

Exploring the Impact of Expressive Therapies on Military Veterans With PTSD

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Abstract

Objective: Evaluate the impact of expressive therapies on reducing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in military veterans.

Methods: Five databases were searched for articles published between 2014–2022 that addressed the effect of the expressive therapies of art, dance, drama, music, and writing on PTSD symptoms in military veterans.

Results: Articles were categorized based on decreases in PTSD symptoms, veterans' triggered responses, participants' recommending expressive therapy/finding it helpful, and increased well-being and/or quality of life. **Discussion:** Outcomes were not dependent on the setting, and art was the most commonly used expressive therapy. Combining two types of therapies was effective.

Conclusion: Expressive therapies are effective in reducing PTSD symptoms in military veterans.

Background

PTSD is caused by traumatic events, and leads to symptoms such as distress, anxiety, and depression that decrease overall quality of life. Expressive therapies such as music, dance, art, drama, and writing are emerging as treatments for PTSD symptoms. The prevalence and complexity of PTSD make the use of newer interventions such as expressive therapies a pertinent area of interest for occupational therapists and other allied health professionals.

Methods

The following databases were searched: PubMed, Scopus Embase, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature, and PsychINFO.

Search terms:

("art" OR "music" OR "dance" OR "drama" OR "writing therap*" OR "expressive therap*") AND ("post-traumatic stress disorder" OR "PTSD" OR "post-traumatic stress disease" AND (veteran* OR "military"))

Results

The final review included 20 studies of expressive therapies for treatment of PTSD symptoms in military veterans. Ten studies used art as an expressive therapy, one involved dance, six involved music, and four involved writing. The studies measured the following outcomes: decrease in PTSD symptoms, veterans' triggered responses, participants recommending expressive therapy/finding it helpful, and increased well-being and/or quality of life. This review found that:

- 87.5% of studies directly examined participants' decreases in PTSD symptoms after art, writing, or music therapy.
 - 18.75% of studies noted that participants self-reported triggering symptoms during music or art therapy.
 - 18.75% of participants reported they would recommend art music or writing therapy.
 - 31.25% of participants found that art, music, or dance therapy improved their well-being and quality of life.
- No articles that incorporated drama therapy met eligibility criteria. All articles reviewed found art music, dance, or writing therapy effective for decreasing PTSD symptoms.

Discussion

- Expressive therapies effectively reducing symptoms of PTSD whether they were used as an individual intervention or in combination with other therapies.
- Structured expressive therapy sessions were more effective in reducing symptoms of PTSD than unstructured sessions.
- Art therapy more so than music therapy served to transform triggered responses into positive memories.
- Studies that showed that expressive therapies increased quality of life and well-being found that therapy sessions conducted over longer periods of time were more effective than those of shorter duration regardless of the type of therapy implemented.
- Stronger improvements in the veterans' overall quality of life were more evident when therapies involved in-person, interactive sessions.
- Art therapy was the most common and effective expressive therapy used.

Conclusion

Expressive therapies are effective in treating veterans with PTSD in various settings. While there is evidence supporting the implementation of expressive therapies as an intervention for veterans with PTSD, further research would strengthen these findings.