The Wounded Warrior: Veterans, Substance Abuse, PTSD, and Homelessness Issues

Rachel L. Brink, LCSW, BCD
Wendy Hellickson, LCSW
Jaime L. Milford, PhD
Tampa VAMC
What Does a Veteran Look Like?
Demographics

- 24 million veterans living
- 80% White, 10% African American, 5.6% Hispanic
- 7.8 million enrolled in VA (FY07)
- 5.5 million treated in FY07
- 3 million receive VA disability compensation
- 273,000 are 100% disabled
39.1% 65 yrs or older

2,900,000 living WWII veterans (900 die daily)
1.8 million veterans are female
(134,000 in Florida)
Today’s Service Member

- Average age 19 years old
- Includes many Reservists
- Numerous tours of duty
- No combat perimeters in Iraq and Afghanistan
- Terrain is dessert, over 120 degrees
- Guns & machinery cleaned constantly b/c of wind blown sand
Veterans & Substance Abuse

What makes veterans unique?
- General population
- Homeless population

VA priority areas
- Suicide prevention
- Continuity of care
Veterans and Comparable Nonveterans
Wagner et al., (2007)

- Veterans are more often heavy alcohol users, but do not have higher rates of alcohol abuse or dependence.

- They are more often daily smokers of cigarettes, and more frequent users of marijuana, but don’t have overall higher rates of illicit drug use, abuse, or dependence.
Veterans and Comparable Nonveterans
Wagner et al., (2007)

- Veterans were more likely to have driven under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- They were more likely to have received substance abuse treatment.
- There is no overall “treatment gap.”
- Regional differences in the “gap” and substance abuse rates.
Homeless Veterans
Goldstein et al., (2008)

- 92% were rated as having problems with alcohol or drugs, and 41% had polysubstance abuse problems.
- Most substance users were likely to have comorbid psychological problems.
- 4.4% of addicted veterans admitted to suicide attempt, compared to national average of 2.7%.
Veteran’s Suicide Hotline

1-800-273-8255
Suicide, Veterans, & Addiction Treatment
Ilgen et al., (2007)

- One year after intake, 4% had attempted suicide in the last 30 days.
- Risk factors: past attempt, severity of psychiatric symptoms and substance abuse.
- Protective factors: contact with the criminal justice system, and # of days of substance abuse treatment. Tx engagement was especially important for high risk patients.
Continuity of Care
Lash et al., (2007)

With increased efforts to promote treatment adherence, treatment engagement and abstinence rates were substantially improved at 12 months.

Consistent with other research, duration of treatment appears to be key to improving outcome in this population.
Take Home Messages

- The average veteran may have a more severe substance use profile than a comparable nonveteran.
- Homeless veterans have a drastically more severe profile for substance abuse, as well as other mental health issues like suicide.
- Suicide prevention is a major priority for the VA currently, and is a prominent issue in patients receiving treatment for substance abuse.
- Increasing treatment length and engagement may help protect substance abuse patients from a future suicide attempts, as well as promote their recovery from addictions.
Not all Wounds are Visible

309,000 receive compensation benefits for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
2007 military screening found psychiatric symptoms in:
31% Marines
49% National Guard
38% Army
Issues That Complicate Treatment

- Knowledge of military history and culture
- Anger
- Survivor Guilt and other guilt issues
- Military sexual trauma
- Vicarious traumatization
- Blast injuries and possible undiagnosed brain trauma
- Toxic exposure
- Family dysfunction
- Minimized sxss while in military
  - Fear of being judged medically unfit to return to duty
Anger

- One of the most troublesome problems for vets with PTSD
- Anger and violence lead to early termination from treatment
- Poorer outcome for PTSD treatment
- Functional in military & combat, source of self-esteem
- Attempts at change met with resistance
- Authority figures = distrust
Military Sexual Trauma

- Sexual harassment - 78% females, 38% males
- Rape/Sexual Assault – 6% females, 1% males
- Must continue to live and work closely with perpetrator
- Mandatory VA screening for MST
ABOUT US
What have we learned about the men and women who served our country in the Armed Services and then become homeless?

From the Northeast Program Evaluation Center (NEPEC)

National Demographic Characteristics for 2007:  
Gender: 95.7% Male  
4.3% Female  
Age: 50.6  
Race: 46.1% African-American  
45.3% White  
Homelessness 6 months or Less: 58.6%

Tampa  
Gender: 98.0% Male  
2.0% Female  
Age: 51.0  
Race: 40.6% African-American  
54.6% White  
Homelessness 6 months or Less: 56.8%

6 months or more: 42.4%  
45.2%
At the end of the money,
I always have some
month left.
WHY LIE
I WANT
A BEER
Please help the men and women who have protected your freedoms in the Armed Forces of America.