a lot of thinking, and having a lot of conversations about that, and there's no shortage of that conversation in the world. But I really believe that, that it is my obligation to carry my part of that, carry part of that weight. It is the civilians' responsibility to step up and say, "I need to be part of this community." If the message

that, if the message is that only veterans can, and should, speak to other veterans, well, I'm deepening the divide, right? So it is incumbent upon me to do the work, so that a veteran feels comfortable talking to me, that's my responsibility. I can't change, I can't convince a veteran of anything and I shouldn't try. I need, it's my, it's my job to bridge that cultural divide. So I'm really interested in that. There are veterans that won't want to talk to me because I'm a civilian, that's fine.

T Tim "TJ" Ryan 21:03

I'm not, but that would be me being the, where I would like to be in that whole scenario. is that bridge? You like, those ones, you say right there, there are some veterans that aren't gonna talk to you, right, because I was one of them. But I, I want to say I was one of them. And I think, you know, I'm hardheaded, I made it through. But I think having, if I had, had someone there that was similar to myself in the role that I imagined, being that you know, that bridge of experience with the clinical side of things and experiences, the veteran side of things, and then just at a humble point, to where you know, and open with their own personal wounds, would help the veterans seeking the treatment open up better.

T Ted Bonar 21:52

I really appreciate that, right. So you know, some of the way we get closer as civilians and veterans is to do these, have these conversations, and that we've have to start filling in the middle of this. One other thing that I want to say though is, because I want to broaden the conversation, just a little bit past clinical services, because I think it's a mistake to suggest that this is only about people with mental health problems or somebody with a diagnosable condition, because suicide is a bigger problem than that. And only, you know maybe -- the statistics vary and some of the statistics are trusted, and some of them are questionable -- it's probably about half the people that die by suicide have some sort of a diagnosed mental health problem, or a mental illness, right. Which means about half dont, right? So suicide is a bigger problem than just mental health. And one of the things, so if all we do is talk about depression, or PTSD, or substance use, or traumatic brain injury, and if that's all we talk about, we're missing a whole bunch of people that are in a lot of pain, and might die by suicide. So one of the things that I think we need to do as a society, which is essentially the question, like, how do we, what can we as civilians do? Well, we need to do a better job at TJ, what you were talking about, we need to do a better job of understanding what it takes to go to war, or to be in the service. These are invisible wars these days, just like we've got invisible wounds. It's pretty invisible. We're not seeing footage of it, right? We don't see pictures, and we don't see footage, and less than a percent of us are signing, are volunteering to serve. So they're pretty invisible. And so when people come back, and they separate from the service, and we have veterans, what

does their employment look like? What does their social connectedness look like? What does their income look like? What does the future look like? What are their opportunities? What are their support networks? And each of those things that I've just mentioned, they have to be culturally informed, so that a veteran feels that they are right, that they fit. And if they don't, then we civilians have failed, right. So I want to provide these things so that a veteran feels their life is worth living, and they don't fall into crisis. But that's my responsibility. It's not a veterans job to go find it, it's our society's, it's our civilians' job to say, "Here it is. We get it." And "Here are some opportunities, and here's a way of life and here's something that we value from what you did." And now let's, let's go further with it, right. So that's, you know, that's I think a really important message. It's not just about mental health problems. Yes, it's about mental health problems, and it's about some of these other things as well.

K Kelly Sampson 24:54

On that note, you both use the term "moral injury" talking, and how, you know, part of what needs to happen is that we, as members of society need to also understand the implications of that. And I'm wondering if you're comfortable, if you could tell us a little bit about what you mean by "moral injury" and how society needs to start to own that as well?

T Tim "TJ" Ryan 25:17

Yeah, sure. I think, more or less, it's not a diagnosis. But I think there is a community of veterans that are pushing for the, for lack of a better term title of "moral injury," as opposed to PTSD. So when I think about moral injury, it wasn't something, first off, that I didn't recognize until after I had gotten out of the service. The, and I'm going to go back to when I first swore in the, sacrifice that, you know, we mentioned that all the veterans, which rightfully so, they accepted. They accept that before they even swore in, you know. Tt was just a formality when they raise their hand, but they don't take into consideration the effect of it. So they accept the sacrifice, they accept the fact that, you know, shots will be fired, people will die, and that they may, they may die, but they don't think about the effect on if they survive. If they survive, what all of those things in that initial sacrifice now, the effect that it has on them. And the moral injury for me, is like civilian casualties, destruction of civilian property. The, you know what, just casualties, I don't even want to say civilian or otherwise, all right. The taking of life, is my moral injury, just that alone. I mean, I can go on with a list, but that one is one that crushes me to my core. And that was something I went into the military comfortable, at least I thought, I thought, I was comfortable with doing. And I feel like everybody kind of has that expectation. You know, it's like, if they talk to someone who's in the military, they're not surprised that they had

