

Hope for veterans with an overlooked form of post-traumatic stress disorder

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In an article published in the March 2016 issue of the *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, investigators in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) report that veterans who fall just below the threshold for a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) respond to a psychotherapy regimen better than those with full PTSD. The study highlights the need to recognize veterans suffering from an overlooked condition called subclinical PTSD. "The study shows not only that we can treat those experiencing subclinical presentations of PTSD, but also that those with subclinical PTSD may actually respond better to treatment than those with more severe forms of the disease," says MUSC investigator Kristina Korte, Ph.D., who is the first author on the article. MUSC co-authors include Ron Acerno, Ph.D., Daniel F. Gros, Ph.D., and Nicholas P. Allan, MS.

Just like [patients](#) with full PTSD, those with subclinical PTSD have experienced a traumatic event and are regularly re-experiencing it, often in nightmares or flashbacks. Patients with full PTSD also experience hyperarousal (i.e., they are easily startled) and avoid reminders of the event, for example by withdrawing from social interaction or turning to substance abuse. In addition re-experiencing the event, patients with subclinical PTSD may exhibit either hyperarousal or avoidance, but not both.

Psychologists began noticing this pattern more frequently in the nineties in veterans returning from the first Iraq War, and even more frequently

in veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade. As researchers have learned more about these patients over time, varying and sometimes conflicting [symptoms](#) have provided an incomplete picture of the disorder and how to treat it. Further confounding the issue is that those with subclinical PTSD are often excluded from clinical trials testing treatments for PTSD—patients with only some symptoms of PTSD commonly aren't included in the healthy control group or in the group with full PTSD. As a result, there is still no standard psychotherapy for treating subclinical PTSD as there is for full PTSD.

The researchers devised an intuitive approach—Why not treat subclinical PTSD patients with one of the standard evidence-based psychotherapy tools already being used in PTSD patients? They enrolled 200 patients with combat-related PTSD symptoms from the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center located adjacent to MUSC, identifying those with either subclinical or full PTSD. For eight weeks, patients received intensive weekly sessions of behavioral activation and therapeutic exposure therapy, designed to lessen their PTSD symptoms by helping them safely re-experience and resolve elements of the original trauma. Psychologists rated the patients' PTSD symptoms and had patients rate their own symptoms before, during, and after the eight weeks.

The results were encouraging. Those with subclinical or full PTSD each experienced a real drop in PTSD symptoms after treatment. The striking result was in how much those symptoms dropped: 29% in those with subclinical PTSD as compared to 14% with full PTSD.

It may seem obvious that patients with a less severe form of PTSD would respond better to standard psychotherapy, but the implications for treatment extend beyond that. PTSD symptoms often worsen over time; as they do, treatments become less effective at reducing symptoms. In this context, subclinical PTSD could be seen as "early-stage" PTSD, in

that treatment might be more effective when the disorder is caught early.

Gros' group hopes these early studies can move beyond men in combat to civilians of both sexes.

"It is our hope that providing treatment for subclinical PTSD could have a significant impact on the cost-effectiveness of treating this common disorder," says Korte. "It could lead to the prevention of more intractable forms of PTSD that can occur when subclin

More information: Kristina J. Korte et al. Differential treatment response trajectories in individuals with subclinical and clinical PTSD, *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.janxdis.2016.01.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2016.01.006)

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