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### **Native American Veteran Treatment Preferences: results from an ongoing survey**

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Native American Veteran Treatment Preferences: Results From an Ongoing Survey.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the study is to gain a clear understanding of the preferences and existing treatment barriers experienced by Native American Veterans. To achieve this purpose, a 40 item cross-sectional survey which looks at Native American Veterans' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs in regard to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its various treatment modalities was designed. The items are intended to measure Native American Veterans' knowledge toward PTSD, treatment perceptions, availability, and efficacy of resources, as well as treatment preferences (i.e. animal assisted, traditional healing, etc.). The goal is to give Native American Veterans a voice in how their treatments are rendered in future programs. A particular focus of this study involves identifying aspects of programs encouraging participation. This paper is a snapshot of results from an ongoing study composed of a sample size of 167 individuals who self-identify as Native American Veterans. A primary goal of this study is to share the knowledge collected with those who contributed to the project. In giving this information back, we hope to influence treatment programs facilitated by tribal nations, veteran service organizations, and veterans' service providers.

### **PTSD background**

PTSD occurs at a high rate in the veteran population. Upwards of 17% of returning military veterans are at substantial risk for developing PTSD as identified in the research (Peterson, Luethcke, Borah, Borah, & Young- McCaughan., 2011). During the past 13 years, over 2 million U.S. military personnel have deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan (Peterson et al. 2011). According to the Census Bureau (2010), approximately 20,000 of these veterans are of Native American ancestry.

The VA identifies approximately 154,000 Veterans of Native American descent (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011) in the United States. Many Native Veterans are unlikely to seek treatment for PTSD because a majority of available treatment options do not culturally represent their world views (Bigfoot & Center, 2007). Very few treatment studies to date have examined Native American Veterans in regard to PTSD.

### **AAT/Equine Interventions**

The idea of animals improving human well-being evolved from an ancient belief in the supernatural power of animals and their spirits, among early hunter gatherers, and in modern times stems from advocacy for animals as facilitators of socially adaptive behavior and mental well-being (Serpell, 2006). Many Native American cultures were considered “horse cultures,” which relied on horses for travel, and to assist in essential features of living, such as hunting game (West, 2014).

The first documented Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) program was in York, England in 1790 (Palley, O’ Rourke, & Niemi, 2010). Current research has shown AAT interventions can be effective for clients who have PTSD, trauma, or both (DePrekel, 2012). A few current programs are operated specifically for veterans, such as Warrior Canine Connection (WCC). This program enrolls veterans with PTSD as a means to train service dogs for other war veterans (Yount, 2013). The gains seen in this program are viewed as therapeutic. The equine program at Rainier Therapeutic Riding is an example of equine programs for the therapeutic benefit of veterans (mynorthwest.com, 2013).

## **Survey Design**

The survey contains both qualitative and quantitative questions designed to assess three outcome areas: perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes regarding PTSD, Treatment modality preferences and outcomes, and treatment components. Participants were asked to identify components desirable for a treatment program, as well as likelihood of participation in various treatment modalities, assessed using a five point likert scale.

The design allows the researchers to identify Native American Veterans across several demographics (i.e. age, gender, service branch, etc.), based on the previous work of (Bayly et al., 2013). Collection of the data allows for a better understanding of PTSD and its treatment from the perspective of Native American Veterans.

## **Results and Discussion**

The majority of veterans surveyed (88%) rated their knowledge of PTSD as average to very knowledgeable. This indicates veterans are likely to believe they can identify signs and symptoms of PTSD in themselves, fellow veterans, and others. While veterans can identify fellow veterans who could need treatment, a problem arises in the belief by veterans (77%) that treatments for PTSD are inadequate. Most of the surveyed participants identified the Veterans Administration (VA) as the main source of available treatment in their location.

It is important to note the pervasiveness of PTSD among the Native American Veterans surveyed; 86% of the participants sampled knew of others who experienced PTSD. Participants also indicated their perception of individuals diagnosed with PTSD did not change negatively after the individual received the diagnosis. A majority of the participants were inclined to view individuals with a PTSD diagnosis more favorably (84%). In addition, 45% of participants believed that PTSD is greater than average among Native American Veterans. The findings seem

to indicate the stigma toward an individual receiving a diagnosis of PTSD is not coming from within the veteran population, but from the majority culture/community. The high exposure of Native Veterans to others who have received diagnoses of PTSD and the unchanged perception toward these individuals further indicates the majority culture/community may benefit from psycho-education to dispel stigma and misconceptions toward PTSD.

The most commonly endorsed barriers identified by survey participants as prohibitive to engaging in treatment were drug or alcohol abuse, denial that a problem exist, fear of what others may think, and not wanting to appear weak. Conversely, an aspect identified by participants as one of the most important for inclusion in treatment programs was the need for programs to be facilitated by therapists who are veterans. This speaks to the need for more veterans to seek careers in counseling. It further indicates a need to have a cultural match for veterans in terms of a veteran therapist being better able to relate to the needs of a fellow veteran. Native American Veterans' appear to perceive an increase in the ability of therapists who are veterans to build a stronger therapeutic alliance via cultural match. The lack of nearby locations and affordable or free treatment were endorsed as strong barriers to seeking treatment, indicating the resources for effective treatments that ameliorate resource barriers for Native Veterans is lacking. Of the Native American Veterans' surveyed, 49% viewed individual counseling as having no impact or making symptoms worse. In addition, 60% of participants who sought treatment for PTSD indicated treatment results ranged from "no difference" to "very unsatisfied." Only 39% of participants reported favorable outcomes. The findings, when paired with preferences of Native Veterans that therapist or leaders of treatment be Native American or veterans, indicates a lack of cultural knowledge by treatment professionals. The cultural knowledge can be parceled to veteran culture and Native American culture, which is lacking in treatment professionals. Further

supporting the lack of cultural knowledge by current treatment professionals was the finding that spiritual and religious guidance, a culturally sensitive treatment, was seen as successful or highly successful by 72% of participants.

A majority of Native Veterans (56%) indicated they were familiar with animal assisted therapy. Animal assisted therapy was more familiar to participants than cognitive behavioral therapy, noted as a popular treatment method. Among participants with strong identification to traditional cultural values, the endorsement of equine therapy was more strongly noted. These participants were also more likely to expect successful outcomes with equine therapy. Individuals reported a strong affinity for engaging in equine or animal assisted therapy. Animal assisted and equine therapy were endorsed nearly as often as spiritual healing by survey participants.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

One of the most salient points identified through the survey is the need for more robust psycho-education for family members regarding PTSD. While they are not the first person to be told of the veterans struggle, they are thought of as the first person to recognize the symptoms by the veterans surveyed.

New treatment modalities which recognize cultural aspects salient to Native Americans may entice veterans to seek new forms of treatment despite past negative experiences. Traditional cultural aspects were identified as a critical piece in the care of Native American veterans. Spiritual/religious guidance, as well as AAT/equine assisted interventions allow for inclusion of Native Veteran treatment preferences, as indicated through this survey. Many veterans are likely to be receptive to spiritual/religious guidance and an animal assisted treatment options, as they are the most commonly endorsed treatments by survey participants.

Native American Veterans endorse the need to have high quality, culturally relevant treatment options, in greater numbers, closer to concentrated populations of Native Veterans (i.e. reservations). Participants also endorsed a strong desire to have veterans be involved in the administration of any treatment program.

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