Wounded Warriors Continuing Battle:

Exploration of Nontraditional Therapy Options for Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

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Current-day veterans are not given the attention and resources they deserve. They fought for our country, yet they are tossed aside and often treated rather poorly at the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are commonly given a few blanket therapy strategies, like therapy dogs and counseling sessions, with the hope that it will work for everyone. This is not the case, and it is my goal to explore some of the nontraditional therapies available.

An average of 17.3% of veterans develop PTSD within a year of returning from war (ptsd.va.gov). Veterans fought for our country and for our freedom, yet many are left to suffer the pain of PTSD without sufficient help. According to several veterans with PTSD that I have personally talked to, there are not enough therapy options readily available to them; they can talk about their fears and feelings in a group or be paired with a service dog, but for many those strategies may not be effective (personal communications).

**Thesis**

Traditionally, the VA treats veterans with PTSD in virtually universal ways and believes that treatment can be successful with simply one or two options. There is evidence, however, that some veterans can react poorly to these “traditional” forms of PTSD therapy (personal communications). In order to help more veterans receive meaningful care, we need to explore other treatment options.

**Background**

Before the term PTSD, it was called “railroad spine syndrome,” as many instances followed railway accidents (Ray, 2008). The first recorded experiences of railroad spine syndrome are said to be in the 1700’s and were believed to cause nerve shock and functional
disorders (Ray, 2008). Sometime in the 1800’s the term trauma, previously reserved solely for surgery, was introduced into psychiatry (Ray, 2008).

Following the battles fought in the Boer, Crimean, and Civil Wars, soldiers were diagnosed with exhaustion; this extreme exhaustion was recognizable primarily by mental shutdown (Ray, 2008). Soldiers with exhaustion were treated with “rest”. They were sent to the back of the line for a short period of time before being thrown right back into battle; this repetitive stress caused extreme fatigue to become a part of their natural shock reactions (Ray, 2008).

Fast forward to World War I, where exhaustion became shell shock. F.W. Mott wrote one of the first and best descriptions of shell shock: “...physical shock and horrifying conditions could cause fear, which in turn produced an intense effect on the mind. Hysterical symptoms include paralysis, contractions, disordered gait, weariness, headaches, and particularly vivid and terrifying dreams” (Ray, 2008). This laid the groundwork for modern-day PTSD, which received its finalized definition and classification thanks to research done during the Vietnam War in the mid-1900’s (Ray, 2008).

**Body**

**Equine therapy**

Equine therapy is often utilized more for children with mental disabilities, such as Autism, than it is for adults. Because of this stigma, many adults may shy away from the idea of spending time with and riding horses to help cope with mental disabilities. This is a shame, as equine therapy can be one of the most beneficial practices available - especially to veterans with PTSD.
Horses, while potentially quite large, are hypervigilant prey animals and are therefore always on the lookout for danger. Many veterans with PTSD can relate to this, as trauma often causes one to feel like they are prey waiting to be attacked (Esposito, 2016). Horses also bring a sense of calm to the scene; it does not matter if a veteran is frustrated by their situation, heartbroken for themselves or their brothers and sisters, or simply depressed - the horses that work in equine therapy, and many outside of the profession, are able to sense what the veterans need and provide that comfort to them. Equine therapy is not simply performed on the ground, however; riding horses can also be extremely beneficial. The way a horse moves at a walk will motion the rider in the same way as if he were walking himself, which can assist in building muscle where it may have been lost from disuse due to extreme depression. It is theorized that equine therapy improves self-esteem, and helps decrease the frequency and severity of symptoms caused by PTSD (Russell, 2013). It has been confirmed through research that equine therapy can lower both heart rate and blood pressure, reduce anxiety and depression, and alleviate stress (Vivo, 2011).

Equine therapy helps those in distress by first helping them to get in touch with their thoughts and feelings. This is possible because horses have the exceptional ability to sense the emotions of those around them and act accordingly. For example, if someone is angry or upset, the horse may mirror their emotions and become indignant as well; if someone is calm and collected, the horse is likely to respond in kind. Horses encourage people to become more in touch with their thoughts and feelings by promoting self-awareness and helping people see themselves in a more real, logical way (Vivo, 2011).

While horses may not be able to physically speak, they are nonetheless excellent communicators. This is an especially valuable trait when working with people who may have
become withdrawn and isolated, and therefore may be emotionally underdeveloped. Horses help people to recognize both their conscious and unconscious patterns of interacting with others. Due to their strong herd instincts, horses immediately begin building relationships with the people around them, essentially treating them as members of their herd; this provides people a rare opportunity to develop a new kind of relationships with others (Vivo, 2011).

