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If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?

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WRIISC *Advantage*

FALL 2012

How **FOOD** affects
your **MOOD**

How healthy
RELATIONSHIPS
lead to healthy **BODIES**

Are **PAIN & FATIGUE**
slowing you down?

Learn about
CHANGE THEORY!

Optimize your
POST-DEPLOYMENT HEALTH

This edition of our newsletter covers topics that are important to the health of ALL Veterans. Our goal is to give Veterans and their health care providers information that can help them best manage their health concerns and live life to the fullest.

YOUR GREATEST MISSION: Keeping Your Health at its Best

At the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC), we evaluate and provide treatment recommendations for Veterans who may have developed illnesses or injuries or symptoms as a result of deployment. Treatments for these conditions often vary depending on the nature of the conditions. While these condition-specific recommendations are important, we also try to emphasize the importance of taking charge of one's overall health. We do this by encouraging all Veterans to take some important steps to try to optimize their overall post-deployment health. These steps include:



BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE: Regular physical activity increases the likelihood that you will live longer and feel better. Benefits include helping you maintain a healthy weight, improving sleep, improving concentration, helping with muscle aches and pains, improving mood, and helping to control blood pressure, sugar, and cholesterol levels. Talk to your doctor before beginning an exercise program. *You might want to ask your doctor about how to obtain a "fitness prescription"- a detailed exercise program designed specifically for you that can improve your fitness while keeping you safe and injury-free.*



EAT HEALTHY: "You are what you eat." Diets high in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, fat-free/low-fat milk products, seafood, lean meats, eggs, beans, and nuts may help to prevent certain cancers and heart disease. Try to avoid foods high in cholesterol, sodium (salt), added sugars, trans fats, and saturated fats as these may increase the risk for developing health problems. You might be surprised to learn that what you eat *also impacts your mood or emotional health and there are nutritional things you can do to help with this.* (See page 3.)



GET ENOUGH SLEEP: Getting seven to eight hours of sleep may improve your immune system, help you to maintain a healthy weight, and improve your mood and decision-making ability. Good sleep habits include sticking to a regular sleep schedule, avoiding caffeine in the afternoon and evening, and engaging in relaxing activities before bed.



STOP SMOKING: Smoking has been shown to cause lung cancer, other cancers, heart disease, lung problems, strokes, and gum disease. If you smoke, the sooner you quit, the better off you will be. Tips that can help break the nicotine habit include making a "quit plan" and having friends and family support you. VA offers a number of resources to help Veterans stop smoking. Check out www.publichealth.va.gov/smoking for tips on how to break the smoking habit.



DRINK ALCOHOL IN MODERATION: Drinking too much [for example, more than two drinks per day (male) or one drink per day (female)] can place you at a higher risk for liver disease, heart disease, sleep problems, depression, stroke, bleeding from the stomach, and several types of cancer. If you feel that you are drinking too much, talk to your health care provider about programs available to help you.



MANAGE STRESS: Taking steps to manage stress can help protect you from a number of health conditions including heart disease and depression. You can take steps to manage stress by not overbooking your schedule, trying to find time to relax,

The Veterans Health Administration's national weight management program called MOVE![®] helps Veterans lose weight, keep it off, and improve their overall health. To learn more, visit: www.move.va.gov/QandA.asp.

eating well-balanced meals, staying physically active, and making time to talk with friends and family.



CANCER SCREENING: Many cancers can be treated successfully if caught early. For this reason, it is important to talk to your doctor about recommended cancer screenings. [↗](#)

For more information on steps you can take to improve your overall health, check out the Quick Guide to Healthy Living at: www.healthfinder.gov.

NUTRITIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

How Food impacts our Mood

AS DISCUSSED in the previous article, we know that our diet impacts our physical health. For example, too much sodium can cause health problems such as an increase in blood pressure. However, many of us may not be aware that what we eat and how we eat can also impact our mood or emotional health. You might find it surprising to know that symptoms of nutritional depletion (or not getting enough nutrients or nutritional value from food) can imitate those of mood disorders. These symptoms include fatigue, anxiety, depression, irritability, poor mood, stress intolerance, overeating/cravings, and sleep difficulties.

