



Bringing our veterans all the way home

A trauma treatment that struggled for legitimacy getting recognition from the VA

MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE

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A local veterans advocacy group celebrated a big victory over the weekend: The recent announcement by the Department of Veterans Affairs that it will encourage the use of a therapy called EMDR for veterans suffering from trauma.

The Veteran Resilience Project, the brainchild of Minnesota EMDR therapist of Elaine Wynne, has been at the forefront of pushing for recognition of the therapy.

EMDR (it stands for “Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing”) is a therapy designed to help the brain unlock traumatic memories and reprocess them into more positive thoughts. During a session, the client is asked to focus on a memory while stimulation is used such as eye movements, tapping or sounds. After each association is processed, the “bilateral” stimulation continues until the original issue is no longer disturbing.

While the VA has acknowledged the treatment is effective, it was not one of the department’s top choices for addressing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The VA had no objection to the therapy, but it seldom would refer patients for treatment because the VA had the resources — and covered the expenses — for other therapies.

Advocates said the VA’s lackluster response to EMDR discouraged funders and has cost them clients and resources.

Wynne tried for six years to start an EMDR project focusing on veterans, but found the VA and the Defense Department resistant because of concerns that the treatment was not evidence-based. Undaunted, she won a grant from a national EMDR program and set off on her own in 2013 to conduct a 20-month pilot project.

In 2015, Wynne took \$10,000 she had left from the project and put it toward the newly formed nonprofit, with most of the money going to reimburse therapists for their work. Paul Riedner, an Iraq veteran with a penchant for social media and marketing, was brought in as executive director.

Since then Riedner, a former Army diver, has been directing outreach with podcasts and seeking funding through crowdsourcing and grant writing.

The Star Tribune wrote a story about the group's efforts in May. Word got back to officials at the VA, and things started rolling in a way seldom seen in a bureaucracy used to glacial movement.

Now VA clinicians interested in being trained will be encouraged to take EMDR training when it is available. And the VA says it wants to make sure veterans have access to EMDR when it is their preferred choice or when the treatment team believes it to be their best option.

Most VA facilities have at least one clinician who has EMDR training. But if there aren't enough clinicians, the VA said it will be directing facilities to pay for EMDR treatment in the community.

Riedner, wearing shorts, combat boots, and a baseball hat emblazoned with the flag, addressed several hundred EMDR practitioners Saturday at a convention in Minneapolis.

"To be honest, I wrote off the VA," he told the crowd. "I was committed to inspiring the community to do it ourselves, since that's what EMDR taught me, that we have everything we need already to heal.

"But people are waking up. It's working. People are responding. They are starving for a legitimate solution, not just awareness. People love to be on the winning side. Let's give them something to get behind."

He got a standing ovation