any kind of combat, or they're, they may not be surprised that they've taken a life. They may not be as surprised that they deployed so many times. But you know, again they're not taking into account what they're asking you to do those many times, what happened there. And on top of that, they may just say, "Well, I expected that was gonna happen," you know, "it's nothing." Like right, isn't that what, you know, soldiers do? Isn't that kind of the thing. So then, you know, that mutes it for the veteran, their feelings, and then the wound just grows internally from there.

27:31

Yeah. TJ, thanks again. So I think it's a hard concept for civilians to really wrap their minds around. And it's just like, I'm gonna laugh at how I just said that, it's a hard thing for a human to wrap their mind around, right. So the service member who experiences moral injury essentially, either sees or does something that, kind of, violates the human norm that they expect of themselves, or of the biography that they've told themselves. And that's not that if they've done anything wrong, it's like, this is the fog of war. This is the, this is how hard decisions and how unrelenting combat is. I'll give a brief example, because I see this, and I've spoken to a lot of civilians and good civilians, mental health providers, that really struggle with this concept. I'll use some, to kind of bring to life this idea of moral injury. I think it's, it can, you can see it in, in the challenges of rules of engagement, and for civilians, to understand what it takes to be outside the wire and rules of engagement. So I'll make this a very brief example.

28:46

But driving in a convoy outside the wire, so you're not on base, it's not safe. And the lead truck is faced with, let's say, a 12-year-old boy, a 10-year-old boy that goes into the middle of the road to stop the convoy, and the lead driver has to make a decision: do I keep going, and therefore drive over the 10-year-old boy, or do I stop the convoy? And so there's a couple of ways that plays out. Driver stops, 10-year-old boy runs , 10-year-old boy isn't killed or anything, convoy starts moving again. They get to the next base, convoy gets to the base, and then what happens? Wow, it's good thing that 10-year-old boy was alive. But what happens with the people behind the lead vehicle? "Why did you stop, we could have been killed." The convoy, stopped, was a sitting target in what could be right a deathtrap, right. So then the driver of the convoy, the leader of the convoy says, loses group unity, loses group cohesion, loses the trust of unit mates, didn't do the job correctly, did not do as he or she was trained, right. Or the other way it plays out is, drive on, right? Convoy doesn't stop in the 10-year-old boy might lose, lose his life. Well get, get to the next base, gets to safety, and what does the convoy do? "Good job, nice work. You did as

you were trained, you did the right thing, you kept us alive." And the driver of that Humvee says, "and I killed and drove over a 10-year-old," it's horrific, right? And these are the decisions that are made, these are not just the decisions, they're the experiences that happened in a split second, that can leave somebody questioning, what am I doing? What did I do? How did I live my life? Did I did I make a mistake? Do they do the right thing? Did I do the right thing by killing a 10-year-old boy? Did I do the right thing by stopping and losing the trust of my unit, because they are trusting me to keep them alive?

T Ted Bonar 30:50

Like that it's, it's a privilege that I haven't been faced with that with that experience, right, that's the luxury of being a civilian. I use that example because a lot of civilians, when I pose that as a question, "What do you do?" Most civilians, when I pose the beginning of that setup, most civilians will say "Well you stop the convoy," right and military members will say "you drive," right. So that is an example, there are many other ways somebody could experience moral injury. But that can be the setup for moral injury. So if you drive over the 10-year-old boy, yeah, that could be PTSD, that could result in PTSD. If you stop the the convoy, the 10-year-old runs away, you get to the next, you get to safety, so nothing happened, right. So that's not PTSD, but that absolutely could be life-altering moral injury. So sometimes there's a great deal of overlap between moral injury and PTSD. But what I'm trying to share by that example, is none of these are experiences that civilians have a lot of, have a lot of experience just even talking about comfortably. I think it's a, I think it's a really hard conversation. I want to check in with TJ, have I said, have I have I laid that out well?

