



Mental Health Innovations

Updates from VA's Specialized Mental Health Centers

IN THIS ISSUE: **Supporting Families and Friends of Those Who Have Served**

RESEARCH

Couples Resiliency Program Improves Treatment Engagement and Relationships of Returning Veterans



Researchers pilot test a couples intervention designed to improve relationships and engagement in mental health services.

Social support plays a key role in post-deployment readjustment and recovery from mental health conditions. Veterans returning from combat and coping with readjustment or mental health conditions can face challenges in their spousal or partner relationships. Difficulties in understanding, communicating about, and coping with these stressors can take a heavy toll on these important relationships. Dr. Noosha Niv and her research team in the VISN 22 MIRECC examined the helpfulness of a couple's intervention for Veterans who have served in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. This brief

intervention was delivered to Veterans and their partners over 10-12 weekly appointments. They were provided with education about mental health disorders and taught important relationship skills including how to better communicate and solve problems. Couples also learned about the impact of combat-related and current stressors on the relationship and how to better manage these stressors. At the conclusion of treatment, Veterans had lower symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Both Veterans and their partners reported that they were more satisfied with the relationship and were more affectionate with one another. Commu-

nication about and coping with stress was also found to improve in the couples who participated in the program. Importantly, the treatment served as a gateway to mental health services. Most Veterans and their partners accepted referrals to and engaged in mental health treatment in both VA and the community following participation in the study intervention. Future research studying the impact of this program will enroll a larger sample of Veterans and their partners and will compare outcomes to those couples not receiving the intervention.

At the conclusion of treatment, Veterans had lower symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

HIGHLIGHT

Coaching Into Care



LEARN MORE

SAFE Manual

Operation Enduring Families

Make the Connection

VA Support Families

Supportive Services for Homeless and At-Risk Veteran Families

Defense Centers of Excellence-Resources for Military Families

Wellness Resources for Military Community

EDUCATION

SAFE Workshops Educate and Support Veterans’ Families

Educators and clinicians in the VISN 16 MIRECC fill a gap in traditional Veteran care by providing support and education to adult family members of Veterans. Family members of Veterans can feel overwhelmed and alone as they see their loved one struggle with mental illness. The Support and Family Education (SAFE) program was developed by Dr. Michelle Sherman and grew out of a desire to ensure that the VA is an environment where families feel welcomed and respected. Started over a decade ago, SAFE was the first educational program developed within VA to make information and support accessible to these family members. The program, which has shown positive outcomes, includes a series of 18 workshops that provide education on mental health conditions, including PTSD, and skills to enhance family resiliency. Adult family members come together to learn about mental health conditions, gain coping skills, and connect with one another. The connections developed often provide valuable support that families can continue to draw upon in the future. SAFE has also been revised to meet the needs of family members of Veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan (named Operation Enduring Families). Both versions of the program are available online at no cost. SAFE is increasingly being used to engage and support families in VA medical centers, as well as in public and private organizations across the nation.



Family members of Veterans with serious mental illness and posttraumatic stress disorder benefit from education and support.

CLINICAL

New VA Program Helps Family and Friends Support Veterans’ Care



MIRECCs partner to assist family and friends connect their loved ones to care and resources through Coaching into Care.

Family members and friends can feel powerless as they watch their loved one cope with post-deployment readjustment and difficulties such as posttraumatic stress, depression, and alcohol problems. Led by Dr. Steven Sayers, Coaching into Care (CIC) is a partnership between the VISN 4, 6, and 22 MIRECCs to address family members’ needs. CIC helps family members and friends support and encourage their loved one to get needed care. Veterans may be reluctant to seek care for a variety of reasons. These include stigma of mental health problems and lack of familiarity with the VA system. CIC provides family members with tools to overcome these barriers and to help the Veteran make informed decisions about seeking mental health care. Family and friends can call the national “Coaching” call center to have a free and confidential conversation with a licensed clinical social worker or psychologist. These professionals provide guidance on communicating with and supporting a loved one in connecting with care. They also provide concrete information about resources and referrals as well as helping family and friends connect with appropriate VA and local services. CIC provides follow-up to initial calls as appropriate to the needs of the Veteran and the family member. Since the program launched nationally in June 2011, it has served over 1500 friends and family members of Veterans. Use of the program by family and friends has resulted in an increased likelihood of the Veteran engaging in VA mental health services. Coaching into Care is available Monday through Friday from 8am-8pm (ET) at 888-823-7458 or at CoachingIntoCare@va.gov.

There are 15 VA specialized mental health centers of excellence which include 10 Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Centers (MIRECCs), 4 Mental Health Centers of Excellence, and the National Center for PTSD. The centers share a mission to improve the health and well being of Veterans through cutting-edge science, education, and clinical initiatives. Mental health problems are often multiple complex conditions. Each center addresses a particular mental health disorder, environmental situation or Veteran cohort. To learn more about these centers, go to www.mirecc.va.gov.

Noosha Niv, PhD (Editor), Shannon McCaslin, PhD, Steven Sayers, PhD and MIRECC Communications Workgroup (Contributors)