In today's society, people mostly eat for the purpose of pleasure versus nutritional value. Studies have shown that we are consuming more and more sugar and processed starchy food than ever before.

With a high-carbohydrate and high-sugar diet, a person's blood sugar (the amount of sugar present in a person's blood) becomes unstable. After eating a meal or snack high in sugar and carbohydrates, the pancreas sends out too much insulin and blood sugar drops below the level necessary to maintain well-being. All the cells of the body, especially the brain cells, use sugar for fuel. A blood sugar level that is too low starves the cells of needed fuel and can cause both physical and emotional symptoms. In response to low blood sugar, the adrenal glands activate and release stress hormones, cortisol and epinephrine (adrenaline), to raise blood sugar up to normal limits. This means that the same response



used in your basic flight or fight stress response is used to regulate your blood sugar. Cortisol and insulin are also both fat storage hormones in the body. When eating a high-carbohydrate and high-sugar diet, your stress response system is over-activated and you are producing high levels of fat storage hormones. The result may be anxiety, fatigue, mood instability, afternoon energy lows, difficulty sleeping, food cravings (especially sugar), and obesity. The good news is there are simple things you can do to prevent these negative symptoms:

- Eat lean protein at each meal (e.g., chicken, turkey, fish, beef, eggs)
- Eat smaller meals more frequently (every 3 - 4 hours)
- Increase the fiber in your diet: eat more bran cereals, whole wheat breads, fresh fruits and vegetables (6 - 7 servings/day)
- Minimize your carbohydrate and sugar intake
- Eat before you get hungry
- Eat "whole" foods (without processing or added ingredients)
- Eat breakfast!

Eating better to improve your mood will help you live a healthier and happier life! [↗](#)

BUILDING HEALTHY *Relationships* » BUILDING HEALTHY *Bodies*

Have you ever wondered why geese fly in a 'V' formation? Flying in a group helps birds reduce wind resistance and helps the flock keep track of each bird. Fighter pilots use these same formations for similar reasons. Humans also perform better when they are in a team. Research increasingly shows that social support is one of the most important ways to improve health outcomes.



We often think that family members and friends can be there to take us to appointments, send that much needed get well soon card, or just offer an ear to listen. In some cases, we even rely on family or friends to help with our most basic needs like bathing, dressing, or preparing food. Friends and family can help us cope with mental health conditions like post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Healthy relationships help us to manage stress and increase our body's ability to heal. Research shows that healthy relationships can improve memory, weight loss efforts, and conditions like diabetes and that these relationships are as important to our bodies as exercise and nutrition.

Improving social support might be one of the best ways to feel better. In some cases, these may involve fighting the impulse to isolate. When we do not feel well, we may want to be alone. This is healthy, as long as we are not isolating ourselves all of the time. Sometimes when we fight the impulse to isolate, we are happy we did something with another person. When expanding or deepening relationships, it is important to remember that no one is perfect. Sometimes we have disagreements, are forgetful, or are a little selfish. This is part of being human and does not mean that a relationship cannot be fixed. Putting in the effort to promote healthy relationships and build a strong team is worth it.



It is also important to support those that support us! Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has programs and staff that can support the friends and family of Veterans,

no matter how we define them. For example, recently, VA changed policies around visiting hours—visitors can now come to the medical center whenever it is convenient for them. VA also has a new Caregiver Support program that offers support and programs to those who care for Veterans. More information is available at www.caregiver.va.gov. Another new program, Coaching into Care, offers support to loved ones who are worried about a Veteran who might not be ready to come to VA or to talk to a provider. Call 1-888-823-7458 or go to www.mirecc.va.gov/coaching to find out more program information. Remember, healthy relationships can improve our health. As a team, we can perform better and feel better. 🐾

If you need to add more social support to your life, some things you can do include:

- 1. JOIN A SUPPORT GROUP.** Ask your health care provider for a list of groups available at your VA or in your local area.
- 2. ASK FOR A REFERRAL FOR RECREATION THERAPY.** Every VA hospital provides this therapy which centers on organizing social outings and groups for Veterans.
- 3. VOLUNTEER.** Sometimes getting outside of ourselves and helping others can make us feel better.
- 4. EXPAND YOUR DEFINITION OF FAMILY.** We do not have to be related to care for or help someone.

