Vietnam Era Veterans with PTSD: Barriers, Facilitators, and Preferences for Treatment Engagement

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Barriers

PTSD “didn’t exist” upon return from Vietnam

Veterans reported that there was no such thing as PTSD when they returned from Vietnam, and that the existing labels (e.g., “shell shock”) didn’t fit their own situation. Many Vietnam Era Veterans about PTSD still exists today, with Veterans saying that when they first heard about PTSD they assumed it was something that applied to Veterans of more recent eras, but not to them.

When I left the military with PTSD in the ’70s, they didn’t have that title, so you were either shell shocked or you were, you know, from a combat situation or I don’t know how else they would’ve categorized it, because they didn’t have the term PTSD. – Orando

Well, they didn’t have it labeled as PTSD. They always called it shell shocked, and I never considered myself – I mean I had my flashes and stuff, but I never considered myself as being down like dead down shell shocked crazy, you know. [...] But if I would have known earlier, I probably wouldn’t have tried to carry this around by myself and the time that I had – Edwin

Non-combat related trauma

A lack of Veteran awareness that non-PTSD exists and can be treated, as well as difficulties in accessing appropriate treatment for non-PTSD, was identified as a barrier by Veterans. But the idea to bring together Veterans who had already learned that you can have PTSD not even having been in a war. And I never knew that, you know. – Isaac

Military and Veteran cultural discourse treatment seeking

The concepts of Veterans as warriors and of self-reliance can prevent some Veterans from seeking treatment. Also, some Veterans may feel they do not want to seek help, or may regret, or guilt over experiences in service, and a reluctance to discuss this with others.

My father was a Veteran. My grandfather was a Veteran, and my great-grandfather was a Veteran. And the only words I got of encouragement from my father was just to suck it up and deal with it. [...] I don’t never get easier. You just gotta deal with it. And that’s what I’ve done, you know, but I’m at a point where it’s not working no more. I’m tired. – Elliot

Data for this poster is drawn from a qualitative pilot study with Vietnam Era Veterans who were recently engaged with a trauma-focused treatment program at a VA Medical Center. Veteran participants (n=12) took part in a two-interview series about their beliefs, conceptualizations, and expectations about treatment and recovery in PTSD. The first interview took place around the start of each Veteran’s engagement with the treatment program; the second interview was scheduled for approximately 4 months later. Transcripts were analyzed using a team-based, inductive coding approach. This poster presents some of the barriers and facilitators to treatment engagement identified by these Vietnam Era Veterans, as well as their expressed preferences for treatment. Viewpoints of Vietnam Era Veterans who had previously engaged with some treatment and those who were completely new to treatment are included.

Preferences

Wariness about medication

Veterans were wary about medication assisted treatment, but were generally willing to try it as long as it didn’t have unintended effects.

I’ll take whatever medication, but if it makes me zombie-like, I’m not gonna do that deal. – Elliot

I told ‘em I’m not gonna take more medication that I am gonna walk around like a zombie at night. No! You know, I take the medication but I don’t have them kind that was like that. – Travis

Preference for groups

Some Veterans preferred groups for the comradeship and shared understanding found with other Veterans. It’s easier to talk to someone…when you’re there with a group. [...] You don’t have that been through what you’ve been through. [...] But that one-on-one, you don’t really know what I’ve been through. – Glenn

[Group] seems to be the way I can associate with other people who have similar issues and they’re Veterans and they understand a lot more about me than the normal person walking down the street. – Russell

Supportive family and friends

Veterans generally said that the support and encouragement of their family and friends was an important facilitator for them engaging in treatment. Plus my two children were after me for - to go for help. I have a son and a daughter. My son is grown – both of them are grown but my son was after me because he stayed with me the longest and he knew what was wrong. – Vernon

Veteran comrades

The opportunity to interact with other Veterans in treatment was a facilitator for many Veterans in our study. (It) really just brings back the comradery that you had when you were in country, you know. When I leave there, I feel good about being with the guys and then when I get back in society it’s like my guard is back up. – Edwin

My therapy is my fellow brothers. Fellow Veterans is my therapy. I feel that if I’m gonna be in a group setting with other Veterans, maybe they can understand all of what I’m going through and then collectively we, you know, can swap information and share information to help each other rise above. – Jerome

Analysis of the data from this pilot study is ongoing. We aim to gain an understanding of Vietnam era Veterans’ conceptualizations of treatment and recovery in PTSD, including their goals, expectations, and beliefs. Further analysis will also include examining how and the history of Veterans’ interactions with the VA shape their current conceptualizations of PTSD and recovery. Our goal is to identify possible recommendations for providers to help tailor treatment for Vietnam Era Veterans.