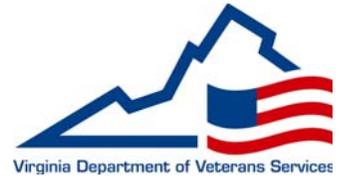


# The Virginia Department of Veterans Services



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## News Release

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## ***Virginia Wounded Warrior Program & Kognito Introduce Family of Heroes, an Online Avatar-Based PTSD and Resiliency Training for Veterans' Families***

### ***Simulation Prepares Families of Veterans for Post-Deployment Life Challenges***

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA--The Virginia Department of Veterans Services' Wounded Warrior Program, in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Health and Kognito Interactive, have launched *Family of Heroes*.

In this interactive training simulation, families of the 280,000 veterans in northwest Virginia learn critical skills to manage the challenges of adjusting to post-deployment life, including how to identify post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal intent. The simulation also helps family members learn how to motivate the veteran to seek help. Families can access the training online at [www.familyofheroes.com](http://www.familyofheroes.com) at no cost.

"The impact of military deployment on families is significant and affects all family members in some way. Deployment can shake even the strongest families, impacting communication, parenting, and intimacy," said Camilla Schwoebel, Region I (Northwest Virginia) Director for the Virginia Wounded Warrior Program. "The *Family of Heroes* program provides a powerful tool to help family members deal with difficult post-deployment issues in a totally confidential and safe manner with the goal of helping the family get back on track," she added.

A study by the RAND Corporation found that a third of returning veterans experience PTSD, traumatic brain injury (TBI), or major depression, but only half seek mental health treatment. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, in 2010, more than 408,000 veterans with a diagnosis of PTSD received treatment at VA medical centers and clinics. Almost 20 percent were veterans of Operations Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn or Enduring Freedom. A Department of Veterans Affairs fact sheet reports that, among veterans ages 18 to 29, rates of suicide are lower for veterans using VA health care services compared to veterans who do not. This translates to approximately 250 lives saved per year.

*Serving those who served.*

## **Role-Play with Avatars**

In *Family of Heroes*, users enter a virtual environment, assume the roles of different family members, and learn by engaging in three realistic practice conversations with avatars who act and respond like veterans experiencing post-deployment stress. Conversation scenarios are based on stories gathered in interviews with veterans and their families.

*Family of Heroes* was developed through a collaboration between Kognito and VA of NY/NJ Healthcare Network, and the training incorporates feedback from more than 100 veterans' families around the country. It utilizes Kognito's proprietary Human Interaction Game Engine™, which is based on research in social cognition and neuroscience, and has been proven effective in multiple studies. To view a short demonstration of the training, go to <http://www.kognito.com/products/ptsd/>.

## **Families' Responses to Training**

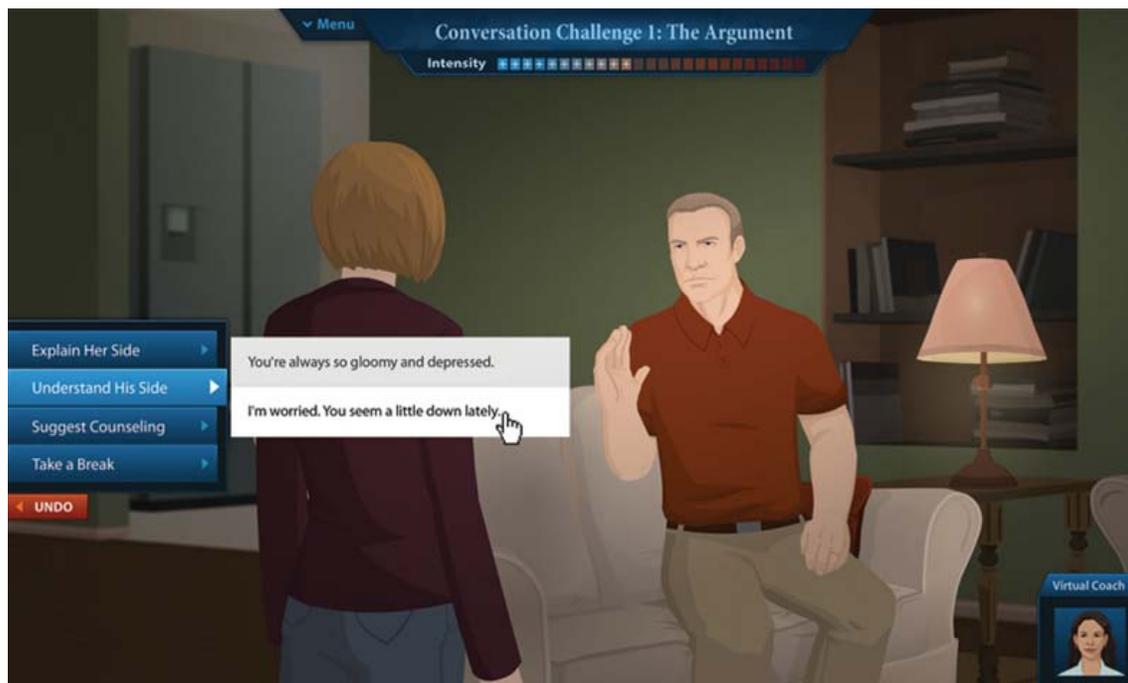
"When I saw the training, it was like I was experiencing some of the conversations I had with my son again," said Felicia Armour, mother of a returning veteran and one of the 100 family members involved developing the training program. "The way it is broken down -- with each step helping you figure out how to start a conversation and keep it neutral so it doesn't escalate into anger -- they covered all the possibilities."

According to veteran Clarence Pierre, "The training is very realistic, especially the disagreements," which mimicked arguments he'd had with his wife. "I wish I had been able to have this training before. It will be very helpful for veterans' families, since it gives you the opportunity to deal with a situation before it happens and try out some different approaches."

Video commentary from these, and other, family members can be viewed at [www.vimeo.com/28357942](http://www.vimeo.com/28357942).

"Our goal was to provide family members with a virtual and risk-free environment where they can practice these challenging conversations, get personalized feedback, and learn conversation tactics to best approach and discuss difficult issues with their veteran," said Ron Goldman, CEO of Kognito Interactive. "With over 56,000 families already accessing the training in the NY/NJ area, we are excited to see this program adopted in additional states and to play a role in supporting our veterans and their families."

Results from a randomized controlled study assessing the effectiveness of this training appear in the peer reviewed journal *Games for Health: Research, Development, and Clinical Applications* (<http://www.kognito.com/products/ptsd/research/>).



*(Photo: Snapshot of Simulated Conversation with Avatar)*