Other Important VA Social Support Resources

- Vet Centers offer help to combat Veterans and their families. Call 1-877-927-8387 or visit www.vetcenter.va.gov for more information.
- Many VA Medical Centers offer couples counseling and resources for families. Speak with your primary care provider or a clinician at your local VA for more information.

Vets4Warriors Program

Vets4Warriors is a national 24/7 helpline staffed by Veterans who have been trained as peer counselors and are supported by behavioral health care professionals. The toll-free helpline 1-855-VET-TALK (1-855-838-8255) provides confidential peer support to National Guard and Reserve Component service members in all 50 states and territories. The Web site is www.Vets4Warriors.com.

The service members who call relate that they feel most comfortable talking to someone who has had similar experiences and who understands the military culture and the unique challenges of returning from a deployment. The helpline's motto is: "You are not alone, anywhere, any time."

The peer counselors remain in contact with callers until their matters are resolved and provide ongoing peer support. The goal is to prevent problems from escalating into crises. Since its inception in December 2011, the helpline has fielded over 14,000 calls to date. The helpline is funded by a grant from the Department of Defense while Vets4Warriors is operated by the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) out of its call center in Piscataway, NJ.



Live chat is available at: www.Vets4Warriors.com

Are chronic pain and fatigue slowing you down?

Learn about Change Theory to help you deal with chronic pain and fatigue!

CHRONIC PAIN AND FATIGUE are two of the most common ailments facing many of our Veterans. Often times, both of these conditions have been found to occur together causing significant disruptions in the lives of returning Veterans. Primary Care and Pain Management Clinics see many Veterans who are seeking help for these symptoms. Some Veterans who experience these symptoms may become frustrated because they feel that they have undergone many tests and taken many medications with no improvement. The WRIISC is focused on researching these conditions and finding ways for Veterans suffering with chronic pain and fatigue to improve their quality of life. "My Best Self: Living with Chronic Pain and Fatigue" is a structured seminar designed by two NJ WRIISC psychologists (Dr. Nyasanu Barbee and Dr. Lisa McAndrew) which takes a slightly different approach in treating these conditions. The seminar focuses on improving the quality of life of Veterans by using the "change theory" as its core element to redirect Veterans away from just relying on medication to reduce symptoms.

Change theory, also known as *behavioral activation*, allows individuals to focus on changing things that are "changeable." For example, internal processes in human

beings which includes things like emotions and thoughts as well as physical experiences like pain and fatigue are difficult to change. In contrast, our behavior or things that we can do such as walking and moving are things that we can control and therefore can change.

Using this argument, our seminar encourages Veterans to first identify their values and then create goals that can allow them to begin to behave in ways that are consistent with their values. Using an *activity monitoring form*, individuals can then begin to schedule activities throughout the week that can allow them to feel better about themselves and meet their goals. Research has shown that an enhanced quality of life has a significant positive impact on individuals with chronic conditions. In fact, in some individuals, they will not only feel happier when engaged in meaningful activities, but they may also experience a reduction in symptoms. Based on the positive response received during our first seminar in May 2012, we hope to continue offering this important program in the future. 🐾

To learn more about the *My Best Self: Living with Chronic Pain and Fatigue* seminar at the NJ WRIISC, please contact us at 1-800-248-8005.

Around the WRIISC *News*

DC WRIISC

“All Vets Garden” for Therapeutic Purposes

With support from the Office of Patient Centered Care (OPCC), the DC WRIISC at the Washington, DC VA Medical Center is working with Veterans and community partners to establish the “All Vets Garden,” which will serve multiple therapeutic purposes. Gardening plots are located on the grounds of the Armed Forces Retirement Home, adjacent to the DC VA Medical Center, and will be directed and run by Veterans.



Zucchini is just one type of vegetable grown in the garden.

The DC WRIISC held its first planting event in June with Veteran volunteers from VA Medical Center and volunteers from Deloitte Consulting and the University of the District of Columbia Office of Extension. Our next step is to establish a Board of Veterans who will define and guide the garden’s mission and goals. The program will continue to work with community partners to provide training and education opportunities to Veterans in agriculture, gardening, business, and nutrition. Many of these training opportunities will be lead by Veterans themselves or will call on community resources.