T Tim "TJ" Ryan 32:11

Yeah thats, you've hit a lot of key points, especially when you mention training, the fact that you continue to mention the training, that's as real as it gets in the mind of the soldier. That training is, that's correct, like, driving over that child would have been trained. And you know, the sad thing about that, the saddest part about all that is there's, there'll be no realization until further on down the road. However, the outcome was, you know, life would have happened at that point, they would either possibly been relieved, you know, 10 years down the road that they never killed that boy, or they can be regretting that they killed that boy, 10 years down the road, when initially they were congratulating themselves, you know, was feeling the high of, you know, the kill, you know, or whatnot. And, when you mentioned the whole broad range effect and what to expect from, with the suicide, and you kept saying, like as a civilian, you know, you can't understand, I would also want to flip it around to things like other traumas, addiction, or rape, car accidents. Let's go with car accidents, moral injury on that, you know. Like,

there's, you know, I know someone who's in that case, you know what I mean? So that there's moral injury all around, I don't want it to just be, you know, like you mentioned before, on the whole veteran side thing like this, just keep in mind that moral injury just isn't at war, it can happen to any one of us in this conversation. Especially in a clinical case, so it's across the board, not just military, I just want to echo on your last, you know statement, im sorry. But you're very right in your example, 100 percent.

T Ted Bonar 33:43

I appreciate that, TJ thanks.

K Kelly Sampson 33:44

And thank you both for helping us understand, because I feel like to the extent we hear about things, we often hear about PTSD, but we don't hear about that concept. So I really appreciate that.

 JJ Janflone 33:54

So big question here, I think, that we maybe need to start to turn to, because we've touched on it a little bit, but I think maybe to try and formally unpack this intersection of gender, this intersection of what masculinity is, or is perceived to be, and how that impacts the rest of firearm suicide, particularly for veterans.

T Ted Bonar 34:15

I'm struggling because it's such a complex. It's such a complex topic, there's a couple of different ways to approach it. So forgive me for stumbling with my words here a little bit. So first, we have the conversation that we've been having, right, from TJ, that the military itself represents a higher risk, as compared to civilians, right. And then we have within that culture, a number of subcultures, right. So you could break up "the military" and "veterans" you could talk about the difference between enlisted and officers, you could talk about the difference between ranks. You could talk about the difference between combat versus non-combat. You could talk about, and you could talk about the difference in age, within the military and veterans, and each of them are going to have some different risk factor. Right?

 JJ Janflone 35:07

Yeah, I ask some very complicated questions, I feel badly.

T Ted Bonar 35:11

That, oh, no, and even among branches, right, different branches have different risk factors. So and, overlapping and integrating with all of that, is the difference between birth sex and gender, and service in the military and the fact is, there is a difference in expectation and even subculture of what you can do, right. So there are a lot of different components. So when I was struggling to find my words, some of those components, we we don't know what is, contributes to this or that and what doesn't. We know there's a higher, an extraordinarily higher risk of sexual assault if you're a woman in the military, and most women aren't sexually assaulted in the military, and yet, by and large, the people who are sexually assaulted are women like, like both things are true. So these are the challenges of talking about either birth sex, or gender, and military service. One thing that I think that we need to recognize, and what is most important, especially for the purposes of this podcast, is that the rate, is that the method for suicide, for women who our service members are veterans, is by and large firearms, which is not true for civilians. So for civilians, the most often chosen method for suicide is overdose. For veterans and service members who are women, it will be firearms, which increases the likelihood that somebody will die by suicide. So while there are many things that we don't know, that I was kind of rambling about there for a second, we do know that, which is a really powerful variable that we have to address. So is that because somebody is a woman? Or is that because the training and the expectation and its inherent that, here's a firearm and we're going to use it, and we're going to learn how to use it, and the expectation is that you know how to use it, and you're going to be graded on it and, right, so that, that increases the risk. Again, it goes back to what I was talking about before, that we can acknowledge that there is risk, but we generally think it's for other people, right it's, a person doesn't say, "Oh, that's a risk of suicide for me." and yet we know that the firearm is a risk for suicide. So let me check in with either, with any of you, if that made sense?

