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## American Indian combat veterans and Posttraumatic stress disorder: Finding relief through Native American Medicine and Tradition

Psychology has come a long way in studying the behavior and experience of individuals. Through psychology many different abnormalities and mental problems have been discovered and treatments have been created for them. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is one of those many disorders that continue to be looked at and analyzed. Although, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder can be found in anyone who has been in a trauma-related situation, this disorder is most common in combat veterans. There are a couple of different treatments that combat veterans can go through to gain control of their posttraumatic stress disorder. The most common is going to a Veterans Affairs hospital to talk to someone about the disorder and working their way from there. For American Indian combat veterans, they have the option to turn to their culture for help. The main focus is how American Indian cultures have their own way of treating health concerns by using their tradition to help the combat veteran. Their American Indian medicine is very different from the Western culture of treatment. This research paper will be specifically for American Indian combat veterans who can use the holistic treatment from their culture to help them with their disorder by analyzing a specific chemical in the brain.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that begins when a person has experienced or has been exposed to events that traumatize them (American Psychiatric Association 271). Symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder range from recurring distressing memories or the traumatic event to distressing dreams of the traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association 271) that make it hard to do daily life activities. Posttraumatic stress disorder is very common in combat veterans and higher rates of PTSD are found in African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians (American Psychiatric Association 276). There are many treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder and one that is most common is prolonged exposure therapy (PE) (Wangelin 162) where the patient confronts their fears and negative thoughts instead of avoiding them. Patients who do this type of therapy are known to have reduced their posttraumatic stress symptoms (Wangelin 162). Specifically, American Indian combat veterans have more than one way of getting treatment.

They have the ability to consult to Native American holistic medicine or Western medicine for their posttraumatic stress disorder. Data from a group in the Veterans Administration was conducted to find out more about American Indian Vietnam veterans who were exposed to combat (Gross 375). The study noted that 65 percent to 85 percent attended ceremonies and healing practices to help aid them in their treatment (Gross 375). In general, Native American medicine is considered holistic because everything is treated at once while Western medicine has departments for every type of health concern (Broome 163).

For Native American combat veterans, they can continue to be more apart of their tradition and seeking treatment by having ceremonies and practices done. A much needed part of treating posttraumatic stress disorder through Native American medicine is being able to consult with close people around you such as family and friends (Cohen 168) and by doing so this can contribute to better treatment for the patient. Stressing the importance of social support and interpersonal relationships is key to treating posttraumatic stress disorder (Olf). By combining Native American medicine and emphasizing the support from family and close friends, it is possible that this combined treatment can make a significant difference in having control over posttraumatic stress in Native American combat veterans. This research is to determine how the holistic treatment of Native American medicine compare to that of Western medicine when treating Native American combat veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder, along with understanding the connection between Native American medicine and oxytocin when treating Native American combat veterans.

To begin, understanding what exactly posttraumatic stress disorder does to a person is very important in determining what could help treat the disorder. In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Posttraumatic stress disorder is described as the reactions of being exposed to any traumatic event directly or witnessing someone experience a traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association 271). There are many symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and they include: uncontrollable and intrusive memories and dreams of the traumatic event, flashbacks, avoidance of anything that reminds the person of the traumatic event such as people, places, conversations, and activities, negative thoughts about themselves and everything around them, feelings of not being able to relate to anyone around them, angry outbursts, problems with concentration, self-destructive behavior, and difficulty falling or staying asleep; just to name a few of the symptoms (American Psychiatric Association 271-273). Along with those symptoms, one in particular is more specific for this paper, and that is if the person has the inability to experience any positive

emotion, happiness, satisfaction, or loving feelings in particular (American Psychiatric Association 272).

And because of these symptoms it makes it very difficult for the person to be social, hold a job, or function in daily life (American Psychiatric Association 273). The traumatic event could be anything that makes the person uncomfortable and distressed and these events could be exposure to war, physical assault, or natural disasters; to name a few that are mentioned in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. There are also higher rates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among veterans and others who are more likely exposed to traumatic events because of their occupation (American Psychiatric Association 276). Higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder are found among survivors of rape and military combat (American Psychiatric Association 276). This paper is specific research for combat veterans and posttraumatic stress disorder is more associated with veterans having poor social and family relationships, lower income, and struggling with educational and occupational success (American Psychiatric Association 279). Fully understanding posttraumatic stress disorder in combat veterans is the first step in determining how to treat the disorder and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is a continuation of the first step.

The main focus of this paper is American Indian combat veterans who have posttraumatic stress disorder. It is no secret that American Indian combat veterans are more likely to suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder because it is evident in a lot research and well-known books.

For instance, in a journal article there was a national study of Vietnam veterans where it was determined that ethnicity played a significant role in higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder. In the study it is explained that Caucasian and Japanese American veterans had lower rates (8.7% and 19.9%) of posttraumatic stress disorder while two groups of American Indian veterans had higher rates (45.3% and 57.2%) of the disorder (Brinker 655). As mentioned in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, it is also evident that American Indians have higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder than most other ethnicities. It is also made known through research that it is more likely that depending on what ethnic background the combat veteran is, determines if they will seek treatment for their disorder. However combat veterans have a tendency to try to normalize their symptoms so that they do not have to seek treatment (Brinker 659). It is said that combat veterans believe that their posttraumatic stress disorder is the price they pay for surviving the war (Brinker 670).

