RESEARCH

Help for Veterans with Serious Mental Illness

Many Veterans with serious mental illness have negative views about their illness (stigma) and themselves because of their illness (self-stigma). This may hinder their recovery. A study recently completed by researchers at the VISN 5 Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC) with the goal of determining whether a group focused on helping Veterans learn strategies to manage and change these types of thoughts could be helpful.

The study involved 248 Veterans at three VA medical centers in Maryland and Washington DC. Half of the Veterans participated in a nine-session group focused on learning tools and strategies to cope with stigma and reduce self-stigma (Ending Self-Stigma). The other half participated in a wellness group providing education about health topics such as nutrition, exercise and quitting smoking. At the end of the study, both groups of Veterans had significantly reduced negative attitudes, called self-stigma. Both groups also had significantly increased feelings of belongingness after the study.

“Participating in an Ending Self-Stigma or wellness group significantly reduced Veterans’ self-stigma and significantly increased their feelings of belongingness.”

The study was funded by VA Health Services Research & Development. Continuing work is examining participant interviews to get a better idea of what they found helpful about the groups. For more information, contact Dr. Drapalski at Amy.Drapalski@va.gov.

EDUCATION

EASE-ing Self-Stigma Training Available for Mental Health Providers

A new training is available for mental health providers to help Veterans overcome self-stigma. Self-stigma is the act of a person taking in negative messages about having a mental illness and coming to believe that these thoughts are true of him/herself.
Providers can receive training to help Veterans overcome self-stigma.

The training, developed by the VISN 5 MIRECC, can be completed in about 1-1/2 hours. It provides tools focused on Education and Awareness, changing negative or unhelpful thoughts (Shifting perspective), and Empowerment to help Veterans overcome these negative thoughts that can delay their recovery. The training is free and can be delivered in person, via conference call, or as a webinar. Training materials are also available to VA staff interested in offering the training at their local facilities. For more information, contact Dr. Drapalski at Amy.Drapalski@va.gov.

CLINICAL

Collaboration Between Mental Health and Chaplains Enhances Care for Veterans

Many people experiencing mental health challenges, including Veterans and service members, turn to chaplains for support. There can be a number of reasons why. “Chaplains are a trusted and accessible resource for many Veterans and service members. Not only do chaplains serve to address individuals’ spiritual concerns, but they are frequently viewed as a less stigmatized point of contact for people experiencing social and psychological distress,” notes Dr. Keith Meador. Dr. Meador is Director of the VA Mental Health and Chaplaincy Program, housed within and administered by the VISN 6 MIRECC.

Both military and VHA chaplains can now participate in an intensive mental health training developed jointly by the military and VHA Mental Health and Chaplaincy Program. Training occurs over 1 year and relies heavily on distance education technologies. Chaplains learn about specific mental health issues and ways to improve the care of patients with spiritual and mental health problems.

In addition, the program recently concluded a year-long quality-improvement project with 14 VHA and military medical facilities. The goal was to develop ways of better integrating mental health and chaplain care practices. Mental health and chaplain teams identified several valuable approaches. These included enhancing awareness of each other’s services, improving communication across disciplines, better coordination of services, and formalized collaborative agreements between the disciplines. Many teams developed and began using new methods for screening patients to identify those who could benefit from a referral to the other discipline. This substantially increased referrals at many sites. In addition, working as team members resulted in chaplains and mental health professionals becoming better educated about one another. This increased their confidence in being able to coordinate with each other and make appropriate referrals. Informative videos providing background and rationale for the collaborative effort are available at http://www.mirecc.va.gov/mentalhealthandchaplaincy/Learning_Collaborative.asp. For further information, write to MH-C@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.

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