JJ Janflone 37:43

It definitely did. I think for me, what I, what I keep coming back to, and maybe even if you would be comfortable talking about it, TJ, because I know, like for example, like even you with the art that you do now, and how like therapeutic that that has been for you. You know, I think that there's sort of this perception, particularly among men or like male veterans of like the role of what a firearm is in their life or like what a firearm actually is, you know. Is this for self defense, is this something that like signals that I'm a professional? Does it signal that I am that I'm a man? You know, does it signal my "soldierness?" I'm

turning into like, a first-year English lecon major, I'm sorry, but I hope that that makes sense. But just, sort of, what role these weapons end up playing in the lives of veterans i think is so interesting, because it is so different from civilians.

T Tim "TJ" Ryan 38:37
Yeah, I think first of all, toxic, oh, there we go toxic masculinity is a great word.

 JJ Janflone 38:44
The dog does not like toxic masculinity. So this is good.

38:48
Yeah, get rid of that thing. Toxic masculinity, not the dog, keep the dog. The, so that's a great word. That's not "for lack of a better term," that is the term. I think, to explain it from the male perspective, I can just go about my childhood, and my relationship with weapons, toys or real, as I progressed through my life, my military career, and my awareness. So when I was a kid, I was all about GI Joe cartoons like that was my, wake up before school it was on. I think, it was Sailor Moon and then GI Joe or something to that effect. And then I had action figures, I had the larger setups of like bases. I would form things, like battle plans with these action figures, toys, which pretty much mirrors my Ranger school experience of doing sand painting of like mission, you know. Moving on to how I had an obsession with collecting toy weapon, toy guns and all sorts. The realer, excuse me, the more real the better. And my favorite one, I can specifically recall was a, I know now, an N60. I didn't know what the gun was back then. An N-60 machine gun, that actually had a belt fed plastic loop. So I had more guns in my toy box than I did baseball bats or, you know, any kind of sports thing. I enjoyed playing outside with my friends, I would always pass out all the toy guns I got and we would play manhunt or, you know, soldier out there. And I would mimic, you know, things that movies that I was obsessed with of action heroes, and things like that, tnd that therefore, you know, brings me into the idea of masculinity.

T Tim "TJ" Ryan 40:40
I was a little boy, that point. I'm not really sure where those ideas, that influence came from. But to me, it felt like it was what I was supposed to do. I felt like that, in order to be man, I had to pursue this military career. And it wasn't like I felt like I was forced to I enjoyed it. I was passionate, I was obsessed with it. The other thing I want to mention is the

toy guns there, I was about four or five years into my military career before I even purchased a gun. And I want to echo that thought, I felt it was, you know, I thought it was required, I felt like I was supposed to do it. Not only at this point, because the idea of a man protecting his house, which is, you know, masculinity, just that whole thing needs to be broken down, and rebuilt. Bu,t so I felt like man is supposed to protect the house. I was a soldier, special ops soldier, how do I not have a weapon? All my comrades here, they got weapons, you know, at their home, you know, personal weapons. They were going out hunting, they were going to gun shows, I didn't want to be left out. I know it all sounds ridiculous, but that was very real thoughts in my mind. And when we talk about, I want to, the increase on women, when it comes to suicide with firearm, I feel that the future, right now the statistics are the way they are because, you know, we're stuck in this, you know, this mentality of the male goes to war and whatnot. There are females that are outperforming males on a regular in the military and as progress, you know, unfolds, you know, years on down the road, and women become more and more involved than they already are in combat, I think that those numbers, unfortunately, will even out at some point in the future. But if we could learn from current, where we're at right now, and hopefully provide the services and mental health to veterans across the board from this point, maybe that can be avoided. But I think that once women are increasingly exposed to the combat role that those deaths may go up, that's scary.

