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VISN 23 Mental Health Service Line Newsletter Special Edition: Guide to VA Mental Health Services

Volume 1, Issue 2

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A Message from the VISN 23 Mental Health Service Line Director

Points of Interest in this issue:

- **From the Service Line Director**
- **Anxiety and Mood Disorders**
- **Substance Use and Addictive Disorders**
- **PTSD**
- **Severe and Persistent Mental Illness**
- **Services for Veterans with Special Needs**

I am pleased to present the second edition of the VISN 23 Mental Health Service Line (MHSL) newsletter. In 2008, VA introduced a new mental health handbook that provides guidelines for VA hospitals and clinics across the US. The new handbook specifies exactly what mental health services VA hospitals and clinics are required to offer to Veterans and their families. The requirements differ depending on the size and type of VA hospital or clinic but they apply across the entire VA system. This issue of the VISN 23 Mental Health Service Line newsletter is meant to provide an overview of the handbook intended for the general public. If you are a Veteran, Veteran family member, member of a Veterans Service Organization, or member of another group interested in VA mental health care you can use this newsletter to learn what mental health services your local or regional VA health care facility has pledged to provide for our Veterans.



Barry Sharp

VA offers treatment for a wide range of mental health concerns. These concerns may include, but are not limited to; depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. Treatments such as medications, psychotherapies (talk therapies), and psychosocial rehabilitation and recovery services help the Veteran along the road to recovery. VA uses treatments that have been proven to be effective for specific mental health disorders. These proven treatments are called evidence-based treatments. The articles below describe treatment available for specific mental illnesses and special programs for Veterans with special needs.

Treatments for Anxiety and Mood Disorders

Anxiety, Depression, and other mood disorders are common among the general public and among Veterans. Treatments include:

- Talk therapies, such as:
 - ◆ Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to help individuals understand the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, learn new patterns of thinking, and practice new positive behaviors (relaxation techniques, using calming tapes to improve sleep, exercising, or socializing with friends).
 - ◆ Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) to help people overcome their struggles with emotional pain and worries. It helps them recognize, commit to, and achieve what's important to them.
 - ◆ Interpersonal therapy (IPT) to help people promote positive relationships and resolve relationship problems.

Antidepressant medications, anti-anxiety medications, and medications to ease sleep and other problems.

Many Veterans receive care for depression, other mood disorders and anxiety through integrated Primary Care and Mental Health services.

"Mental health recovery is a journey of healing and transformation enabling a person with a mental health problem to live a meaningful life in a community of his or her choice while striving to achieve his or her full potential"

[http://
mentalhealth.samhsa
.gov/publications/
allpubs/sma05-4129/](http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/sma05-4129/)

Helpful links for more Mental Health Information:

- Click selected icons in this newsletter margins to link to website for more information or click the title below for a complete guide:

[Guide to VA Mental Health Services for Veterans & Families](#)

MAKE THE CONNECTION
Shared experiences and support for Veterans



Vet Center

877-WAR-VETS(927-8387)

FIND A VA FACILITY



NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE
1-800-273-TALK (8255)
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Treatments for Substance Use and Addictive Disorders

Substance abuse problems are common in the general public and among Veterans. When Veterans have trouble readjusting to civilian life, some turn to substances to help them cope. Persons can abuse or become addicted to alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs and misuse prescription medications. Treatments for substance abuse include:

