Veterans and Mental Health

Learning About PTSD

with Dr. Laura Wiedeman

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Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

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Objectives

- Learn about PTSD epidemiology, symptoms, and recovery
- Review available resources for veterans with PTSD, including websites, educational videos, mobile apps, and VA services
- Address common misconceptions about PTSD that may be held by veterans and/or the public
- Develop a greater understanding of how to interact with veterans who may have PTSD
Objective #1:

PTSD EPIDEMIOLOGY, SYMPTOMS, AND RECOVERY
What is a “traumatic” event?

**Daily hassles**
- Car breaking down
- Paying bills

**Major life events**
- Losing a job
- Divorce
- Buying a new home
- Getting married

**Serious traumatic events**
- War zone exposure
- Physical or sexual assault
- Serious accidents
- Child sexual or physical abuse
- Natural disasters
- Torture
Trauma exposure is common.

Most people you meet every day have experienced a trauma.

How common is PTSD?

Only about 7% develop PTSD in their lifetime

Criterion A: Traumatic Event

• Directly experiencing a traumatic event
• Witnessing, in person, an event that happened to someone else
• Learning about the violent or unexpected death of a friend of family member
• Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of traumatic events
Symptom Clusters

At least 1
Re-experiencing symptom

At least 1
Avoidance symptom

At least 2
Negative alterations in cognitions and mood

At least 2
Hyperarousal symptoms
Symptom Clusters: Intrusions (Re-experiencing) (Criterion B)

- Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s)
- Recurrent, distressing dreams related to the traumatic event(s)
- Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks)
- Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to trauma reminders
- Marked physiological reactions to trauma reminders
Symptom Clusters: Persistent Avoidance (Criterion C)

- Effortful avoidance of distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings related to the traumatic event(s)
- Effortful avoidance of external reminders (e.g., people, places, conversations, situations) related to the traumatic event(s)
Symptom Clusters: Negative changes in beliefs and feelings (Criterion D)

- Persistent, exaggerated negative beliefs about oneself, others, and/or the world
- Distorted blame of self or others
- Persistent negative emotions
- Difficulty feeling positive emotions
- Feeling detached or cut off from others
- Diminished interest or participation in significant activities
- Difficulty remembering important aspects of the trauma
Symptom Clusters: Alterations in arousal and reactivity (Criterion E)

- Irritable behavior and angry outbursts
- Reckless or self-destructive behavior
- Hypervigilance
- Exaggerated startle response
- Problems with concentration
- Sleep disturbance
Prevalence rates, by service era

11-20%
- 11-20 out of every 100 veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) have PTSD in a given year

12%
- About 12 out of every 100 veterans who served in the Gulf War (Desert Storm) have PTSD in a given year

15%
- About 15 out of every 100 veterans who served in Vietnam have PTSD in a given year
Why do some people get PTSD while others do not?

- Personal factors
- The traumatic event
- The recovery environment

PTSD
Personal Factors

**Personal factors**

- Historical factors such as prior trauma exposure, other prior adversity, history of psychiatric disorder
- Demographic characteristics such as female gender, younger age, minority race/ethnicity, lower education
- Genetic factors (but there is no "PTSD gene")

- The traumatic event
- The recovery environment

PTSD
Traumatic Event

The traumatic event

Personal factors

The recovery environment

PTSD

Unintentional
(disaster or accident)

Deliberate
(combat, assault, abuse)
Recovery Environment

- Personal factors
- The traumatic event
- The recovery environment

Characteristics of the recovery environment such as low social support, stressful life events, new trauma
Comorbidity: PTSD often co-occurs with other mental health problems.

80% have one or more mental health problem
(depression, anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders)

20% have no other mental health problem

Other Co-occurring Problems

- Reduced quality of life
- Increased risk of suicide attempts
- Relationship difficulties
- Difficulties at home or at work
- Higher unemployment rates
- More medical illness
Recovery is possible!

Reduce symptoms

Effective management  Improve quality of life
How can PTSD be treated?