T **Ted Bonar** 42:52

It is, it is concerning, TJ. I appreciate that. And I also appreciate that you mentioned that, it would take a while to really unpack what masculinity would mean, right. I get, I get the question, though, I totally get the question. And, JJ, I guess I want to share one other thought about it, though. Of course, there are differences, but there's also another concept, I think, that might be helpful, or at least it helps me is, sometimes it's not about "the male experience" and "the female experience" or the men, or whatever language you want to use for that. I think there's this, there's another way to experience or understand military culture through the concept of stoicism, right, this idea of stoicism being of quiet strength, right? What do I need to do? What do I need to, what characteristic, that's attached to a value, do I need to possess to accomplish something as difficult as being in the military, going to war, right. I mean, stoicism goes back into Greek mythology, right, that's where the word comes from. So stoicism can provide the strength that a person needs to go to war, right. And at the same time, stoicism can leave somebody vulnerable to saying "I have a hard time asking for help. If I ask for help, it's a sign of weakness, or it's a sign that I haven't completed the mission, or I haven't done something right." Or "I can't ask for help, I should be able to do it on my own," things like that. And so stoicism is this, this really complicated characteristic where it's a value, and it's a survival, and it's a strength, and it's amazing, and it's powerful and profound. And it leaves somebody

vulnerable when they are in trouble, right. And, and I think that stoicism as a value, as something that's experienced within the culture, I think that crosses across masculine/feminine, male/female, man/woman, birthsex/gender, I think that stoicism can be both a strength and vulnerability to really powerful extremes. It can provide identity for somebody's whole life, and it can be something that brings you to your knees. Yeah. I know, there's one example that I can use that'll ressonate with all veterans, is the Post-Deployment Health Assessment. Like everybody, every single veteran knows exactly what I'm talking about. They know the question that I'm talking about or even what I'm about to say, and it's that "Do you want to see the doc." And everybody, I know 99% of the answer that everyone puts on their assessment, and it's so bad to the point in the military community, and this is male or female, is it's treated as a joke? It's a joke amongst us, it's a joke after-the-fact, memes are made about it. It's not funny anymore, it definitely is not funny anymore. We, like they need to stop treating it that way, and I, I laugh now, right, I was one, you know, myself. I've made the jokes and all that stuff and I regret it. I regret it now and I recognize the seriousness of it. And like that's, that's stoicism right there. Male, female, whatever. That's just stupidity. Thanks, TJ.

K Kelly Sampson 46:13

I want to pick up on something you said, TJ, when you were talking about your childhood, and what it was like just growing up as a little boy, and having this fascination with guns and warcraft and things like that. So kind of shifting a little bit, I just was wondering what your opinions are about the different types of guns on the market available for civilians, and what it's like when we live in a world where, obviously, you have a service weapon as part of being in military, but then you return and there's also the availability to have handguns or things similar to your service weapon, and what, what is that like, for you to come back to that sort of environment?

46:56

Yeah, absolutely, and I have a lot, a lot to say about that. But before I say that, I want to also make it, I want to make it known that it was, this was an evolution of thought. Like it was a thought process over time. So as it stands, right now, I have a huge problem with the fact that I can see an M-4, you know excuse me, the AR, mock M-4, whatever you want to call it, just around Walmart. I have an issue with that, because I saw that walking around Baghdad, you know. And in my mindset in Baghdad was not, I wasn't out there to get, you know, bananas and a box of cereal, you know, so I shouldn't be here. But there was a point in time where I myself, wanted to own a rifle, a AR of some sort, saw no issue with it. And this was earlier in my military career, and as a part of that whole toxic masculinity or whatever, you know, my mindset was, that I realized was not the correct. I

understand, you know, the Second Amendment and all that stuff. You know, I think it also needs to be voiced that, back then we were, you know, it was musket and ball, it wasn't 30-round magazines, you know. And I think, I understand that, you know, the right to bear arms is to protect yourself from the government, or some people may feel that way. But there's no need for an assault rifle at that point, not when those are weapons of war. Because that's what they are. That's, that's what, they're weapons of war. Like pistols and things like that are maybe more familiar, because of watching stuff growing up, you know, like, Old West, there was always like a pistol. I didn't really get surrounded by assault rifles until my military career. And even if someone said they were hunting, you know, I'm sure that there weren't no, no, I know, there were no burster automatic weapons when they were hunting. I also know that they probably were doing like a bolt-action weapon, and in the military you're not taking a bolt action weapon to combat. So if I wouldn't take that bolt action weapon to combat, that combat weapon doesn't need to be over here, at home. But I know it sounds like a lot of, like a little bit of anger, and a strong point, but I do know that you know, what those weapons are capable of, and I have a bias maybe, I have a personal relationship with what they're capable of. And I think that kind of goes back to the whole understanding of the civilian community. Like I can see that they don't understand, they don't understand what they're asking me to do because they feel like, that it's so lackadaisical, they can, you know, mimic what I did over, there over here. So they obviously don't understand what they asked me to do, you know. Did that answer the question?