- Talk therapies, such as:
 - ◆ Motivational enhancement therapy to help the individual strengthen his/her commitment to getting clean and sober.
 - ◆ Motivational Interviewing focuses on exploring and resolving ambivalence and centers on motivational processes within the individual that facilitate change.
 - ◆ Cognitive behavioral therapy to help the individual identify the needs that alcohol/drugs meet and learn new ways of meeting those needs. In this way, the individual develops new coping skills to avoid relapse.
- Medications to decrease cravings for alcohol and medications to ease withdrawal (“detox”) from alcohol and drugs. Medications may also be used to treat chronic alcoholism. Sometimes medications can also be used as therapeutic substitutes for illegal drugs like heroin or addictive prescription pain medications.
- Opioid Treatment Programs (OTPs) that address use of illegal substances, such as heroin and some prescription pain medications. Opioid Treatment Programs offer talk therapies and may provide medications to help Veterans stop abusing opioids. These medications work as carefully-monitored substitutes for the drugs of abuse. These programs and medications may be available at some VA hospitals or by some primary care or mental health providers at local community based outpatient clinic or via a resource in the community.
- Intensive Outpatient Programs (IOP) that utilize the Matrix Model which is a comprehensive program including groups, individual counseling, and mental health services. Veterans remain in IOP aftercare services under the care of a mental health provider for up to a year.
- Residential treatment programs for substance abuse allow Veterans to live at a treatment facility, usually for 30-90 days, while undergoing intensive treatment. This treatment environment provides support and structure to help the Veteran achieve long-term recovery.

Treatments for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Posttraumatic stress disorder can occur after a person has a very serious or life threatening traumatic experience. For Veterans, this life threatening event often occurs during combat. However, other noncombat related events – such as natural disasters, motor vehicle accidents, or sexual trauma – can also threaten life and can result in PTSD. VA has been a national leader in the development of talk therapies for PTSD. Treatments for PTSD include:

- Talk therapies:
 - ◆ Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to help individuals understand the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, learn new patterns of thinking, and practice new positive behaviors.
 - ◆ Cognitive processing therapy (CPT), a form of CBT that involves writing about one’s traumatic experience and correcting negative thought patterns so that memories of trauma don’t interfere with daily life.
 - ◆ Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE), which addresses symptoms by decreasing avoidance, one of the underlying causes of PTSD. The therapy allows individuals to work through painful memories in a safe and supportive environment, and to engage in activities that have been avoided due to the trauma.
- Medications to ease PTSD symptoms such as nightmares, irritability, sleeplessness, depression, and anxiety.
- Residential care for longer-term, intensive treatment within a structured setting.

Treatments for Severe and Persistent Mental Illnesses

■ You are not alone

- 46% of people in the U.S. have had a mental health diagnosis during their lifetime.
- 33% of adults will have experienced an anxiety disorder at some point in their lifetime.
- 47% of all OEF/OIF/OND Veterans have sought services at VA. Top 2 reasons: Muscle and Joint Problems and Mental Health. Of the 49% who have sought mental health care: 54% report PTSD problems, and 38% report depression.

Severe and Persistent Mental Illnesses like Schizophrenia, Schizoaffective Disorder, and Bipolar Disorder may occur intermittently – that is, they typically improve at some times and get worse at other times. VA offers a range of treatments and services for veterans with severe mental illnesses. These Veterans typically benefit from psychosocial rehabilitation services designed to promote recovery and improve everyday functioning at home and in the community.

Treatments for severe and persistent mental illnesses include:

- Antidepressant medications, mood stabilizing medications, and antipsychotic medications to stabilize mood, organize thoughts, stop hallucinations, and ease related symptoms.
- Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Services to optimize functioning.
- Work therapies to promote and support recovery.
- Residential care for longer-term, intensive treatment within a structured setting.
- Mental Health Intensive Case Management (MHICM). A team of mental health doctors, nurses, and social workers that treat Veterans in their homes and community. MHICM helps Veterans experiencing severe and persistent mental illness decrease the need for hospitalization and live more successfully at home and in the community.
- Peer Support is a form of helping Veterans with serious mental illnesses and/or a substance use disorder to successfully engage in their treatment through sharing experiences, encouragement, and instilling a sense of hope and skill building to promote recovery. These services are provided by an appropriately identified Veteran (peer) with experience and success utilizing Mental Health/SUD Services.

