

# Door Openers/Door Closers

With input from Andi Westfall

Most people have good intentions when they reach out to a combat veteran and want to help and support. Many times they are unsure how best to help and support the veteran so they respond with questions or comments that could have been best left unsaid. Perhaps they did not really think the comment or question all the way through or its ramifications or perhaps they are uncomfortable with silence and feel the need to fill the void with words. The following is a general guideline when interacting with a veteran. Each veteran will cope with their combat experience depending on their age, culture, faith, gender, community support, the presence of family members and/or social support system. As concerned Christians, we want to offer the veteran a safe, open, non-judgmental environment for them to talk about whatever they want to talk about in their own time. To offer this to the veteran, it is best to avoid the comments below and instead use the “door openers” provided.

1. **Did you kill any anyone?** *(This is an inappropriate question and should not be asked; it serves no useful purpose. It is the veteran’s choice to divulge this information when they feel “safe” enough.)*
2. **What was the nastiest or most disgusting thing you saw over there?** *(If the veteran wants to share this kind of detail they might, but only after a certain level of trust has been established. Let them decide whether to speak of their experiences)*

**Door Opener:** I cannot imagine the things you have gone through.

3. **Are you glad to be home?** *(Consider for a moment what this question is really asking. Asking the same question in the experience of the veteran might sound something like this. “Are you glad that you are no longer in a situation where you are getting shot at, missiles being fired at you on a regular basis, the threat of your vehicle being blown up every time you get in it, sand storms and 140 degree temperatures.”)*

**Door Opener:** I am glad you are home. Could you tell me about the conditions you had to endure while over there?

4. **How are you doing?** *(Only ask this question when you are willing to stay and listen to the answer. Many times, the veteran doesn’t know how they are doing, know how to express it or feel safe to really express their feelings and state of mind. It is okay not to know what to do with the answer. You are not there to “fix” it for them but merely to give them a safe place to express their feelings. Sometimes just being there so the veteran can “debrief” can be enough.)*

**Door Opener:** I won’t ask how you are doing and I will listen to you if you would like to talk about it. Could we meet for lunch tomorrow?

5. **Did you see the news? There was a story about a troop loss in ...** *(The veteran has “lived” the news and doesn’t need to relive it. The war is very personal to the veteran and most likely they know people still fighting and dying.)*

**Door Opener:** Do you hear from your friends that are still over there?

6. **Do you feel guilty about what you had to do over there?** *(Just about every combat veteran has some measure of guilt. Those who make it home alive, although grateful, may have survivor’s guilt. Those who participated in direct combat had to make decisions that may have ultimately resulted in taking human life, possibly including women and children. These veterans generally have tremendous guilt and may not be able to find release.)*

**Door Opener:** I am glad you did what you had to do to come back to us.

7. **Do you want to go get a drink?** *(Alcohol may be, or become, a problem for the veteran. You do not want to be an enabler for their self medication. Instead ask if they would like to go for coffee, a meal or desert.)*

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**Door Opener:** Would you like to come over to the house for coffee?

8. **Do you want me to pray with you?** *(The veteran may be very angry at God for the experiences they lived through, a feeling that God was not there for them, or any number of reasons. A more supportive question might be, "How can I pray for you?" And do not be surprised if the answer is, "You can't" or, "I don't know".)*

**Door Opener:** How can I pray for you? What can I pray for you?

9. **Do you think God could ever forgive you?** *(The combat veteran will have some measure of guilt whatever their responsibility was in the combat arena. God is an all forgiving God and does not put a limit on His forgiveness. As a supporter of the veteran, find ways to help them accept God's forgiveness and/or to forgive themselves.)*

**Door Opener:** You may have areas where you cannot accept God's forgiveness, what might those things be? Sometimes the things we beat ourselves up over are the things we feel God cannot forgive. What are some of the things you beat yourself up about?

10. **Did you see any dead bodies?** *(If the veteran should want to share this very intimate detail of their deployment it is for them to decide the time and place.)*

**Door Opener:** I am not sure how I would react to the things you must have seen; can you tell me how you are coping with them?

11. **I understand what they are going through.** *(Unless you have "been there, done that", a combat veteran yourself, there is no experience that compares to combat. Just as there is no experience that compares to rape, assault or any other trauma. You do not have to understand what the veteran has been through. Instead, recognize this was something incredibly painful for them and show them you care.)*

**Door Opener:** I do not have the experiences you went through. Will you let me walk through them with you?

12. **Just be grateful you made it home alive, you didn't die over there, or, you just need to get over it and be happy you are home now.** *(Some combat veterans wish they had been killed in action along with their battle buddies. It makes coming home more difficult than actually being in combat. The veteran knows what is expected during the heat of battle. They rely on training and the instinct to survive. There is no training manual for coming home and there is no debriefing that can fully prepare the veteran for how difficult it might be. As a result, many desire to go back because they know who they are and how to survive.)*

**Door Opener:** Being back home is nothing like being over there. What are some things you are thankful now that you didn't have over there?

13. **If you need anything just let me know.** *(Many combat veterans do not know what they need or the wherewithal or strength to call someone for help. Many return from commanding, fighting and running on a level of adrenaline that is unnatural, often for extremely long periods of time. They may not have the energy or desire to get out of bed, to go to the store or perform normal routine tasks. A better way to be a support would be, if you see a need and have the ability to meet that need, don't wait until they ask. Either do it or ask if it is alright for you to do it for them.)*

**Door Opener:** Would it be ok if my son and I cut your grass Saturday?