JJ Janflone 49:59

I think, I think it does. And I think it goes directly too to the, sort of, like the stoicism that Ted was talking about as well. Sort of, if you're trained and you've become habituated to think of firearms in a particular way, or manage firearms a particular way, or to even have them in one context, it's got to be exceptionally jarring to you to go from maybe some of your worst memories, to seeing somebody at 7/11. And like the same arms, you know what I mean? Like, that's got to be a hard thing to sort of manage, emotionally.

T

Tim "TJ" Ryan 50:32

Yeah, and let him out. Also, to echo along with the training, going back to the training that servicemembers have to have, you know, the fact that we don't, when we were overseas, we didn't even bring our weapons into the chow hall. Or, you know, it would have to be like. Or no, excuse me, we would discharge the weapons. They weren't loaded weapons inside the chow hall. And I can go, it's not right for me to go into a place here, and then like a civilian is doing something that was trained, again, also, like a proper weapon safety.

Like so many, you know, civilians doing certain things with these weapons, flagging, you know, the term overview of putting the barrel, pointing your barrel at not an enemy. That happens all the time, and that's disturbing to me as well. You know, I mean, I don't, yeah that bothers me. I have people that come into the store that I work at with a sidearm on. I think that's a little silly, my opinion, you know, hate me for it. But like, I think, but it doesn't take, it doesn't strike me the way that an assault rifle, someone with an assault rifle or a Barrett 50 Cal Sniper rifle, just chilling on an American street, that's not okay. It's not okay at all. That's the stance that, I mean, at least I take between weapons

JJ Janflone 51:54

I think that's super important to talk about, I think especially now, in the context we're in. Like, I know, I keep bringing up 2020, but like, to pull back the curtain. To everyone who's listening, like, we're recording this on Election Day, right. And so like, there are reports of like, people at polling places with guns. There are reports of like, there has been a rise of, sort of, armed protests this year. And so that's got to be difficult, I assume, too. Because I know I'm anxious about it. It makes me uncomfortable to see people who, and like, I have only what can be described as 'baby's first firearms training,' right. But it makes me very uncomfortable to see people who I'm like, "You don't have trigger discipline, and if I know that, then you shouldn't have this giant weapon, in public around these babies, you know. And so, it kind of spreads out from there. And so I'm wondering, if you have, if either one of you have any thoughts on, you know, how people maybe can be dealing with some of this stress, or some of this uncertainty, and if you cannot solve that for me, I don't feel badly. I will not judge you, because my professional therapist can't figure it out either so.

T

Ted Bonar 53:00

Well it's such a good question like, well, first of all, I think it's fair and I think it's important to acknowledge -- stress is not about to go away -- right? Like, there is a lot of stress in the world. This is a tough time. That's okay to say it, eight. And I don't, I think it's a mistake if we suggest there's an easy fix. And if you do this one thing, everything is going to be okay. Now, I don't want that to sound pessimistic, I really want to come from the place of we can prepare for this, right, we can prepare for this and know how we're going to care for ourselves. You know, and there's both like the general answer, and then there's the firearm-safety-specific answer. And there's, of course, overlap there, right. Even if we're talking about servicemembers, veterans, or we're talking about just anybody, what do we do? We talk about how can we prepare for when things get hard, right? And so sometimes it's going to be we have to connect with other people. And so for a service member or veteran, it might be your battle buddy, or it might be the, you know, your unit members or somebody. And for those of us who have not served, it's our friends and our family, and

