Veterans Offered Help in Coping with Military Sexual Trauma

About one in five women and one in 100 men receiving VA health care reported experiencing military sexual trauma (MST) while serving, according to a recent study. Yet many incidents of MST go unreported.

“Unfortunately, shame and fear may keep people from seeking help,” says Russell Jenkins, Ph.D., military sexual trauma coordinator at Erie VA Medical Center. “It’s important for people who have experienced MST to know they are not alone and that it is possible to feel better.”

Counseling and Treatment
That’s where Erie VAMC steps in. Erie VA offers free counseling and treatment to Veterans who’ve experienced any type of sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that occurred while serving in the military.

Individual counseling, cognitive processing therapy (CPT), and prolonged exposure (PE) are a few treatment options that have been proven to be effective in helping patients confront and deal with MST. These treatment approaches focus on helping Veterans develop coping skills to deal with past experiences.

Common issues MST survivors struggle with include:
- Interpersonal difficulties
- Self-blame and self-doubt
- Problems with sexual functioning and sexuality
- Difficulty identifying and setting appropriate interpersonal boundaries
- Fear for safety

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Finding Peace Again
“Distress from MST can present in different ways and spill over to disrupt patients’ lives,” Dr. Jenkins says. “Treatment options help Veterans deal with core issues. By confronting the experience, it is possible for Veterans to reduce distress and find peace again.”

Free Care, Choice of Provider
All Erie VAMC patients are screened for military sexual trauma. The medical center provides free care for conditions related to MST even if Veterans are not otherwise eligible for VA services. To help create a safe and comfortable environment, Erie VAMC also offers patients a choice as to the gender of their provider for individual therapy sessions for MST.

For more information about MST services, call the Behavioral Health Clinic at 814-860-2038 and ask to speak with MST Coordinator Dr. Russell Jenkins.

Community Outreach Spreads the Word
Erie VA has a specific outreach team dedicated to spread the word about our services to local Veterans, their families, and the community as a whole.

Erie VA’s outreach team has a wide range of expertise in Veteran-related issues. Our goal is to ensure every Veteran knows what VA benefits and services are available. We are asking you to partner with us.

How can your organization get involved?
1. Keep us updated on events happening in your area that we could attend.
2. Cohost an event with us or other Veterans service organizations in the area.
3. Request a speaker from the Erie VA to present on Veteran- and health care-related topics at your next meeting.

If you are interested in requesting VA staff to attend an event in your area, please call 814-860-2097.

Welcome Home Event
Mark your calendars for the Welcome Home Veterans Appreciation Day, scheduled for Saturday, July 23. Enjoy a free buffet dinner and an Erie SeaWolves game with fireworks to follow. Starting June 13, tickets to this event will be available in the Voluntary Service Office and the OEF/OIF Office. Tickets will NOT be available the day of the game. Look for more information online at www.erie.va.gov.
It Takes a Village to End Homelessness

In November of 2009, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric K. Shinseki, announced his commitment to end homelessness among Veterans within five years. The Erie VAMC Homeless Care Team (HCT) has embraced this challenge. Two years into the plan to end homelessness, the HCT has served more than 300 local Veterans and helped 60 Veterans and their families maintain permanent housing.

“Those who have served this nation as Veterans should never find themselves on the streets, living without care and without hope.” –Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Community Partnership
Each year, the Erie VA HCT invites community partners, homeless Veterans, and formerly homeless Veterans to a Community Housing Assessment Local Education Networking Group (CHALENG) forum. The goal of this community collaboration is to identify needs of homeless Veterans, provide education on new homeless initiatives, and share resources to help end homelessness among Veterans.

Survey Identified Needs
CHALENG participants are asked to complete a survey that the HCT uses to develop future plans for the program. The 2010 results identified food, shelters, and permanent housing as significant needs of homeless Veterans. Transitional housing, increased services to rural Veterans, and support programs for Veterans’ families are just a few programs highlighted at the forum.

As a result of last year’s CHALENG forum, the HCT expanded the Housing and Urban Development–VA Supported Housing (HUD-VASH) program, adding 25 additional housing vouchers to give a total of 60 Veterans and their families a place to call home.

To participate in the CHALENG forum or to learn more about the Homeless Care Team, call Laryssa L. Stolar, LCSW, at 814-860-2481.

Resources for Homeless Veterans

Erie VA provides a variety of health care and supportive services, including case management; transitional and permanent housing; and dental and medical care, for local homeless Veterans or Veterans at risk of becoming homeless. To learn more about homeless Veteran services, visit www.erie.va.gov/homeless.