Treatments have been developed to accommodate the needs of combat veterans no matter what

ethnicity they are. However, American Indian combat veterans have to opportunity to consult treatment within their culture. American Indian combat veterans can either decide to get help from traditional medicine or Western medicine. There are many components that differentiate the two and to elaborate, Native American traditional medicine is considered holistic treatment meaning every aspect of the patient is evaluated in order to treat them (Broome 163). This means that the patients' physical, emotional, social, and spiritual abilities are examined all at once, along with the environment around them (Broome 163). By comparing Native American medicine and Western medicine the ways of treatment are looked at differently. Western medicine is more incline to focus their efforts in looking at the patients' medical history, family history, and using medication and technology (Broome 163). For instance, one type of Western medicine for treating posttraumatic stress disorder is prolonged exposure therapy (Wangelin 162). Prolonged exposure therapy is the most widely used type of Western medicine and this type of therapy exposes the combat veterans to everything they are afraid of that triggers their posttraumatic stress disorder (Wangelin 162). This is effective because since avoidance of certain situations and memories that go back to the traumatic event; it helps the combat veteran find ways to coop with the memories and situations, overall taking away the avoidant tendencies (Wangelin 162). This type of therapy helps the veterans find relief and it is the most preferred (Wangelin 164) but Native American medicine focuses on the patients' happiness and Native American healers help the patient find their happiness or recover it as much as possible (Cohen 168). By focusing on the ultimate happiness of the patient, everything around them would be restored and balanced making it more effective at treating the disorder. Along with Native American traditional medicine, ceremonies are done to help the patient (Gross 374). These ceremonies can be very beneficial to the combat veterans because by focusing on the happiness and family bonding, more of the brain chemical oxytocin can be released.

After reviewing the ways Native American medicine and tradition work together to treat patients, there is information to continue to see how the Native American medicine and tradition can help American Indian combat veterans with their posttraumatic stress disorder. By doing this the brain chemical, oxytocin can be introduced to understand how the Native American medicine and tradition work can treat the posttraumatic stress disorder. First of all, oxytocin is a brain chemical that is released when feelings of love, bonding, and attraction are felt and it ultimately makes you feel good (Olf). Oxytocin can be released by the

person interacting with other people, but because posttraumatic stress disorder makes combat veterans avoid any and all types of social interaction, it makes it difficult for oxytocin to be released. It is of significant importance that combat veterans connect and interact with others to reduce the stress that comes with posttraumatic stress disorder (Olf). It is said that social contact is effective at making people have a sense of calmness and promotes bonding and attachment along with providing better confidence in themselves because oxytocin is considered the love hormone (Olf). Through ceremonies and bonding with family, it can possibly help the patient control their posttraumatic stress disorder. As mentioned by Kenneth Cohen in *Honoring the Medicine*, a family love is one of the most important aspects of treating a patient. Without love and happiness there is no way of controlling the disorder. Oxytocin enables the patient to enjoy life, open themselves up to people around them, feel love again, and feel attached again (Grohol). Oxytocin is believed to be released during hugging and touching along with being involved in social interactions and bonding (Grohol). By being a part of ceremonies in the Native American tradition the combat veteran can receive some relief from their stress because they would be interacting with people close to them and people within the community who want to be of assistance to the patient. An example of a particular ceremony for combat veterans is called “Wiping Away the Tears” which is specific in the Hopi tradition (Phillips). The purpose of this ceremony is to help the combat veterans keep the away the spirits of the dead away from the patient (Phillips). Along with this information, it was found that many veterans within the Washington State University community took a survey that showed that half of them believed that usual posttraumatic stress disorder treatments did not work for them and that they would rather consult traditional healing (Phillips). This type of social interaction could be beneficial to the combat veteran in helping them find relief from their posttraumatic stress disorder.

The importance of social interaction and bonding is to ultimately help the American Indian combat veterans with the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. The feelings that are associated with oxytocin can be released through the Native American medicine and tradition. This is possible because when ceremonies are done, the patient along with the family and community work together to help treat the patient. This indicates social interaction and family love which are both ways oxytocin can be released (Olf). As mentioned, the purpose of this paper is to find ways for American Indian combat veterans find relief from posttraumatic stress disorder by consulting their Native American medicine and tradition. By examining the

oxytocin that is released in the brain, it can be speculated that by participating in ceremonies and experiencing bonding with people around them, they could possibly find relief from their disorder.

Although I have looked at the ways Native American medicine and tradition can help an American Indian combat veteran with their posttraumatic stress disorder, there are still some things that are not researched yet. Possibly by combining Native American medicine and tradition with Western medicine, the affects of posttraumatic stress disorder in the combat veteran, there could be more relief from the disorder than just using one type of treatment. By combining the different ways of treatment, it could either significantly help the American Indian combat veteran find relief of the disorder or either it could have no change in effectiveness. It would be interesting to find out whether or not it could be possible for two different types of treatment for one particular disorder like posttraumatic stress disorder, to have significant changes in how an American Indian combat veteran deals with it as compared to just using one type of treatment.

Through this research, looking at different ways of treating posttraumatic stress disorder can be very effective in finding relief for American Indian combat veterans. By examining the ways of Native American medicine and tradition, it can be said that it can help American Indian combat veterans just as much as participating in therapy in the Western medicine. This research was to figure out how, by releasing more of the brain chemical, oxytocin can help American Indian combat veterans, who have the highest rates of posttraumatic stress disorder, to control the disorder. Although this research has been looked at, there can always be more information that can be discovered about posttraumatic stress disorder and the people who are diagnosed with it.

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