our community, and the people that get it. And we all have some people in our lives that get us and then we have other people who we really like, but they don't, you know, hear us when we're, when we're in the midst of a really hard time. So we need the people that, that really get us, that can hear us that can understand when things are hard. So sometimes it's going to be "who are those people and how can we be around them?" Sometimes it's going to be physical exercise, and sometimes it's going to be, you know, taking a bath and doing breathing exercises. But sometimes it's going to be "have I gotten enough sleep?" and sometimes it's going to be "what did I eat and did I take care of myself?" From a systems point of view if, you know, for people that that are running organizations, you know, the answer to, you know, or the message to staff can't be "you just have to self care better." The message has to be, "here's how we're going to care for you," right, that it's a system problem, right. Stress is not a lack of self care. Stress is real and it's out there. I don't care what politics you're from, I don't care what side of this issue, that issue, i's a hard time right now. When we talk about firearm safety specifically, in this context, it very much is tied into how are you going to prepare your weapons for when you are having a hard time or when things are stressful? Right, that takes people thinking ahead. That takes a plan, that takes acknowledging that things can get tough, and "here's what I'm going to do to manage a hard time". Everybody's going to have good days and bad days. That's a human condition. So on a bad day, what are we going to do? Right, it, so I really think it ties directly into the End Family Fire message of "what are you going to do with your weapons when you have a bad day?" That's not about a "gun grab," that's not about gun control. That's not about taking away somebody's rights. That's about what are you going to do when it's a bad day, and let's make a good decision about how you're going to manage that bad day.

56:32

And I think that that saves lives. Right? And then we can all get better at that, you know, one of my goals is to work with mental health providers so that we are better prepared to have those conversations. I'm going to give you a shameless plug here, through the American Association of Suicidology, we're doing a training in association with End Family Fire, that is, it's going to be on November 19. And we're going to be providing training for mental health providers. How do you talk about guns from a culturally informed perspective, so that it's not about gun control, it's not about taking something away, it's when a gun owner, when a firearm owner from a gun culture, from a firearm culture is, is in a bad way, how do we have that conversation so that somebody is safe? And that's one of the best suicide prevention strategies that we can have. So we have some really good programming coming up for if there happen to be any mental health professionals in the audience, we've got a number of different things coming up that, that

people might be interested in. So that's my shameless plug for the day, and I hope that it was also appropriate in that answer of, how do we do this when it's stressful time?

JJ Janflone 57:50

Yeah. And I'll link to that in description of my episode, too, so people can -- you're not shameless, at all -- but to your plug. And, and I think that's really important, too, because I keep thinking about, TJ, when you were sharing, sort of, your story, the part that you said that, they were, they were locked, but not really, because you had the keys. And I keep thinking about that, because that goes right to the the core of, sort of, the End Family Fire campaign, which is like keep them locked, keep ammunition separate, but like actually have it in such a way that there is a barrier there, if you're going through a rough time. And so, because while I'm so, so, so glad that you were able to like take yourself out of that situation, remove that sort of key from yourself, unfortunately, there's a lot of folks that don't, don't do that. And so we lose our opportunity to, you know, become friends with them and see their artwork and chat with them. So I think that that's really important to highlight too in your story.

T

Tim "TJ" Ryan 58:50

Yeah, for sure. When we talk about that moment, there were all these red flags, and there was warning signs and you know, they weren't, they weren't missed. I didn't miss them at all. I just I just ignored them. And that's why I say that it was locked, but not really, because I could've easily, easily opened it. But I thought that I would never find myself in a predicament where I would even think about committing that act, so. And that's a thought that I know that other you know, veterans or people are having, you know, they feel so sure of themselves, but it's, it's just like, it's just like, like a car accident or getting struck by lightning. It could happen to you. It's possible, there is a possibility. So and then I just wanted to go back to the election, and stuff about it. There is, you know, the sacrifice that a service member has made, those that are still here and those that aren't, were for people like to, well for people to exercise their freedom in the way that they want, especially to vote. And an example of that would be like the whole Colin Kaepernick thing. I went to war for Colin Kaepernick to stand, kneel, do whatever the hell he wants and express himself in the way that he wants to. That was the whole point. So, to see that threat, to see that that freedom that we fought for as servicemembers, threatened by people on election day at polling booths or possibly threated, or like even for protesting, threatened for peacefully protesting. Those are going against the things that we fought for, and it's just pretty much like a spit in the face of any veteran, at least in my opinion. You know, you vote about the gun rights, don't bring it to the freakin' polling booth. And I don't, one of the main things that got, that catapulted me is this little thread of active duty

soldiers who are on our streets, and there's no way that I wanted to see war, that only soldiers can bring, to our streets. And I know that, you know, others definitely don't want to see it either. So and that would be bringing military weaponry, you know, against people for exercising freedoms I sacrificed, or you know, that others sacrificed for, you know. I want to just, you know, tell people, it's okay, you know, to be a little bit vulnerable, you know. It's okay, to not bring weapons doesn't make you less of a person, less of American, you know, doesn't mean anything. It's okay to not be tough all the time. You know, it's okay to love somebody, its better than to hate somebody. Alright, I'm rambling.