Both medication and psychotherapy are effective, but psychotherapy is more effective.

**How effective are these treatments?**

Both medication and talk therapy can help to treat your symptoms. Your customized treatment plan may include one or more of these options.

**TREATMENT EFFECTS ON PTSD SYMPTOMS**

- **Medications**: (0.43)
- **Talk Therapy**: (1.26)

**What do the numbers mean?**
The greater the effect size, the more noticeable a change in symptoms.

- Small Effect: 0.2
- Medium Effect: 0.5
- Large Effect: 0.8
Evidence-based Psychotherapy Treatments

• First line psychotherapies:

A Trauma-focused psychotherapy that includes components of exposure and/or cognitive restructuring, such as:

– Prolonged Exposure (PE)

– Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)

– Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Works

Prolonged Exposure
- Pre-Treatment
- Post-Treatment
- 9 Month Follow-up
- 5-10 Years

Cognitive Processing Therapy
- Pre-Treatment
- Post-Treatment
- 9 Month Follow-up
- 5-10 Years

Evidence-based Pharmacological Treatments

- **First line medications:**
  - Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs)
    - E.g., paroxetine (Paxil), sertraline (Zoloft), fluoxetine (Prozac)
  - Serotonin-Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitors (SNRIs)
    - E.g., venlafaxine (Effexor)

- **Warning:** Benzodiazepines (e.g., Xanax, Valium, Klonopin)
  - Limited efficacy
  - Increased safety concerns – potential for harm
  - Not recommended for PTSD
Objective #2

RESOURCES AND SERVICES
Provide **education** about PTSD and effective PTSD treatments

Make available resources to promote treatment engagement

Develop tools to foster **self help** and **symptom management**
PTSD Basics

• **Understanding PTSD and PTSD Treatment** is a booklet that explains basic information about:
  – What is PTSD?
  – What can cause PTSD?
  – What are the symptoms of PTSD?
  – What do I do if I have symptoms?
  – How do I know if I have PTSD?
  – Why get treatment for PTSD?
  – Common questions about treatment
  – What happens during PTSD treatment?
  – How do I choose a mental health provider?
  – Where can I go to get help?
Animated Whiteboard Videos

- Short (~3 minute), engaging videos about PTSD and effective treatments
AboutFace
http://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/AboutFace/

Learn about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from Veterans who've experienced it. Hear their stories. Find out how treatment turned their lives around.

VETERANS	CLINICIANS	FAMILY

Who I am
How I knew I had PTSD
How PTSD affects the people you love
Why I didn't ask for help right away
When I knew I needed help
What treatment was like for me
How treatment helps me
My advice to you
PTSD Treatment Decision Aid
http://www.ptsd.va.gov/decisionaid
Mobile Apps

- The National Center for PTSD has partnered with a number of organizations to develop a variety of mobile apps.

- Apps are focused on PTSD, related health problems (e.g., insomnia, alcohol use, etc.), or general well-being.

- There are apps for patients, providers, and for use with patient-provider dyads.
PTSD Coach

- PTSD Coach mobile app – more than 275,000 downloads in 98 countries.

- App provides:
  - Education about PTSD and PTSD treatment
  - A self-assessment tool
  - Portable skills to address acute symptoms
  - Direct connection to crisis support

- Used as stand-alone education and symptom management tool, or with face-to-face care.

- Tools are easily accessible when they are needed most.
PTSD Coach Online
http://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/ptsdcoachonline/default.htm

- **PTSD Coach Online** offers an expanded suite of 17 tools to help manage symptoms (e.g., problem solving, challenging cognitions).
- Users can choose a tool based upon a current problem or a full list of tools.
- Video instructions from “coaches” are available for each tool.
PTSD Family Coach


- PTSD Coach is for family members of those living with PTSD.
- App provides:
  - Education about PTSD and self-care
  - Information to help take care of your relationship and children
  - Resources to help a loved one get treatment for PTSD
  - Tools to manage stress and build social networks
  - Tracking for stress level over time
Printable Materials to Share
http://www.ptsd.va.gov/about/press-room/Materials_for_Printing.asp

• A variety of handouts, posters, brochures, and flyers
• Intended for veterans, families, and general public knowledge
• Emphasis on understanding PTSD, co-occurring conditions, treatment, as well as more general readjustment issues
Veterans Crisis Line
https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/

- 24/7
- Phone support
- Text messaging
- Online chat
“MakeTheConnection.net is an online resource designed to connect Veterans, their family members and friends, and other supporters with information, resources, and solutions to issues affecting their lives.”