Because horses can be rather large and unpredictable, feelings of fear, past trauma, inadequacy, and lack of control may arise in whomever is handling them; the two most common fears are that the horse may not like them or could hurt them. Because people are naturally drawn to horses and have a desire to form a relationship, they tend to power through and learn how to tolerate and process their emotions, rather than giving into the usual reaction of “fight or flight”. By learning how to overcome fear and anxiety regarding horses, people can then take that skill outside of the barn and adapt it to their normal day-to-day situations (Vivo, 2011).

Psychotherapy and PTSD

Psychotherapy is a collaborative treatment between an individual and a psychologist. It is composed mainly of dialogue, providing a safe and supportive environment that allows a patient to talk and work out problems with someone who is objective and non-judgemental (apa.org).

In 2005, five researchers conducted a study focusing on a meta-analysis of psychotherapy for PTSD. They concluded that psychotherapy is one of the most effective psychosocial treatments available to those with PTSD, and that it provides a large initial improvement (Bradley, Dutra, Green, Russ, & Westen, 2005). The researchers found a few drawbacks to their results, including the lack of long-term follow up data (Bradley, Dutra, Green, Russ, & Westen, 2005)
**Darkness and acoustic startle**

Acoustic startle is what helps protect prey animals from predators (Frankland & Yeomans, 1995). Acoustic startle causes the body to rapidly stiffen up before reacting with fight or flight, more or less giving the prey time to decide the best course of action (Frankland & Yeomans, 1995).

In the 1990’s, four researchers conducted a study where they proposed that those with PTSD had a higher acoustic startle baseline than those without. Their proposal was partially correct, as those with PTSD only had an exaggerated startle response under stressful conditions (Davis, Grillon, Morgan, & Southwick, 1998). The researchers utilized their results from a previous experiment, where they hypothesized that Vietnam veterans with PTSD showed exaggerated startle only under stressful conditions (Davis, Grillon, Morgan, & Southwick, 1998). They ultimately found that darkness facilitated startle in humans, which they then suggested meant the startle reflex is “sensitive to the aversive nature of darkness” (Davis, Grillon, Morgan, & Southwick, 1998). Based on these results, the researchers created a new experiment revolving around the effect of darkness on acoustic startle, specifically in Vietnam veterans with PTSD (Davis, Grillon, Morgan, & Southwick, 1998). A fear of the dark is relatively common, so it would make sense to say that darkness facilitates startle in humans, which in turn suggests the startle reflex is sensitive to the aversive nature of darkness (Davis, Grillon, Morgan, & Southwick, 1998).

The study was conducted utilizing 19 non-medicated Vietnam veterans with PTSD, 13 Vietnam veterans without PTSD, and 20 civilians without PTSD (Davis, Grillon, Morgan, & Southwick, 1998). Results showed that the overall startle level was elevated in the veterans with PTSD compared to veterans and civilians without. When paired with darkness, the acoustic
startle response was equal in both groups of veterans, and greater than the group of civilians without PTSD (Davis, Grillon, Morgan, & Southwick, 1998). This suggested that the elevated startle response in darkness was not specific to veterans with PTSD, but to veterans who have seen combat (Davis, Grillon, Morgan, & Southwick, 1998). If this study was successful as intended, therapies could have been designed to help limit or control the supposed elevated startle response for veterans with PTSD. However, since the study was somewhat unsuccessful, researchers are continuing to conduct studies in hopes of finding new therapy options for veterans.

Rebuttal

The downside to many of these therapy options is the cost. For example, the most common facility for equine therapy in Dallas, Equest, costs $7,000 per client per year (equest.org). Based on results from Open Path Psychotherapy Collective, the average psychotherapist in Dallas charges $30-$50 per visit for individual clients (openpathcollective.org); if attended on a weekly basis, psychotherapy would cost $1,440-$2,400 per year. Cost may not be as much of an issue as the VA would have you believe, however. Equest subsidizes 100% of all veteran program costs (equest.org), and some therapists would be willing to work out a deal that works best for everyone in the long run.

Conclusion

In my experience in talking with veterans experiencing PTSD, they receive minimal care through the Department of Veteran Affairs. This is no way to treat the men and women who fought for our country and our freedom. Current methods of therapy have shown to be ineffective for some veterans with PTSD (personal communications); research into more
nontraditional therapies, such as equine therapy, could prove to be more effective for veterans that need assistance.
References

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Equest.org/about-us


Openpathcollective.org/find-a-clinician