NATIONAL CALL CENTER for Homeless Veterans

1-877-4AID-VET
1-877-424-3838

Are you a homeless Veteran? Call the national hotline and a counselor will direct you to local staff, services, and homeless programs.
Redesigning Care, Improving Quality

Did we exceed your expectations? Erie VA’s Systems Redesign Office is actively pursuing new, innovative ways of improving our processes so we can provide you with the best care anywhere!

Systems Redesign success stories include:

- Increased nurse time spent at the bedside by 73 percent
- Reduced the time it takes to process enrollment applications and schedule first appointments for new patients by streamlining the process
- Streamlined the discharged planning process to reduce the burden on patients when they are ready to go home
- Reduced the days from awareness of abnormal CT scans to diagnosis by 23 percent

Our goal is to provide exceptional health care to Veterans. To achieve this, the Systems Redesign team focuses on increasing value-added services by eliminating waste and inefficiency.

Tell us what you want!

How can you help? We need your input every time you receive services. What could have been done better? What did we do well? If you could change or correct anything related to your visit from start to finish, what would it be?

We’re asking for your feedback for improvement opportunities because patients deserve the best care. Thank you for your service, and we look forward to discovering new ways to better serve you.

Submit your suggestions online by visiting www.erie.va.gov/suggestions. You can also call and ask to speak with the patient advocate, systems redesign office, or the public affairs office. If you are interested in participating in an upcoming Veteran focus group centered around how we can serve you better, please call 814-860-2097.

Veterans Crisis Line

VA is rebranding the National Veterans Suicide Prevention Hotline (1-800-273-8255). An important component of this comprehensive effort involves a new name: Veterans Crisis Line, which establishes a unique identity for this critical service.

Since its launch, the National Suicide Prevention Hotline has answered more than 390,000 calls and made more than 13,000 lifesaving rescues.

VA and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) continue to work together to ensure all Americans in emotional distress or suicidal crisis have a single confidential number to call for help. They...
Let’s face it—driving an hour or more to see a specialty care doctor is a burden. That’s why Erie VA has introduced new Telehealth programs at the Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) to bring care closer to home.

Telehealth services offer patients an easier way to receive care. Using video and teleconferencing equipment, patients can simply drive to their local VA clinic to “meet” with a specialty care provider who is located in Erie or at another hospital such as Pittsburgh or Clarksburg, WV. Using this technology, patients and providers can see each other, speak to each other, and conduct a regular specialty care visit while being miles apart.

Available Telehealth programs include:
- Behavioral Health
- Dietitian
- MOVE!
- Telespeech
- Patient Education Colonoscopy Group
- Telesleep
- Dermatology
- Spinal Cord Injury Clinic

Veteran Frank Sontag sits with Paula Bauda, CRNP, as they talk with Charles Atwood, MD, director of the sleep lab in Pittsburgh, during a follow-up consultation appointment. Less travel, same great care.

The VA is one of the biggest telemedicine/telemental health systems in the world and has been leading the way in telehealth applications.

If you have not as yet taken advantage of a TeleHealth visit, please ask the clinic staff to discuss the new program with you at your next office visit.

Important Phone Numbers
- Ashtabula VA Clinic—1-866-463-0912
- Crawford VA Clinic—1-866-962-3210
- McKean VA Clinic—814-368-3019
- Venango VA Clinic—1-866-962-3260
- Warren VA Clinic—1-866-682-3250

Important CBOC Phone Numbers
The Ashtabula, Crawford, Venango, and Warren clinics, including labs, will open at 9 a.m. on the first and third Wednesdays of each month. This does not apply to the McKean CBOC, which will continue with regular hours. All five CBOCs will have no scheduled primary care provider or nurse clinic appointments offered after 12 p.m. noon every Wednesday.
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Sleep Management
This one-session class is designed to help improve your sleep.
CONTACT: Edward Dabkowski, Ph.D., at 814-860-2038 to register or for more information, or ask your primary care provider for a referral.

Pain Management
Find better ways to manage pain and live more effectively.
CONTACT: Edward Dabkowski, Ph.D., at 814-860-2038 for more information or ask your primary care provider.

