

Integrating a Systemic Paradigm When Treating Combat Veterans with PTSD

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Commentary

Following their military service, as many as one-third of military veterans experience PTSD from exposure to traumatic events associated with war (USA Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA), 2016). In this commentary, the authors discuss the potential benefits of integrating systemic therapy in the treatment of PTSD in combat veterans.

Following their military service, as many as one-third of military veterans experience PTSD from exposure to traumatic events associated with war [1]. Many of these servicemen and women experience significant difficulty integrating their competing military identity with their civilian identity after returning home [2].

The struggle to resolve competing identities combined with the potentially devastating effects of PTSD symptoms can cause significant distress for the veteran [2,3]. However, often times, family members of combat veterans silently suffer alongside the veteran, unsure of how best to help their struggling family member [4].

Despite these unseen effects on family members, the USDVA currently endorses individual treatment models such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) [1].

While family therapy is among the treatment options suggested by the USDVA, no systemic models are currently endorsed [5]. Furthermore, combat veterans may have limited opportunities to receive family therapy as licensed marriage and family therapists comprise only 0.7% of all veteran hospital clinicians [6].

Under the current medical model, many veterans do not seek out mental health services, even when experiencing severe distress due to PTSD [7,8]. Combat veterans often fear the stigma associated with receiving a mental health diagnosis [9]. While veterans recognize the difficulties, they experience due to PTSD, they often resist being labeled as mentally weak [10]. In order to better serve this population, it is critical that mental health professionals consider new approaches to provide a less-stigmatizing environment and increase the likelihood of treating the many veterans and families who suffer.

Systemic family therapy offers a new approach in treating PTSD as it differs from other treatments currently offered to combat veterans. Rather than conceptualizing symptoms as a result of individual pathology, family therapists recognize the various contextual factors that contribute to the manifestation of symptoms [11].

Family therapy models focus less on the individual's struggle with PTSD symptoms and instead focus on collaboratively fostering safety, understanding, support, and accountability for all family members [12]. Individual therapies often ignore the ways in which family

members may exacerbate or alleviate symptoms of PTSD experienced by the combat veteran. Recent evidence suggests that integrating family members into therapy may lead to quicker, and more cost-effective, treatment results than individual treatments [13].

In the presence of complex trauma, individual treatments may certainly be needed; however, systemic therapists conceptualize cases by focusing on contextual factors that will best contribute to treatment success.

In a recent article, by Lucero et al. in 2017 outline the treatment of PTSD in combat veterans using Internal Family Systems (IFS), a systemic therapeutic model. The authors demonstrate how systemic therapy provides a less-pathologizing stance while treating both the individual and relational effects of PTSD.

We encourage clinicians everywhere to consider the many potential benefits of integrating family therapy into the practice of treating combat veterans with PTSD. Doing so may increase the likelihood of helping many veterans and their families whose suffering often goes unnoticed.

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