Brief PTSD therapy strongly reduces symptoms of chronic pain, study reports
19 June 2014, by Vjolca Hysenlika

Kevin Kip, PhD, FAHA, professor and executive director for the USF College of Nursing Research Center, led a team of investigators and clinicians who conducted a randomized control trial of ART in a military population. The trial enrolled 57 service members and veterans from the Tampa Bay area.

The researchers compared ART to a non-therapeutic PTSD treatment called attention control (AC) regimen. Clinicians treated half of the participants with ART, and the other half received AC, which consisted of either physical fitness assessment and planning, or career assessment and planning. After initial treatment, both groups received a follow-up assessment at three months.

According to information cited in the study, 70 percent of veterans with chronic pain in the U.S. Veterans Administration system may have PTSD, and up to 80 percent of those with PTSD may also experience chronic pain. Previous studies indicate that individuals suffering from chronic pain report a much lower quality of life and that constant pain may also worsen PTSD symptoms.

"With this study, we set out to describe and quantify the types of pain frequently experienced by service members and veterans with symptoms of PTSD," Dr. Kip said. "However, we were rather surprised as to how substantially levels of pain were reduced with ART, which was being used principally to treat symptoms of PTSD."

ART works in two phases to alleviate PTSD symptoms and psychological conditions including depression and anxiety.

The patient first visualizes in his or her mind a prior traumatic experience, which typically elicits uncomfortable physiological sensations like tightness of the chest, increased heart rate and sweating. Then, the patient follows the clinician's hand back and forth in a series of rapid left-to-right eye movements.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a growing epidemic among veterans and military service members returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Along with PTSD, a large percentage of veterans also experience chronic pain affecting the nervous system, internal organs and musculoskeletal tissues. These physical symptoms can be debilitating, and so far no formal treatment guidelines exist.

However, a recent University of South Florida College of Nursing study reports that accelerated resolution therapy (ART)—a brief, safe and effective treatment for PTSD—strongly reduces chronic pain. The researchers found that ART, a combination of evidence-based psychotherapies and use of eye movements, substantially reduces accompanying pain including neuropathic symptoms and head pain. The findings appear online in the May issue of the European Journal of Psycho-traumatology.

Diego F. Hernandez, PsyD (left), a licensed clinical psychologist and clinical director of ART at USF College of Nursing, demonstrates Accelerated Resolution Therapy, as veteran Brian Anderson follows his hand movements.
In the second phase, the patient imagines in their mind a positive solution to "replace" the distressing images with positive ones in a way that the original distressing images can no longer be accessed. ART is delivered in one to five one-hour sessions, requires no homework, and no written or verbal recall of the traumatic experience.

The USF College of Nursing recently began its fourth and largest ART study. Researchers are currently recruiting 200 veterans and service members suffering from PTSD, including those who were sexually abused or previously treated with other PTSD therapies. They will also examine the cost-effectiveness of ART, and further investigate how and why the therapy works.

Provided by University of South Florida