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9/28/2009 - SOUTHWEST ASIA -- Knowing someone is going through a hardship is half the battle. Helping that person through it is the other. That one simple act of kindness will have a ripple effect - one which may have you on the receiving end one day.

Traveling around Afghanistan, Iraq and other areas nearby, I have been witness to so much. Sometimes I endure the hardships myself while at times I simply stand on the sidelines and watch in admiration as people get through every tough moment out of duty.

I have seen the Airman who is working 16-hour days as a flight nurse desperately trying to save someone's life. I have seen the Soldier who drives 8-hour convoys and is mentally taxed from scanning for improvised explosive devices and sniper fire. I have met the Marine who carries his own cot on his rucksack because there is nowhere else to sleep in Helmand province, Afghanistan. I have bedded down at a combat outpost where there isn't enough food to go around and even water has been rationed.

All these men and women have a common thread shared among them: they survive. Some thrive, some falter and some just deal with life on a day-by-day basis. Every one of them has demons to face. Each is conflicted with the idea of not being able to control life at home. All question whether the sacrifice is worth the price being paid today for tomorrow's future.

Invitation to a Pity Party

So many people cope with the deployments because of the person to his right and left. A person can have a moment of weakness and he is carried through by his Wingman.

I personally have had a few days where I just wanted to shut the world out and have my very own pity party because I missed my child. But my partners wouldn't let me go at it alone. They demanded I open up. The day was still spent mostly mourning the time apart from my family but I at least knew the guys cared enough to ask. I didn't feel quite so lonely.

But not everyone has that.

Befriending the "Uglies"

What about the person who has no one?

It was one of the stereotypes from high school: the loner. It was usually that one guy who sat by himself at lunch, talked to no one in the hallways in between classes - the guy who sat on the bleachers while all the jocks practiced.

Loners don't suddenly form a clique of popular people after they graduate. They continue through life alone unless someone makes the extra effort to find out who he really is. After having a talk with a colonel at a combat stress clinic, he told me that we need to befriend everyone, even the "uglies." Those people can be described as the undesirables, the loners, the misunderstood, the quiet ones or even the ugly ducklings.

What about the person who doesn't fit in anywhere? You can walk on by and focus on your own little world. No one would think less of you for it because it's acceptable to shun the undesirable.

But what will you think of yourself when you see a person who quite literally looked lost and you didn't throw him a life preserver? How will you react to the news that this person committed suicide and the note read "Because no one cared anyway ... ?"

Stray Collection

In many respects, I collect strays. I have always done that. I just always sought out that type of person. Some people have told me that I can't save the world. I'm not really trying to save anyone, rather help them. My thought is if I can spare a few moments to help someone by offering to listen and shoulder the burden somehow, then maybe that random act of kindness will be paid forward to the next person in need.

I am curious when I see someone who has such sadness in his eyes to know what happened to him. Every one has value. Sometimes, you learn something from the person you least expect. Just because a person is not acceptable by current standards of suitability doesn't mean he's without worth.

I like to look at my strays as "diamonds in the rough." Have you ever asked someone how she's doing and she's completely shocked at the question? Generally, it's that very person who is unused to ever being seen let alone acknowledged.

Some people are so caged in that sometimes it's just not worth the effort - or so we tell ourselves. But, as the colonel observed, a good relationship means investing time.

Investment of Time

Investing the time doesn't mean simply saying, "Hi," and then go about your day. It's more involved than that. I was recently told something that seemed so obvious that I couldn't believe people have to be taught it. It's the act of asking how a person's day is.

So, when you see a person who seems to be having a rough time or hit a low point, ask the question, "Are you okay?" This is the first step in investing a few moments of your time to care about someone outside your inner circle.

But it goes one step further: be prepared to hear whatever may come out of that person's mouth and listen with an open, nonjudgmental mind. Another sage bit of advice I received when talking with a senior Airman. She told me that sometimes it's uncomfortable to hear what people might say in response to your question. She called it "opening Pandora's box."

This can be eye opening, too. That person may just say something you yourself have been unwilling to admit. You may strike up a relationship with a person you never knew you had anything in common with. You may realize the person has been devastated by events you know nothing about and needs help you cannot give. In either case, you invested the time and someone may be better off because of it. That person may also be you.

I honestly don't know if I ever really helped someone. I do know that hearing someone else's struggles makes me rethink my own. Sometimes I am inspired by a person's strength. Sometimes I learn how to better deal with future situations or how to approach someone with a similar background. I know that each person can teach me to be a better version of me. Some lessons, though, need to be taught over and over for me to really grasp the message.

It's important at times such as these to know you're not alone. It's comforting to know these struggles are something that not only defines who we are, but unites us. The burdens we each endure are what creates the special bond between us, as members serving in the U.S. military.

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