JJ Janflone 1:01:41

I'm never gonna say no to 'love one another' as a core message. And especially like, that's a message we need right now. And, and I think maybe just to close this out, because, I would keep both of you on for forever.

T

Ted Bonar 1:01:59

I really enjoy it, you know, and that's the evidence, that treatment works. I, and I need to share that. I am, I've been through it, I've been the naysayer. But I am also evidence and I'm here as a result of, of treatment, and having taken that step. So I want to encourage other people to get over that, you know, ego speed bump, and seek the treatment, and second guess or second take their decision, when it comes to weapons, and reach out to other people. But I'm definitely I, like I said, voicing this, it helps me. This, like being able to admit to my realizations of my mistakes, you know. Being able to speak to, you know, you all about, you know, the things that I've done. And then, in fact, I can hear myself acknowledging that it was wrong, it lets me know that I've grown, so thank you for having me. And I would love to come back.

JJ Janflone 1:03:04

Thank you. And so on that note, although I think you already started taking us there, TJ you know, what, what is something that people can do right now? Where can they go if they want to learn more, or you know, if they're, if they're listening to this, and they're like, I'm worried about myself, or I'm worried about somebody in my life that I love. You know, what's something that, if you had like a piece of advice, what's something that you could do, that you would recommend, right now?

T

Ted Bonar 1:03:29

So one thing, the main thing is the Veterans Crisis Hotline. And it sounds like it's like, "oh, yeah, it's so easy," but I didn't personally own a veteran's crisis hotline number card, or phone tag. As much as people, loved ones, tried to continue to give it to me, I would just keep pushing it away like I didn't need it. I definitely needed it. And even if you don't need it, what's the harm in having that hotline number close by, or in your phone, you know the two minutes, less than a minute it takes to put it in there. So it may sound simple, but that having that accessible, hands down is paramount. I love it. And I love those, that hotline is fantastic. They do a great job. So since this is a podcast, let's go ahead and give the number 1-800-273-8255, and then press "1" if you're a veteran. So eventually we will have the 9-8-8 number, that will be a three digit number for suicide prevention and mental health crisis that is not in service yet. So it's 1-800-273-8255, press 1 for veterans. You can also text to 741741 to get the Crisis Text Line, really great resources. TJ. I appreciate that you mention those.

JJ Janflone 1:04:56

And if you're like me and not great about writing things down, it will be in the descriptor of this episode.

T

Ted Bonar 1:05:01

Awesome.

JJ Janflone 1:05:02

But I like the idea of just physically having it, too, even if maybe, it's just like making a business card yourself, and just having it with you. I think that that's really good advice.

T

Tim "TJ" Ryan 1:05:12

No, it's definitely, I keep mine in my wallet fold, for very specific reasons. So as I'm going through my driver's license, my credit card, my VA picture, there's the veteran crisis hotline number, there's my hospital card, you know what I mean? So like I constantly see it. I know it's there, you know, so that's also important. I do that intentially, somewhere that you constantly see it and know it's there. You take it with you. Don't -- no refrigerator magnet -- it's got to be on your person. Inspectable item, inspectable item. Veterans know that. Yeah.

JJ Janflone 1:05:44

I like that. I like that a lot. I want to, I've been ending the podcast increasingly pretending that I'm Mr. Rogers from Mr. Rogers Neighborhood doing the, like "I like you, just as you are," and like, I'm glad you're here with me, which sounds super corny. But like, I mean it. So I want to say thank you, all of you so much for being here. I think I can speak for Kelly and myself and say how wonderful this was.

K

Kelly Sampson 1:06:05

We really appreciate it.

T

Ted Bonar 1:06:06

I really appreciate it, and TJ, thank you specifically. You've helped me, I think you've helped a lot of people today. I really appreciate you. Thank you. appreciate you.

JJ Janflone 1:06:19

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