Special Programs for Veteran Populations with Special Needs

VA recognizes that some groups of Veterans have special mental health needs. In response to these needs, VA has developed special programs tailored for these groups that include:

■ Tobacco Cessation

Smoking is the leading preventable cause of premature death and a leading cause of illness and mortality. Smoking and tobacco use cessation persists as one of the VA's biggest public health challenges. Many Veterans began using tobacco while in the military. The rate of smoking among Veterans in the VA health care system is higher than among the U.S. population. Approximately 70 percent of all smokers say they want to quit, but even the most motivated may try to quit five or six times before they are able to quit. Over 3 million Americans successfully quit smoking every year.

To help Veterans quit smoking and tobacco use, VA offers:

- Screening for tobacco use during primary care visits
- Individual counseling
- Prescriptions for nicotine replacement therapy, such as a nicotine patch or gum, or other medications
- Participation in evidence-based smoking cessation programs

■ Services for Older Veterans

VA Community Living Centers (CLCs) provide options for Veterans needing temporary assisted care until they can return home or find placement in a nursing home. Other services for older Veterans may include:

- Home-based Primary Care that includes a mental health professional as part of the team providing care to Veterans in their homes.
- Screening for dementia like Alzheimer's disease and/or other problems that interfere with memory.
- Assessments that help decide whether the Veteran can safely live at home and make informed medical decisions.



1-800-QUIT-NOW



VISN 23: VA Midwest Health Care Network



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Special Programs for Veteran Populations with Special Needs

■ Services for Veterans with Gambling Disorders

Gambling disorders may combine elements of impulse control and addictive disorders. The VA can provide an array services for Veterans with gambling related difficulties including:

- Assessment of gambling related problems
- Assessment of other mental health difficulties that may be related to gambling
- Individual counseling
- Couples Consultation

■ Services for Veterans in Remote Locations

Veterans who live some distance from services may benefit from Home Telehealth Services. A variety of mental health services may be provided by secure telephone or televideo systems to Veterans in their own homes or in Community Based Outpatient Clinics nearer to their homes.

■ Services for Women Veterans

Several women's inpatient units, residential treatment programs, or special treatment tracks for women exist. In addition, mixed gender inpatient units or residential treatment centers must ensure safe and secure sleeping and bathroom arrangements, including, but not limited to, door locks and proximity to staff. Each regional VA network (called a VISN) must have residential care programs able to meet the needs of women Veterans. Some types of sub-specialty care (e.g., women with PTSD) may be limited based on need; women Veterans who need these services may be referred to regional or national resources.

■ Suicide Prevention Services

Suicide prevention coordinators work with veterans and their mental health care teams to monitor and support Veterans at high risk for suicide. For at risk Veterans, a personal safety plan is developed that helps the Veteran recognize signs that often precede his/her suicidal ideations and lists strategies that help the Veteran manage those thoughts and feelings. The Veteran (including family members, if desired) and his/her mental health provider collaborate to create this Safety Plan that is designed specifically for the Veteran. An important component of the plan

■ Services for Veterans Just Returning From Deployment

VA operates 232 community based counseling Vet Centers. Many providers at Vet Centers are Veterans themselves. Vet Centers provide readjustment counseling and outreach services to all Veterans who served in any combat zone. Military Sexual Trauma counseling and bereavement counseling are also provided. Services are available for family members for military related issues, and bereavement counseling is offered for parents, spouses, and children of Armed Forces, National Guard, and Reserves personnel who died in the service of their country. Veterans have earned these benefits through their service, and all are provided at no cost to the Veteran or family.

■ Military Sexual Trauma Services

Veterans who experienced military sexual trauma (MST) may develop PTSD and/or other mental illnesses. Any Veteran who was sexually traumatized while serving in the military, can receive counseling. This is true for both male and female Veterans who served in any era. Special inpatient, outpatient, and residential treatment programs are available to male and female Veterans who experienced MST, using proven medications, talk therapies, and social supports. Veterans receiving MST-related counseling or treatment are not billed for inpatient, outpatient, or medication co-payments. There is a MST Coordinator at each VA medical center who can be contacted with any questions.