



CESAMH

(VISN 22) Center of Excellence for Stress and Mental Health

Overview

In response to the increasing prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) and other stress-related mental health problems in veterans, the Veterans Administration in 2006 awarded the VA San Diego Healthcare System (VASDHS) and VISN 22 a Center of Excellence for Stress and Mental Health. This center consists of a multidisciplinary team of clinicians, educators and researchers whose goal is to understand, prevent, and heal the effects of stress.

About Stress- and Trauma-Related Disorders

Stress and an individual's response to it involve complex interactions among many systems — biological, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental. A person's unique vulnerabilities to stress begin with the inborn and inherited effects of genes and their expression, and accumulate with the experiences of family, job, and with changes in physical and mental health throughout the lifespan. In the case of military and veteran personnel, the added effects of stress related to service to our Country are extremely important factors as well. To understand, prevent, and heal the effects of stress, we have created a Center of Excellence that will investigate relevant aspects of stress and its related medical and psychiatric problems in veteran and military personnel from a comprehensive and integrated multidisciplinary perspective. This Center focuses on multiple aspects of stress and its adverse effects including, but not limited to:

- The effects of stress in the Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)/Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) contingents and veterans
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- The mental health concomitants of traumatic brain injury (TBI)
- The interaction of physical and mental health consequences of stress exposure

Mission

Through clinical and translational research, innovative therapeutic programs, and education and training, the CESAMH aims to be a national resource for cutting-edge understanding and state-of-the-art treatment of stress- and trauma-related problems.

Several documents including the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health report, its companion document, the VA Action Agenda, the VA Mental Health Strategic Plan, and more recently the Mental Health Uniform Services Package have outlined recommendations to transform the mental health delivery system in the VA to improve

access and quality and to promote recovery. The CESAMH has selected from these documents three basic Strategic Initiatives that are relevant to our mission and vision and that serve as an organizing mechanism coordinating our research, educational and clinical activity. They include:

- Resilience, Recovery, and Rehabilitation
- Spirituality and Consumer-Centeredness
- Understanding, Education, and Awareness

Organization

The CESAMH's organizational structure includes three major components: Research, Clinical, and Education.

Research

The Research component is composed of nine units: Clinical Health and Neuroscience, Epidemiology and Therapeutics, Functional Neuroimaging, Genetics and Genomics, Lifespan, Neuropsychology, Psychophysiology, Psychotherapy, and the Bioassay and Biomarker Unit. The Center provides infrastructure support for large-scale projects and collaborative efforts, as well as direct research support for smaller innovative or pilot proposals. All research is geared toward direct clinical applicability, and answering questions of current clinical relevance.

Clinical

The Clinical component of the CESAMH works closely with the various clinical components of VASDHS and VISN-22 to develop, pilot, and assess innovative methods of screening and evaluation and to develop improved forms of prevention and treatment for veterans with stress-related disorders that are appropriate to ethnicity, gender and developmental age. A primary clinical focus includes newly diagnosed veterans, as well as those who have suffered military sexual trauma.

Education

The Education component has four primary goals:

- To disseminate information to multiple groups of stakeholders that include administrators and policy makers; researchers; healthcare providers; family members and advocates; veterans and active duty military using a variety of media (i.e., workshops, print, websites, video)
- To educate about and disseminate evidence-based practices
- To participate in and foster partnerships with organizations that will increase outreach, reduce stigma, and promote recovery
- To develop and implement training and career development programs for researchers and clinicians to increase the pipeline of investigators who are capable and successful in conducting research or providing care in stress and mental health.

Selected Studies and Projects

Marine Resilience Study

The objective of the Marine Resilience Study is to complete a series of three prospective, longitudinal, interrelated projects that seek to better understand risk and resilience in a cohort of at least 1600 Marines bound for Iraq. The primary aim of this study is first to identify the individual (genetic, biologic, psychological, psychiatric, trauma and prior deployment history), social (e.g., social supports), and deployment (e.g., cohesion, various dimensions of war-zone stress) factors that predict trajectories of mental health

response, particularly posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A secondary aim is to integrate and analyze data across studies in order to accomplish a broader multi-system understanding of the phenomenology of adaptation to operational stress.

Armed Forces Twin Registry

A second large-scale research effort is focused on the development of a post-Vietnam (Gulf Wars) twin registry of more recently active or discharged military personnel. Twin studies provide a unique mechanism for studying stress and many other measures because they constitute a unique natural experiment. Complex statistical modeling can be used to determine the percent of variance of characteristics of interest that are due to additive genetic influences, shared environmental influences, and nonshared (individual-specific) environmental influences. This has important implications for molecular genetic studies and for treatment and intervention.

Leadership

Director – James B. Lohr, MD

Director of Research – Dewleen Baker, MD

Director of Clinical Affairs – Niloo Afari, PhD

Director of Education – Laurie Lindamer, PhD

Administrative Officer – Cathy Whitney

Contact

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