



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Understanding the Effects of Trauma and Traumatic Events to Help Prevent, Mitigate and Foster Recovery for Individuals, Organizations and Communities
A Program of Uniformed Services University, Our Nation's Federal Medical School, Bethesda, Maryland • www.usuhs.mil/csts/

POWERFUL MOVIES, POWERFUL MEMORIES: Viewing Advice for Family and Friends of Military Members

Movies such as the “The War Tapes” and the HBO special “Baghdad ER” have received critical acclaim for their moving portrayals of our servicemen and women. If you have a loved one who is deployed to the conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan or one that may soon deploy, you are probably both interested in and worried about watching such movies. While these films highlight heroism and action, they also graphically depict the ravages and anguish of war. Viewing these films may stir powerful emotions for both military members and their families. These emotions can range from sadness, worry, fear and anxiety to actual pain and flashbacks. Military psychiatrists, alert to the possible effects of such viewing, have prepared this fact sheet to help answer questions such as: *Should we watch? If so when, and with whom?*



or after a movie that stirs powerful emotions or memories.

- If your spouse or loved one has been deployed to this or another war, chooses not to watch with you but still wants to watch the movie, encourage him or her to watch with a buddy.

BEFORE VIEWING

- First remember, you *do not* have to watch the movie, or do not have not watch it now.
- Consider whether watching the movie now might cause you to worry about things for which you have no control. If so, waiting to watch at a later date may make more sense
- Consider watching the movie after reading more about what is in the movie. A review in your paper or on the web may help you decide. *If you have concerns watch the movie at a later time.*
- Consider recording the movie to watch in the day time rather than the evening.
- If you are watching the movie with someone who has been to this or another war, remember some deployed persons feel they just can't explain the situation or show their feelings to loved ones during a movie.
- Therefore, you may want to watch with a friend. It is often helpful to have a friend who understands your family's experience and is available to talk with during

WHILE VIEWING

- Talking during the movie to another adult can “break the spell” of the movie and remind you that you are home or with friends and not in the scene you are watching.
- Get up and move around during the movie — It is good to get up and grab a soda or glass of water.
- Changing your normal viewing position, or watching from a distance, can help to remind you “it is only a movie.”
- If you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed by your emotions during the movie turn it off or walk away. You can always watch the rest at another time.

AFTER THE MOVIE

- Talk about your feelings. If your spouse has returned from this deployment or another, they may need to express their feelings first. But talk with someone — your spouse, significant other, close friend or a parent. Talking about strong emotions can be difficult but it is often a good first step in reducing distress and restoring a sense of normalcy.
- If talking is not working or you cannot find someone to talk to, consider your physician, your clergy (either civilian or military) or contact your local community behavioral health clinic. Medical caregivers, counselors and clergy are trained to assist people in stressful situations.

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CHILDREN, MOVIES, AND DEPLOYMENT

- Graphic movies are not appropriate for young children (under the age of 12 or 13).
- If you have a loved one deployed to war or in some other dangerous situation, these movies may not be helpful for your family or children of any age.
- War movies are not appropriate for young children and may not be appropriate for older children (e.g. those with a history of emotional problems or traumas, or those that are less mature). Remember that in children ***intellectual maturity is not the same thing as emotional maturity.***
- Remember that scenes from these movies may increase children's fears and worries rather than teach them about this aspect of their parent's lives. Children may only "see" the frightening parts. These parts may hold extra meaning for children whose parents have deployed, or may deploy. At times of a new deployment, the child may hold onto these fears rather than the importance of the parent's difficult job.
- Hearing the soundtrack even if not seeing the video can be very frightening for children. Adults watching these movies should ensure that children do not overhear the soundtrack — which may be particularly frightening.

SEEKING HELP

- Families always want to understand the life of their loved ones and to share their joys and sorrows. Sharing the life of a soldier, sailor, marine or airman brings you closer to their fears and joys. Hearing how they may feel after watching movies such as this can be stressful but also can bring families together.
- To help your loved one, you must also take care of yourself.
- You can (and should) discuss your thoughts about watching the movie with your physician if you have concerns before watching. Of course, you should also let your doctor know about any changes in mood, concentration, or sleep that you notice if you choose to watch. Seeking help for emotional issues related to deployment or reintegration into family life and one's routine is a positive step, and one that may occur as a result of watching these movies.



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