

Letter from Larry Collins, retired District Court Judge recommending EMDR for Veterans

On average 22 U.S. military veterans commit suicide every day, often from untreated PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

Untreated PTSD also accounts for countless veterans entering the Minnesota court system for criminal charges, such as assault, disorderly conduct, drug possession or sales, driving under the influence, or child abuse/neglect. These veterans may also enter the court system for civil cases, such as dissolution of marriage, failure to pay child support, orders for protection, and harassment restraining orders.

Whatever the life circumstances of a veteran with PTSD, he or she is entitled to the best trauma treatment available. The most commonly used treatments for PTSD are: (1) Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR); (2) Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT); (3) Exposure Therapy (ET); and (4) drugs. How is a veteran with PTSD to know what is the best treatment for PTSD?

Dr Bessel van der Kolk, MD is generally recognized as the leading authority on trauma and trauma treatment. He is the author of the best-selling book “The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma,” first published in 2014. As stated in his book, he is a Harvard trained psychiatrist; the founder and medical director of the Trauma Center in Brookline, Massachusetts; a professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine; and director of the National Complex Trauma Treatment Network.

“The Psychotherapy Networker” is a publication for psychotherapists. This publication asked Dr van der Kolk in 2017 to summarize the developments in trauma research that have occurred over the past 40 years. The January/February 2017 edition of this publication contains his response.

Among other information about trauma, Dr van der Kolk wrote:

“Another major advance was the emergence of EMDR in the 1990’s as the first approach that showed that we didn’t need to rely on drugs or the traditional talking cures to get traumatized people to leave their ‘traumatic memories behind.’”

Dr van der Kolk then reviewed several developments in the field of trauma. He wrote:

“While all of this was going on, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has accumulated the most research support, even though we know that the whole cognitive part of the brain shuts down when people are traumatized, triggering the primitive survival part of the brain. So, using CBT with trauma is like telling somebody with an amputated leg to take up running. It can certainly give people a sense of perspective on their coping options when they’re in the right frame of mind, but it has limited value with severe trauma.”

He then further stated: “The most commonly used CBT approach to trauma is exposure therapy, which assumes that desensitizing someone to something that used to trigger them is the best way

to help them be less affected by memories. The problem is that desensitization leads to a global lack of feelings and engagement, so when you get desensitized from your trauma, you also get desensitized to joy, pleasure, engagement, and everything else going on. Desensitizing people shouldn't be the goal of treatment: rather, we should help traumatized clients to realize that 'Yes, this happened to me years ago, but not today; today is a different day, and I'm no longer the person I was back then.' That kind of integration involves a neural network different from the neural network of desensitization."

It is critical that veterans with PTSD get the best trauma treatment possible. In that regard, veterans and active-duty military must be told about EMDR treatment. They need to know that EMDR treatment can be completed in a relatively short period of time, as opposed to "talk therapy" that can sometimes last for months, and even for years. Some EMDR treatments may only take a few weekly sessions.

EMDR is an important component of chemical dependency treatment programs for addicts and alcoholics that are also dealing with trauma histories. The famous Hazelden-Betty Ford Foundation chemical dependency treatment centers and hospitals use EMDR when dealing with trauma.

Larry Collins, retired District Court Judge

(drug court judge and a substitute veterans court judge)