The Psychology Of Homecoming

AS the nation prepared to welcome the first of its returning prisoners of war, both military and private psychologists warned that the prisoners would be suffering from invisible wounds that may take years to heal.

According to Clinical Psychologist Charles Stenger, planning coordinator of the Veterans Administration P.O.W. program, the fact of imprisonment has a psychological impact that is "tremendous—an extreme and prolonged stress." This starts at the moment of capture. "That shock is about the most overwhelming, stupendous experience that can happen," says William N. Miller, a psychologist at the Navy's Center for P.O.W. Studies in San Diego. "No one who has not been totally at the mercy of other human beings can understand it. It brings a feeling of total helplessness and then a fantastic apathy."

Filled with guilt, concerned only with physical survival, the prisoner often becomes obsessed with trivial rituals and trivial goals. For instance, says Stenger (a prisoner himself during World War II), "it is routine to spend hours folding a blanket, because it is one of the few things a guy can do from which he can get a feeling of effectiveness if he does it well." USAF Major Fred Thompson, once a P.O.W. in Viet Nam, recalls devoting hours to an effort to train the ants in his cell to fetch crumbs. When that palled, he began building a dream cottage in his head, board by board, brick by brick.

Zombie. Another problem is what Manhattan Psychoanalyst Chaim Shatan calls the emotional anesthesia of captivity, a kind of psychological numbing that deadens feeling. Explains Los Angeles Psychiatrist Helen Tausend: "Many prisoners learn to cope with their situation by setting up low-key reactions in themselves—a kind of little death to save themselves from a bigger death." Back in the outside world, they often display a "zombie reaction"—apathy, withdrawal, lack of spontaneity and suppression of individuality. The symptoms often disappear quickly, but Shatan estimates that they can easily last three years. To a certain extent, he says, "You never get over it."

Recovery is a difficult process. One reason: culture shock. First, explains Stenger, "The P.O.W. has become partly acclimated to Vietnamese culture, which is much more inner, self-oriented and passive than ours." Then comes the confusion of return to a changed world. As Psychiatrist Tausend expresses it, a returning prisoner is "like a man coming out of a dark room." By way of illustration, Iris Powers, chairman of a P.O.W.-M.I.A. committee, recounts the experience of Army Sergeant John Sexton. Released by the Viet Cong in 1971, Sexton had never heard of Women's Lib, miniskirts or unisex. "When he went into a shop for some clothes and saw a girl buying from the same rack—it was a unisex shop, and she was buying pants with a zipper up the front—he just walked right out again."

Even stable marriages will be subjected to stress when husbands return. In captivity, says Tausend, many a prisoner idealized the woman he would come home to, cherishing "an impossible dream in order to survive." In most cases the dream will crumble.

The focus of such problems may be sex; some wives fear that they may be frigid for a while, and psychiatrists warn that some husbands may experience temporary impotence. Some wives feel as if their imprisoned husbands had willfully abandoned them; younger women especially, reports P.O.W. wife Jane Crumpler, "are so bitter; they resent having wasted youthful years." Other wives may have difficulty simply because of their prolonged deprivation. Admits one: "I don't know if I can be a wife to him again; I've had that bed all to myself for such a long time." Says another: "We've both been in prison."

Summing up, U.C.L.A. Psychiatrist Louis West predicts that "if people had a good sexual relationship before, they will be able to re-establish it quickly —provided the same bond of affection exists. Where the relationship was fragile to begin with, it will be ruptured beyond repair."

In many cases, the bond between husband and wife will be easier to restore than that between father and child. P.O.W.s, says one psychiatrist, will be coming home not only to children who do not know them but, worse yet, to children who do not like them. According to Tausend, "Small children may be frightened of their fathers at first, especially of those who are overwhelmingly enthusiastic," while "older ones who have idolized their father without knowing him may be disillusioned. Here comes the great daddy hero, and he turns out to be a human being who is grumpy and weak."

To reduce the impact of all these problems, Department of Defense psychiatrists and psychologists began briefing P.O.W. families three years ago (TIME, Nov. 6). The advice of the experts seems to boil down to six rules:

1. Do not belittle a P.O.W. if prison-induced habits persist. Long deprived of shoes, beds and chairs, some returnees may at first have trouble tying their shoelaces, may choose to sleep on the floor and squat rather than sit.

2. Be open about feelings. "Isolation comes when we pretend that everything is all right if we are really feeling strange," Psychologist Stenger warns. "What would be most damaging for these people is not to know where they stand."

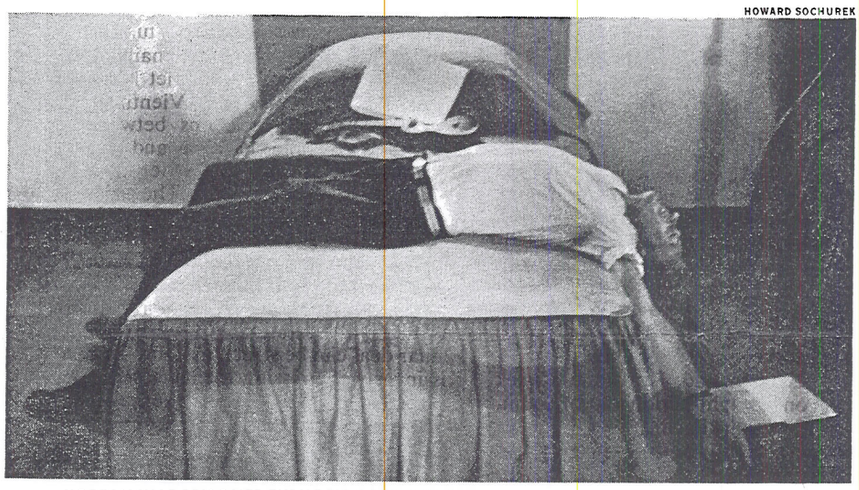
3. Do not try to distract a prisoner or take his mind off what has happened to him. Explains West: "In a relaxed setting, with a few friends, the returnee will want to talk about his experience —relive it, almost—little by little."

4. Do not treat a former P.O.W. as mentally ill, because he is not. "He has learned to adapt to an extremely threatening environment, and that takes a pretty well-organized individual," Stenger believes.

5. Do not treat a returnee as a hero because, says West, he does not consider himself one and will feel worse if complimented. The reason: he feels guilty for surviving while other men, perhaps braver than he, died in combat.

6. Give the returnee the privacy he needs to sort things out. It is important, urges Atlanta psychiatrist Alfred Messer, not to ask P.O.W.s to make speeches or submit to interviews prematurely. "You've just got to give him a chance to get his head on straight."

HOWARD SOCHUREK



KOREAN WAR PRISONER EUPHORIC AFTER RELEASE
Creating little deaths to avoid bigger deaths.

TIME, FEBRUARY 19, 1973