

College Students Stressed by War

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When his kid brother went off to war, a depressed Christian Dingethal went to bed.

The junior at Canisius College in Buffalo, N.Y., says he also for weeks stopped going to classes, doing laundry and contacting his parents.

"I didn't know if I was saying goodbye to him for the rest of my life," said Dingethal, 21. "I didn't know how to deal with that. I turned cold."

Soon after Dingethal's brother, Joseph, arrived in Afghanistan early this year, the Army shipped him home after he hurt his eye in an accident. Christian Dingethal has gotten counseling and is returning to classes.

However, a national poll of college students conducted for The Associated Press and mtvU shows the stress he suffered — while extreme — is hardly unusual.

Half of the students surveyed said they personally know someone serving in Iraq or Afghanistan or who had been deployed there. Of that group, just over half said they had experienced stress because of the person's service, including nearly one in six who said it had caused them a lot of anxiety.

Women are more likely than men to say the problem has been intense.

The Pentagon says nearly 1.7 million U.S. troops have served in Iraq and Afghanistan over the years, some putting in more than one tour.

The poll underscores that even though the economy has surpassed Iraq in many polls as the country's top problem, war continues to have a big personal impact on students — many of whom are stressed out for other reasons as well.

The AP-mtvU survey found that overall, eight in 10 college students say they feel stress, including four in 10 who say it affects them often. The most often mentioned causes include school, money and relationships. MtvU is a television channel broadcast at many college campuses.

Among students hit hard because they know people overseas is Lindsey Odom, an education major at McMurry University in Abilene, Texas. She said boyfriend Jimmy Lemoncelli, who is in the Air Force, left home in late December and is scheduled to be in Iraq through July.

"I came home the first two weeks of student teaching after school and I just cried," said Odom, 22. "It takes a strong woman."

Of those who said they know someone serving, half said it was a friend and a quarter said it was a relative. It was a classmate for more than one in 10.

A tiny number of students — 2 percent — said they had served in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

Wendy Barranco, a sophomore at Pasadena City College in California, was a medical technician in Iraq. She said she's been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and is studying to become a physician's assistant. Compared to her time in the Army, she finds school too slow.

"I've already been there and done that," she said of some of her classes. "I'm not living unless I'm busy. Now if I have an afternoon off, it feels weird."

A 2007 report by a federal Institute of Medicine panel estimated that 13 percent of Iraq veterans and 6 percent of those returning from Afghanistan suffer post-traumatic stress disorder, the most commonly diagnosed mental difficulty from those wars. Sufferers can have flashbacks and other problems related to their tense times overseas.

In the new poll, 15 percent said the person they know was wounded and 19 percent said the serviceman or woman suffered psychological harm. An additional 3 percent said the person they knew was killed.

About 4,400 U.S. service members have died and more than 30,000 have been wounded in the two conflicts, mostly in Iraq, according to Pentagon figures.

As of last fall, about 120,000 veterans who have left the military have been given a preliminary diagnosis of a mental health problem, said spokesman Phil Budahn of the Veterans Affairs Department.

The poll found most students saw tough times ahead for those back from the wars. Two-thirds said they think it is hard for those returning to readjust to life at home, and almost as many said they think the government does a poor job of giving those troops needed medical and psychological treatment.

The survey was taken a year after disclosures of poor treatment of patients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.

Anti-war feelings are slightly higher on campuses than in the rest of the nation. Two-thirds of the students said the U.S. made a mistake invading Iraq five years ago, with women and minorities likeliest to oppose the war.

The poll was conducted by Edison Media Research from Feb. 28-March 6 by having 2,253 undergraduate students fill out confidential forms. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus 3 percentage points.

The students, age 18-24, were given the questionnaires at 40 randomly chosen four-year schools around the country.

To protect privacy, the schools where the poll was conducted are not being identified and the students who responded were not asked for their names. Those mentioned in this story were not among those polled and did not necessarily attend schools involved in the survey.

MtvU's sponsorship of the poll is related to its work on Half of Us, which it runs with the Jed Foundation, a nonprofit group that works to reduce suicide among young people. Half of Us is a program designed to raise awareness about emotional problems faced by college students.

AP News Survey Specialist Dennis Junius and AP writer Christine Simmons contributed to this report.

On the Net:

mtvU survey: www.halfofus.com

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2008/03/19/national/w102234D26.DTL>