TOBACCO CESSATION
Quit the habit. Live longer. You may receive a prescription for one of several medications to aid in your attempt to quit.
CONTACT: Stephanie Dorich, LSW, at 814-860-2038 or ask your primary care provider for a referral to any of the following tobacco-cessation group programs:

Support Group
Support therapy for any Veteran interested in quitting tobacco of any kind
WHEN: Every Friday at 9 a.m.
WHERE: Behavioral Health Clinic

Educational Group
One-time tobacco-cessation educational group
WHEN: Dates vary

WEIGHT MANAGEMENT
Studies of those who have lost weight found that having support increases your chance for success. Join one of these MOVE! programs to get started on a healthier you.

TOBACCO CESSATION

MOVE! Support Groups
Support therapy for overweight or obese Veterans who want to lose weight, keep it off, and improve their health.
WHEN: Two times a month

MOVE! Phone Clinic
This call-in telephone clinic can answer your questions about losing weight and provide support when needed.

MOVE! Education Series
This is a four-week educational series taught by a registered dietitian, a physical therapist, and a behavioral health clinician.

EDUCATION
Medical Words: A Tutorial from the National Library of Medicine
This tutorial teaches you about medical words and how to put them together. You’ll also find quizzes to see what you’ve learned.

CANCER SURVIVORS SUPPORT GROUP
The Man to Man support group is led by Dr. Sharma, urological surgeon at Erie VA. Life after cancer...share, support, learn.
WHEN: July 21, August 18, September 15, and October 20 from 1 to 2 p.m. Look for more dates in the next issue.
WHERE: Conference room 1 on the second floor of the Erie VA Medical Center

View upcoming events and classes online at www.erie.va.gov.

IMPORTANT CONTACTS
Main Erie VAMC Line
814-868-8661
Make/Change Appointment
814-860-2124
Patient Advocate
814-860-2100
Nurse Line
814-860-2500
Farmer’s Markets Are Here!

In the spirit of living a healthier lifestyle, be sure to come to the Farmer’s Markets to pick up your locally-grown fruits and vegetables so that you can eat wisely! The Farmer’s Markets will be held in the second floor pavilion from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. on:
- Friday, June 24
- Friday, July 22
- Friday, August 19
- Friday, September 23

Join us for fresh food, fun games, live music, and prizes.

A Healthier You!

The VA is committed to keeping Veterans well and well-informed! That is why the National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention created a series of Healthy Living Messages to promote healthy living habits to prevent disease. To attain a healthier lifestyle, try to follow these tips:
- Be involved in your health care.
- Be tobacco-free.
- Eat wisely.
- Be physically active.
- Strive for a healthy weight.
- Limit alcohol.
- Get recommended screenings and immunizations.
- Manage stress.
- Be safe.

The VA also has a variety of programs available to help you achieve your health care goals, including a weight-loss program (MOVE!), tobacco-cessation classes, and groups to assist with abstaining from alcohol. To learn more about the prevention programs available, talk with your Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT). You can also check out www.prevention.va.gov to find specific strategies that will help you become well and well-informed!

Veterans Crisis Line

provide a special service for Veterans through the SAMHSA-funded National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

If a Veteran from this area calls the Veterans Crisis Line, the Erie VA Suicide Prevention Coordinators (SPCs) will be notified and provide the appropriate follow-up to the Veteran in need. The SPCs strongly encourage all Veterans and their families to use the Veterans Crisis Line should they be in an emotional crisis. Veterans and concerned family members can call the Veterans Crisis Line by dialing 800-273-8255 and press 1.

Reach Suicide Prevention Coordinators, Janet Montgomery, MSW, and Lisa Schwartz, LSW, at the Erie VAMC Behavioral Health Clinic at 814-860-2038 or 1-800-274-8387.
Focus on Veterans

On June 2, more than 30 local criminal justice, law enforcement and mental health professionals attended a Veterans Justice Outreach Conference to learn about the special issues returning Veterans and combat Veterans of any era face. The goal of this conference was to ensure that Veterans who are at risk of or who are currently involved in the criminal justice system receive the proper treatment and behavioral health care they deserve.

During the conference, behavioral health specialists gave presentations on the programs and services provided by Erie VA. Topics included programs for justice-involved Veterans, Veterans justice outreach and homelessness, post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. Also featured were de-escalation techniques for law enforcement, and brief overviews on suicide prevention, substance abuse, and health care for homeless Veterans.

Kathy Mahood, Chief of Behavioral Health, gives an overview of programs for Justice-involved Veterans.

The highlight of the conference was when three Veterans led a panel discussion and shared their experiences after returning home from combat.

More than 30 professionals gathered together to learn about the unique issues Veterans face, the supportive services available to Veterans, and their role in helping Veterans recover.