Our theory is that lives are enriched by a community of healthy relationships, healthy environments, and a feeling of mutual support and empowerment. While our task is to create a working garden, our overall goal is to create a space where Veterans engage in innovations guided by what matters to them. By doing this, we hope to transform the experience of nutrition, lifestyle, training and employment, and health care for Veterans. We also hope that these experiences will lead to reinforcing behavior and cultural change throughout the hospital for Veterans and health care providers alike.

NJ WRIISC

Strengthening our Commitment to Advancing Research and Clinical Care for Women Veterans

The number of Women Veterans using VA care nearly doubled over the past decade. As leaders in post-deployment health care, the NJ WRIISC continues to place a high priority on meeting the needs of Women Veterans through our clinical care and research programs.

We are pleased to announce that our facility was selected by VA’s Health Service Research and Development (HSR&D) to be a site for the VA Women’s Health Practice-Based Research Network (PBRN). The lead for this new Network will be WRIISC research psychologist, Dr. Lisa McAndrew (pictured) along with Drs. Gudrun Lange, Drew Helmer, Helena Chandler, Jorge Serrador, and Len Pogach.



NJ WRIISC will be one of several sites in the country for the VA Women’s Health PBRN. The designated sites will work together to make it easier to conduct a wide range of research and multi-site studies to examine the health and delivery of health care to Women Veterans. As a member of the Network, the NJ WRIISC will be eligible for potential participation in new and innovative research projects and initiatives geared towards improving the care of Women Veterans. The NJ WRIISC also will have access to new information about women Veterans as it becomes available, and will work to make sure all clinicians are informed of this information as it applies to clinical practice. We are honored to work on this important project as it will provide important insight into the specific health care needs of our population of Women Veterans.

Study on Spirituality and Personal Beliefs

With the support of the OPCC, Dr. Grace W. Yan of the NJ WRIISC studies the impact of spirituality and personal beliefs on the physical and emotional well-being of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Veterans. For more information, please contact the NJ WRIISC at **1-800-248-8005**.




CA WRIISC

New Research Project Seeks Better Treatment for Veterans with Chronic Pain

A new study at the CA WRIISC will focus on Veterans from the first Gulf War (GW1) who suffer from chronic or persistent pain. GW1 Veterans are a special population as they have been found to have higher rates of chronic wide-spread pain in comparison to non-GW1 Veterans, and this pain is often accompanied by other symptoms such as fatigue, possibly a result of not sleeping enough because of the pain.

There are many treatments for chronic pain in addition to pain medication. These include physical therapy, exercise and fitness programs, relaxation techniques, and other alternative medicine practices like acupuncture. Although the right combination of treatments can help reduce pain and help individuals cope with their symptoms, they may not be completely successful in eliminating pain. Finding new approaches to treating pain is important to help Veterans with chronic pain live a better life.

The use of Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (rTMS) is currently being evaluated as a possible treatment option for chronic pain. Recently, CA WRIISC has been awarded research funding to examine whether rTMS can help reduce pain among GW1 Veterans. rTMS is a non-invasive method of delivering stimulation to the brain with minimal risks and side effects. Patients remain awake and alert throughout the procedure as a hand-held electromagnetic coil is placed over their head. They typically notice only a loud clicking noise and tingling sensation on their scalp. The length of rTMS treatment sessions vary, but generally do not last longer than 30 minutes. Previous studies have shown that this method can improve pain symptoms after 10 to 20 sessions over the course of two to four weeks, and the pain relief may last over six months.

The rTMS Study for Chronic Pain among GW1 Veterans is scheduled to begin recruitment at CA WRIISC this year. Findings of this study will be important for all Veterans who suffer from chronic pain. For more information on this study, please contact the CA WRIISC at 1-888-482-4376. 

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For comments or concerns regarding this newsletter, please contact us at: 1-800-248-8005 or email wriisc.nj@va.gov.



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VETERANS: *Do you live with chronic pain and fatigue?*



Learn how to live the best life possible.

For more information about the *My Best Self* seminar, please call 1-800-248-8005 or visit:



www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov