Student Case Study Assignment – Week 2 – Understanding Trauma

Grief & Trauma: Navigating Loss, Awakening Life

Instructor: Dr. Althea Winifred

Instructions for Completing the Case Study:

1. Read the entire case study narrative carefully and thoughtfully.
2. Reflect on the trauma experiences described and the coping mechanisms used.
3. Answer the reflection questions provided at the end.
4. Your written response must be a minimum of 300 words.
5. Submit your completed response to SubstanceInstitute@gmail.com by Saturday, May 10, 2025.

Focus on identifying how trauma impacted the individual's body, mind, emotions, relationships, and identity. Pay special attention to visible behaviors and hidden internal struggles.

Reflection Questions:

1. Identify the visible signs that indicated Steven was struggling with trauma after his deployment.
2. How did Steven's internal beliefs about strength and weakness affect his willingness to seek help?
3. What trauma responses (fight, flight, freeze, or fawn) do you recognize in Steven's behaviors? Provide examples.
4. How did learning about the physiological impact of trauma help Steven shift his perspective on his symptoms?
5. Reflect on how Steven's healing process illustrates that recovery from trauma is not about erasing the past, but learning how to live with it in a healthy way.

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Submission Details:

- **Response Length:** Minimum of 300 words
- **Due Date:** Saturday, May 10, 2025
- **Submit To:** SubstanceInstitute@gmail.com

Case Study: "The Weight of the Rucksack: Corporal Steven Adams' Story"

Corporal Steven Adams was proud to wear the uniform of the United States Marine Corps. He joined the military at nineteen, full of ambition, strength, and a desire to serve something greater than himself. Deployment after deployment tested and refined him—Steven saw combat, participated in missions that would forever remain classified, and stood in harm's way without hesitation.

During his second deployment in a volatile region overseas, Steven's convoy was ambushed. The events unfolded within seconds: explosions, gunfire, confusion, and then the eerie aftermath of silence and smoke. Steven survived physically unharmed, but two of his closest friends did not. Despite the trauma of the attack, Steven completed the remaining months of his deployment, earning commendations for bravery under fire.

What no one could see was that Steven's body had internalized the fear, horror, and helplessness he had felt that day. When he returned stateside, he appeared stoic and composed, but inside he was trapped in a cycle of hypervigilance, intrusive memories, and emotional shutdown. Steven could not sleep through the night. Loud noises triggered flashbacks. His relationships became strained because he was either emotionally distant or quick-tempered. Steven was, in every

way, stuck in survival mode, though the battlefield was now thousands of miles away.

Initially, Steven refused help. In his mind, reaching out for support was a sign of weakness—a belief reinforced by the tough culture in which he had been trained. He believed he should be able to "shake it off" or "push through it." However, the weight of trauma was not something Steven could carry silently forever.

Within a year, Steven's life began to unravel. He found himself drinking excessively to numb the memories. He withdrew from family events. His once bright eyes grew hollow and tired. Every day felt like walking through a fog of numbness, anger, and guilt.

When Steven finally sought help, it was not voluntary. His mother, concerned for his well-being, persuaded him to attend a therapy session at a veterans' support center. Steven walked into the appointment with clenched fists and a guarded heart. He told the counselor that he was "fine" and didn't see the point of talking. But the counselor, trained in trauma-informed care, patiently guided Steven through an explanation of trauma's impact on the brain and body. She showed him how his flashbacks, anger, and emotional shutdowns were not signs of failure—they were normal responses to abnormal experiences.

Through this revelation, something shifted inside Steven. For the first time, he began to see his symptoms not as personal weaknesses but as evidence of survival.

Over months of counseling, Steven learned how his nervous system had stayed locked in "fight or flight" mode. He discovered how triggers (certain sounds, smells, or crowded environments) could

unconsciously send him into a hyperalert state, as if the ambush were happening again. His counselor helped him build coping skills such as grounding exercises, breathing techniques, and emotional regulation tools.

Steven also had to confront the grief hidden underneath the trauma—the grief of losing comrades, the grief of losing his sense of invincibility, and the grief of no longer recognizing himself fully. Healing was slow and nonlinear, filled with setbacks and victories. Some days Steven felt strong; other days he felt like the broken 19-year-old he had tried so hard to bury.

One major breakthrough occurred when Steven realized how trauma had distorted his sense of identity. He was not simply a soldier who survived a war; he was a human being worthy of peace, healing, and purpose beyond his pain.

Today, Steven continues on his healing journey. He volunteers at the same veterans' center that helped him begin his path to recovery. His story reminds others that trauma is not a permanent sentence, but an invitation to rediscover strength through vulnerability and courage.