It was just another drive through Eastern Washington for Jim Narovich, who was heading to a veterans conference in Pasco with fellow vet Christopher Brock.

But for Brock, the dry landscape was a trigger, sending his mind back to the deserts of Afghanistan and to memories he’d rather not relive.

“He took a handful of anxiety pills just to make it through the desert, driving over there,” Narovich said of the trip two years ago.

“There’s things that you avoid, and that’s one of them,” said Brock, sitting next to Narovich recently in a small room at the American Legion Post 43 service office in Sedro-Woolley.

After spending nine months on the ground months in Afghanistan and six in Bosnia before that, Brock returned from his Army service unable to shake off much of what he’d seen.

He was medically discharged for a knee injury in 2005 but he left the service with deeper wounds. Counselors diagnosed Brock with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, that same year.

You have these events, these experiences you don’t feel like you can relate to other people that haven’t been a part of it, even your family and loved ones.”

Jordan Linaya, Iraq War veteran and student at Western Washington University order causes his heart to race at the sound of a helicopter and leads him to triple-check windows and doors before bed — if he goes to bed. On one occasion, this warlike mentality caused Brock to punch a co-worker who jokingly shook his ladder at a construction site. Brock lost his job over the incident.

“I don’t know how to communicate any of it,” said Brock, who’s found the only other people who really understand are those who have lived it.

Common ground They’ve made life more complicated, but the knee-jerk reactions that outsiders find odd are what kept Brock alive “over there,” he said. Many of them were drilled into him as
PSTD

Continued from Page D1

When he gets with other veterans, he doesn’t have to explain. They get it.

Brock, who is now commander of American Legion Post 91 in Burlington, said people don’t realize how many veterans like him are combating PTSD while trying to live, work or get an education in Skagit County.

There are about 950 members of the four American Legion posts in Skagit County. And the Legion accounts for only 5 percent of veterans nationally, said Buck Fowler, a Vietnam veteran and Post 43 adjutant.

Statistics for local veterans living with PTSD are not available but, Fowler said, “There’s a lot of us out here.”

Fowler’s been dealing with PTSD since he got out in 1975, around the time psychologists began using the term. The condition had been called “soldier’s heart” by Civil War vets, “shell shock” during World War I and “battle fatigue” during World War II.

Fowler and Brock agree that their greatest antidote for PTSD has been getting together with other veterans. At the service office, the two go back and forth sharing stories about war and about coping afterward. They slip into a comfortable cadence of military acronyms and lingo as they relate their experiences, which, though separated by decades, have much in common.

Student vets

When he returned from a six-month deployment to Iraq four years ago, Jordan Linayao began putting his GI Bill benefits to work.

The $6000 bill provides four years of in-state tuition and an annual stipend for books and supplies.

Now 25 and finishing his linguistics degree at Western Washington University, Linayao works at the campus veterans service office to help other students like him.

Linayao said he’s one of about 150 veterans using GI Bill benefits at Western, though he estimates there are many others who have run out of benefits. There were an estimated 4 million.

In the spring, many of them at the Oak Harbor campus.

Transitioning into the academic world as an older student would have been challenging enough for Linayao. But he also was diagnosed with PTSD after serving four years in the Marine Corps.

Linayao said he felt distant from the younger students, who he’d see yawning or texting in class. Though he’s only a few years older than most of them, the depth of camaraderie and sacrifice he experienced overseas made him feel much older.

Staying focused in class can be hard enough for Linayao, who battles intrusive thoughts and flashback-like memories of his military experience. He’s learned to identify and deal with some of the situations that trigger them, but others are unavoidable.

One such trigger occurs a few days after Thanksgiving every year. It’s the anniversary of a “traumatic combat event” Linayao experienced overseas, and he often spends the holiday dreading it. He didn’t talk openly about that experience.

“You have these events, these experiences you don’t feel like you can relate to other people that haven’t been a part of it, even your family and loved ones,” he said.

Relationships

Dr. Bridget Cantrell, a counselor who’s been working with people with PTSD for 20 years, said the disorder can wreak almost as much havoc on loved ones as on the person with the diagnosis. Her nonprofit business, Hearts Toward Home International, takes referrals from Skagit and Whatcom counties.

Brock, originally from Indiana, said he stayed in Skagit County to be near his three children; he has custody of one. His marriage ended shortly after he returned from Afghanistan.

Fowler said he’s been married four times and thinks PTSD played a major role in at least his first two divorces, though he hadn’t been diagnosed at the time.

Now a chaplain for veterans, Fowler said it’s hard to explain to family members — especially those who knew him before his service — why he acts the way he does. He said finding a spouse who wants to understand him has made all the difference because “it’s always gonna be a part of you.”

Fowler’s wife puts up with his quirks, he said. When they go camping, she helps him check the perimeter and find escape routes.

The divorce and suicide rates among veterans, many of them dealing with PTSD, are staggering. There were 32 suicides among service members in July of this year, the highest monthly total since the war in Afghanistan began. Cantrell said, “That all trickles down as a result of not being able to reach them and provide what they need,” she said.

(PTSD) is something that happens to a person as a result of something that is so horrific, there’s no words to describe it. It affects their whole entire being.”

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LIFE AFTER WAR

Veterans cope with PTSD by sharing stories with each other

Story by WHITNEY PIPKIN Photos by SCOTT TERRELL Skagit Valley Herald

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He was medically discharged for a knee injury in 2005, but he left the service with deeper wounds. Counselors diagnosed Brock with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, that same year.

He calls it a normal reaction to the abnormal experience of war.

For Brock, now 30, the disorder causes his heart to race at the sound of a helicopter and leads him to triple-check windows and doors before bed — if he goes to bed. On one occasion, this warlike mentality caused Brock to punch a co-worker who jokingly shook his ladder at a construction site. Brock lost his job over the incident.

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Common ground

They’ve made life more complicated, but the knee-jerk reactions that outsiders find odd are what kept Brock alive “over there,” he said. Many of them were drilled into him as survival skills.

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Afghan war vet Christopher Brock (left) and Buck Fowler, who served in Vietnam, pose at the American Legion Post 43 service office in Sedro-Woolley. Fowler holds a photo of him as a Marine recruit at age 17. Both men have been diagnosed with PTSD.

Jordan Linayao (right) talks with other veterans in the office where he works at Western Washington University. Linayao says talking with other vets helps him cope with PTSD, especially in the school setting.