- Information about common life challenges, problems, and conditions
- Extensive video gallery with good sorting options
- Information and resource locator
- Self-assessments and self-help
Where to Get Help: US Dept. of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration (VHA)
- Hospitals
- Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs)
- Vet Centers

Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
- Compensation
- Education & Training
- Home Loans

National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
- Burial and memorial benefits

**Please note this is not a complete list of services provided by each administration**
Where to Get Help: Benefits (VBA)

- Connect to your local Regional Benefit Office
  - CA locations: Oakland, Los Angeles, San Diego

- Find your local County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO)
  - Assistance and advocacy in connecting veterans and their families with service and benefits
  - County locations: [https://www.calvet.ca.gov/VetServices/Pages/CVSO-Locations.aspx](https://www.calvet.ca.gov/VetServices/Pages/CVSO-Locations.aspx)
Where to Get Help: Health Care (VHA) Eligibility & Enrollment

- **Eligibility Criteria:** [https://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/apply/veterans.asp](https://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/apply/veterans.asp)
  - Served in the military
  - Separated under any condition other than dishonorable
  - Minimum duty requirement (24 consecutive months)

- **Enrollment**
  - Complete VA Form 10-10EZ
  - [https://www.vets.gov/](https://www.vets.gov/)
  - For assistance:
    - Call 1-877-222-VETS (8387) for help completing the form
    - Contact the Enrollment Coordinator at your local VA health care facility
    - Contact a National or State Veterans Service Organization
Where to Get Help:
Health Care (VHA) Locations

• Hospitals and Community Based Outpatient Clinics
  – Hospital & Clinic Locator:
    https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/division.asp?dnum=1

• Vet Centers
  – Readjustment Counseling for veterans and their families
  – For those who served in a combat theater or area of hostility, experienced
    MST, provided mortuary services, operated unmanned aerial vehicles in
    support of combat operations
  – Bereavement counseling
  – CA Locations:
    https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/state.asp?dnum=ALL&STATE=CA
Where to Get Help: Health Care (VHA) PTSD Treatment

- All VA Medical Centers provide PTSD care, as well as many VA clinics
- Some clinics have specialized PTSD programs
  - VA PTSD Program Locator: https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp
  - Within CA: https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/state_PTSD.cfm?STATE=CA
- PTSD services may also be provided over telehealth
- Comprehensive resource list: “Where to get help for PTSD”
Objective #3

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS
Common Misconceptions

About trauma exposure and/or having PTSD:
• You can only have PTSD from combat
• PTSD is a lifelong, chronic disease
• Having PTSD means I am weak, crazy, broken, or damaged

About recovery:
• It is too late for me to recover
• Everyone who served in combat has PTSD

About services:
• I am not eligible for VHA services because I am not service connected
• I can only get treatment for PTSD at a VA hospital
Objective #4:

INTERACTING WITH VETERANS WHO MAY HAVE PTSD
Interacting with Veterans with PTSD

- Many veterans will not know or disclose if they have PTSD
- Provide information and assistance connecting them to VBA benefits and VHA services
- Focus questions on ways they need help – what do you need to know in order to help them?
  - Talking about specifics of military service, including deployments, may be personal or triggering
  - Trauma exposure or details are not needed
- Be mindful of personal space (e.g., approaching from behind, physical touch, sudden movements)
- Offer validation, normalization, and gratitude
- Instill hope
Thank you!

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