

AOM Program Helps Vets Recover from PTSD

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Veterans can now gain hope for recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is a condition that has symptomatic features of recall, arousal and avoidance. The Academy of Oriental Medicine at Austin (AOMA) partnered with the nonprofit Save A Vet (www.SaveAVet.com) and the Austin Veterans and Family Advocacy Council (AVFAC) to assist in a program called Veterans Team Recovery Integrated Immersion Program (Vet TRIIP). An innovative and creative demonstration project for treating veterans with PTSD and related symptoms, the goal of Vet TRIIP is to assist veterans and their families in returning to peaceful, happy, pro-ductive and successful civilian lives.

This is a collaborative effort with students and alumni from AOMA working together with volunteers from a wide range of disciplines treating our veterans. The basis for the Vet TRIIP is the successful multi-modality PTSD program called the Restoration & Resilience (R&R) Center developed at Ft. Bliss for returning soldiers with PTSD to active combat status.

PTSD is a type of anxiety disorder that can occur after experiencing a traumatic event that involved the threat of injury or death. The recall symptom involves the repeated reliving of an event, which can disturb day-to-day activity. There may be flashback episodes, recurrent distressing memories and repeated dreams of the event. There can be physical reactions and recall to situations reminiscent of the traumatic event. Avoidance involves emotional numbness and a lack of interest in normal activities. There may be feelings of detachment and an inability to remember important aspects of the trauma. Patients may display little hope in a future and avoidance of places, people or objects that trigger memories of the event. Arousal involves difficulty concentrating, exaggerated re-sponse to stimuli, hypervigilance, irritability, outbursts of anger and sleeping difficulties. Another criteria for diagnosis is that these symptoms are severe enough to interfere with daily activities.

So far, the Vet TRIIP program is the only one in the United States that will utilize an integrative approach to treat veterans from the Korean and Vietnam wars, as well as those from the first Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan. This program will also involve close collaborations between multiple disciplines, including acupuncture, chiropractic, massage therapy, reiki, meditation, tai chi and *qi gong*. Additionally, the veterans involved in this program will continue their standard mental health care.

Experts from the field of psychology, psychiatry, chiropractic care and acupuncture recently presented topics for volunteers, and students and alumni of AOMA. Topics included "Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) for PTSD," "Multi-Modality Integrated Immersion Programs for PTSD," "Standard Treatment for PTSD," "PTSD Symptoms and Progression," "Military Culture" and "Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine for the Treatment of PTSD." Participants in the program were interviewed. The following accounts are reduced into "composite-case vignettes" where the brief narratives combine various stories so as to protect the identity of the participants.

One person reported that he was hit so many times in his left leg that he was on 58 different

medications and half of them were to offset side effects of the medications. After three months in the program, he is no longer on psychiatric drugs and narcotic pain medications. He is now on only nine medications. He doesn't have any pain right now. He reported enough relaxation to be able to sleep. "I have not felt that relaxed in a long time. This turns you into a normal human being. You don't have to go to the outside edge of exploding. I feel that it is possible to be healed from PTSD."

Presenters and audience were also interviewed. Many reported that veterans aren't going to allow someone to treat them who hasn't "been there." Based upon this lesson, participants reflected upon sharing a personal connection to a veteran's experience if they hadn't not served in battle. The connection is crucial. When working on veterans, don't ask too many questions. You can focus on the physical part of what you are doing and leave the other part to counselors.

Another veteran with PTSD who had not slept for four days reported, "I barely got home without falling asleep. I slept for 12 hours. I woke up around midnight. I remember being afraid that I would not get back to sleep, right before I fell back asleep. It was great! How many veterans can I bring to the next session?"

The daughter of one veteran observed, "I have never seen my Dad laugh spontaneously in my entire life." His wife showed up the next day during the Integrated Immersion Experience, "because I wanted to see what you guys did. Can you send him home today like he was last night?"

Overall, participants were inspired. Most of the participants experienced acupuncture and energy work for the first time with wonderful responses. Everybody was working together to create a healing experience for the veterans.

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