

Instead of Sheep: A Soldier's Way of Explaining PTSD to his Son

A VFW member from Illinois wrote a children's book to help veterans teach their young children about their struggles with PTSD in an age appropriate manner

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With the weight of his son on his shoulders, Mathius Carter walked down to the hockey rink inside a crowded Allstate Arena for the Chicago Wolves' opening ceremony on Military Appreciation Night in March 2022.

The Wolves' staff had told him it was a spectacle, selling his 5-year-old son on the idea of a great time.

When the loud and sporadic sounds of fireworks began, like gun blasts that crackled and fizzled, Carter felt it coming on. He braced himself, the weight of his son on his shoulders.

"It was the worst panic attack I had had in years," said Carter, an Army veteran who deployed with the 32nd Signal Bn., 3rd Inf. Div. to Iraq in 2003. "I sensed it could be triggering, but my son asked me to stay. I am a father first, so I gutted it out and paid the price."

After the pyrotechnics display, Carter walked back with his son to a booth his employer had set up at the Allstate Arena in Rosemont, Illinois. As an outreach coordinator for Road Home Program at Rush, a Chicago-based mental health clinic for veterans, Carter often felt the need to hide his own inner battles to help others.

"That night was different," said Carter, the commander of VFW Post 12014 in Crystal Lake, Illinois, as well as a senior vice commander for the Department of Illinois' District 5. "One of my co-workers manning the booth with me asked if I was all right, and I remember telling her I was definitely not OK. It was hard for me to admit because how am I supposed to help

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people if I myself need help?”

The Iraq War veteran, who suffered two traumatic brain injuries after a mortar attack on his truck in 2003, had started his quest to help veterans in 2020 as a case manager at Veterans Path to Hope, a nonprofit in Crystal Lake.

“It was there that I began to realize the long-term cost of war,” said Carter, who left the service in 2005. “When three veterans in my caseload and a good friend from Iraq all committed suicide, I realized that I, too, was not OK mentally.”

Contemplating his own demise toward the end of 2021, Carter sought help in a hurry, and the only place that provided the timely relief was Road Home.

“I reached out for help and found a lifeline with the Road Home Program,” Carter said. “They got me out of a dark place, so when a job opportunity opened up there, I signed on as an outreach coordinator.”

Then two weeks later, Carter suffered the panic attack at the Chicago Wolves’ hockey game.

‘WE KNEW WHAT WE WANTED TO SAY’

Following the panic attack, Carter scheduled an appointment with his clinician the next day and told him about the episode he had suffered in detail. The clinician listened to him confess he never wanted his son to see him struggle with his emotions.

“I told my therapist I always hid them,” Carter said. “Then my therapist made a face and suggested I needed to figure out an age-appropriate way to teach my son what I was going through.”

Carter took the advice from his clinician and delved into online research on ways to do so. There were no age-appropriate books, according to Carter, that captured his exact mood when going through a PTSD attack.

“When I am going through an episode, I am somewhere else,” Carter said. “I am vacant and quiet and sad, and it is not at all how I am normally. So I had to try and find a way to explain this to my son.”

The epiphany crept in in the form of a children’s book. To do this, Carter’s first resource was his longtime friend, Nick Atchison, a gifted illustrator and Iraq War veteran who served with Carter in the same unit and has five children himself.

“He loved the idea,” Carter said. “We knew what we wanted to say and that is how we wrote and illustrated it. We consider it a tool for Army dads like us to talk about PTSD to little ones who don’t always understand what is going on.”

Carter and Atchison self-published “Instead of Sheep: A Soldier’s Way of Explaining PTSD to his Son” on Nov. 8, 2022, and the book has since garnered 4.9 stars on Amazon, as well as more than 20 positive reviews.

“I have gotten feedback from people I know who have not had a way to have that conversation with their children on what they went through and how they feel,” Carter said. “But we have also received feedback from people who were not in the military and who are not fathers. It has allowed them to see what we go through as well.”

‘I REALIZED I WANTED TO BE HERE’

For Carter, however, the challenges brought on by 2022 had not ended.

On Dec. 28 that year, the Iraq War veteran was once again tested. This time, the feeling that gripped him was not panic but a heart attack.

“I know this might sound strange, but I was in a way glad that I had a heart attack,” Carter said. “Being a man, a veteran and parent, those are all groups of people that care about other people but not always take care of themselves. I realized then that I wanted to be here, wanted more time to continue to do my work in helping other people but also myself.”

Since the heart attack, Carter has doubled down on his health as much as he has on his two commitments to family and veterans.

A recently appointed VFW National Aide-de-Camp, Carter continues to carry his newfound outlook on life with him throughout outreach missions with Road Home, as well as his duties as a VFW officer and published author.

Over the past year, Carter has conducted public readings of “Instead of Sheep: A Soldier’s Way of Explaining PTSD to his Son” at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library in Chicago, as well as the Kohl Children’s Museum in Glenview, Illinois.

The children’s book author and his partner, Atchison, have also begun working on the next iteration of “Instead of Sheep,” which they see as a potential series.

“For our second book, we are aging up the characters to target older kids, between six to 12-year-olds,” Carter said. “We will talk about moral injury and survivor’s guilt and things that might be a little heavier than what we shared in the first book.”

The second iteration of “Instead of Sheep,” according to Carter, is slated to be published later this year. For more information on the book, visit <https://insteadofsheep.net>.

This article is featured in the 2024 February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.