

# ART THERAPY FOR THE TREATMENT OF PTSD

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In efforts to better address issues of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Veterans, the VA Palo Alto system has instituted pilot programs known as the PCT (PTSD Clinical Team), comprised of a psychologist, social worker, and art therapist. The PCT offers trauma-focused therapies, and is unique in its multidisciplinary approach, involving traditional (i.e., verbal) evidence-based therapies that are complemented by the right brain (i.e., creative) interventions of art therapy. As the combination of these left- and right-brain approaches has demonstrated improved treatment efficacy, the VA has made strides in supporting creative arts therapies as legitimate treatment modalities.

Art therapy serves a number of functions in this type of treatment that cannot always be successfully achieved using solely traditional psychotherapy. Art serves as a non-verbal means to express unresolved memories and feelings, which have often been suppressed or avoided since the time of the trauma. In Figure 1, this Vietnam Veteran powerfully characterized in this cut-out image how it feels to be traumatized. For many with PTSD, traumatic memories and distressing emotions are too difficult to talk about. Creating visual imagery works using the right brain and results in concrete, external representations of those internal experiences, which are often nebulous, abstract, and overwhelming. Many Veterans find imagery more accurate than words in conveying how they think and feel, and less threatening to talk about than the thoughts/feelings themselves.



*Figure 1*

Unresolved mental representations of trauma are salient and frequently experienced as if they are actually occurring in present time (as in a flashback), and often arise when triggered in waking life (as intrusive thoughts.)

Nightmares (which can be considered intrusive thoughts during sleep) are among the chief complaints of those with PTSD, and often resistant to treatment. Art has been described as “the key that unlocked those things I had locked away forever”.

Traumatic memories are encoded differently than non-traumatic memories, “locked” in the right brain, and therefore less accessible through verbal language. Art can be the key for some to open those doors, and to release those distressing experiences.



*Figure 2: Images that have plagued a Vietnam Veteran as intrusive thoughts when awake, and as nightmares while asleep.*

Some experiences are so emotionally-distressing that Veterans don't feel comfortable talking about them, or even hearing others talk of their traumas, which is why avoidance is such a common symptom. Dialoguing with an external representation of those distressing internal experiences through creative expression is often less threatening. Veterans who have been unwilling to participate in any form of trauma therapy have been able to tolerate discussing images that they created, providing a cathartic release and a sense of mastery over something they were convinced they could not tolerate. In Figure 3, Drawing the things that distressed him, this veteran was able to tolerate thinking of those experiences that caused him to become hypervigilant and fearful, to symbolically represent them in his artwork, and eventually talk about them. "It has provided me a lot of relief, and helped to make me feel more comfortable and calmer."

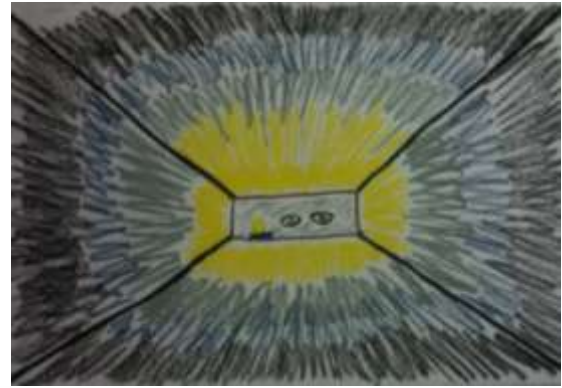


Figure 3

The ultimate goal of trauma therapy is to help Veterans make changes to redevelop a fulfilling life and reincorporate meaningful activities that are frequently abandoned as an expense of ensuring their perceived sense of safety. Distressing emotions (anger, fear, shame/guilt and sadness) dominate and overshadow. Happiness is usually a casualty, as unpleasant emotions are



Figure 4/5: Wrought with guilt over the actions he took in combat that resulted in 2 Purple Hearts, this Veteran transformed the image that haunts him and makes visible his plight to be absolved.

avoided, suppressed or numbed, and is often considered a fond previous way of being, but inconceivable in present life. Art serves to help develop a different perspective and break black-or-white thinking, to illustrate and remind that happiness is indeed possible. Helping to change Veterans' perspective to see the world as something other than an unsafe place opens up possibility to develop self-sufficiency, reintegrate into society, and develop more meaningful lives.

In Figure 6, an entire group's artwork was synthesized into a single image. This Veteran felt a sense of renewal by 'dumping out all of the trash, which she drew using flowing and vibrant colors, and symbolically changing footsteps from black-and-white shoeprints (reflective of all-or-nothing thinking and futility) to flesh-colored footsteps (representing rebirth), and creating an inspirational image of hope and recovery.

It is fortunate for our nation's Veterans that the VA has begun recognize that creative art therapies can provide significant relief and alternative means to facilitate recovery from PTSD. As our Veterans return from Afghanistan and Iraq, they will face many of the same difficulties as Veterans from previous conflicts have dealt with. Broken relationships, isolation and avoidance, road rage (from constant threats of roadside bombs and IEDs), anger and impulse control disorders, and a belief that the world is an unsafe place, are among the difficulties that Veterans have incurred serving our country. It is our responsibility to help our nation's Veterans, and having art therapy in the treatment arsenal is one way to help ensure that this mission be successful. ■



Figure 6

\*\*\* All artwork used in this article was released by the artists for this publication.