

## Veteran and military mental health

Phoenix Australia undertakes a range of research exploring posttraumatic mental health with veteran and military populations, including studies on conceptual and methodological issues.

The results of this research may have broader applicability to posttraumatic mental health in other populations.

### Promoting veteran and military mental health

#### **Barriers to Rehabilitation**

We investigated whether there are systematic barriers (particularly those that DVA may be able to address) to successful rehabilitation for DVA clients. Interviews with DVA clients, staff, and stakeholders, and surveyed rehabilitation service providers found that defining 'success' in rehabilitation is a complex and subjective task, which depends on a number of factors including the client's initial goals, age, injuries, geographic location, and the legislation they fall under. Consensus among participants indicated that measuring success in rehabilitation is an important and necessary requirement, but that there is a need for a useful measure of 'successful outcomes' beyond a return to work. We designed a trial of the Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) approach to investigate barriers to rehabilitation, in which targeted goals with well-defined outcomes to be achieved within a specific timeframe are determined for each individual. The GAS approach was seen by service providers to support a client-focussed approach to rehabilitation.

#### **Family functioning in veterans and partners**

Poor family functioning is consistently found to be associated with PTSD symptoms in veterans, but the relationship between family functioning and response to treatment is not well understood. This longitudinal study evaluated the relationship between PTSD symptoms and poor family functioning in a large sample of veterans and their partners. We found that veterans who reported more difficult family relationships at intake to a treatment program also reported a relative increase in PTSD symptoms at 3 months post-treatment. Similarly, poor family functioning at 3 months post-treatment was a good predictor of subsequent increases in avoidance and hyperarousal symptoms.

The reverse pathways, with PTSD symptoms predicting poor family functioning, were only evident with avoidance. These findings suggest that an increased focus on improving family functioning may play a role in providing more effective treatment for veterans.

### **Measurement of anger in combat-related PTSD**

Anger is the most frequently occurring problem associated with combat-related PTSD reported by veterans, their spouses, and assessing clinicians, and is associated with ongoing psychological disturbance well after traumatic exposure. It is vital that practitioners are able to effectively assess anger in veterans with PTSD. We formally assessed the psychometric properties of the 5-item Dimensions of Anger Reactions (DAR) scale. Our results suggest that the scale is a reliable and uni-dimensional measure of anger disposition directed towards others. The DAR also appears to be sensitive to change associated with therapeutic intervention for PTSD, which indicates it has potential value for measuring treatment outcomes in a clinical setting, or as a short measure for use in research.

## **Website evaluation**

### **Wellbeing Toolbox**

Given the rapid growth of web technologies for health care, there is an urgent need to increase understanding about the effectiveness of online treatments for veterans, in particular for contemporary veterans. The aim of this project is to examine whether participation in the online self-care resource, The Wellbeing Toolbox, is associated with achievement of individual wellbeing goals and significant improvement in mental health outcomes after three months of use. This study also investigates the obstacles and enabling factors relating to contemporary veterans' use of online self-help. Preliminary results indicate that the website use is contributing to participants achieving their wellbeing goals. Motivation to use the website remains an important obstacle to achieving wellbeing goals.

## **Program evaluation**

### **Quality assurance and PTSD program monitoring**

Ensuring that treatment for PTSD is effective is as important as the provision of treatment, and DVA seeks the highest quality treatment programs for PTSD for their clients. The aim of this ongoing project is to accredit, manage and report on the outcomes of DVA-contracted PTSD programs across Australia. We monitor clinical outcomes for veterans participating in the programs by collecting data from veterans and clinicians at key points during program delivery. Feedback is provided to DVA and the service providers to help ensure that the programs evolve to meet the changing needs of veterans and their families. This is particularly important given the new wave of veterans engaging with DVA services.

### **Long-term outcomes for VVCS counselling**

While immediate improvements in mental health are a desired outcome of therapy, it is also important that those early changes are maintained. This research aimed to examine the effects of centre-based VVCS counselling for veterans and veterans' family members with moderate to severe psychological symptoms from pre- to post-intervention, and identify whether improvements in mental health are maintained long-term. Overall, we found that VVCS counselling resulted in significant reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, and alcohol misuse, and 60 percent of those who completed their VVCS counselling had significant improvements maintained over 12 months. However, there was also evidence that some veterans experience persistent mental health problems even after receiving counselling.