

## **Acupuncture for Integrative Treatment of PTSD at CORE Trauma Healing Center**

Jen Tartakoff, L.Ac, Dipl.Ac

The effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on first responders and veterans has gained awareness in recent years, due to its prevalence and the critical impact on individuals, families, and social dynamics. According to the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS), “the estimated lifetime prevalence of PTSD among these Veterans was 30.9% for men and 26.9% for women [1].” As understanding of PTSD and trauma response expand, it is more widely recognized as a somatic condition—not just a psycho-emotional disorder. DSM V diagnostic criteria span the physical, mental, emotional and behavioral realms [2]. While standardized treatment approaches are available, many have acknowledged the need for additional interventions—a need which has led us to offer acupuncture at CORE Trauma Healing Center. A systematic review of research describes that “first-line therapy includes a combination of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and psycho-pharmaceuticals. Inadequate response and/or drug intolerance have caused many patients with PTSD and their advocates to seek alternative or supplementary treatments [3].” Acupuncture can play a vital role in trauma therapy, both as a stand-alone intervention, and in conjunction with other modalities. This is illustrated by the nature of the intervention, organizations which have set the precedent for acupuncture therapy in trauma management, and documented treatment outcomes.

Conceptually and biologically, acupuncture fills a role that other therapies are unable to. This makes it a vital modality to incorporate in a treatment center such as CORE. As a mind/body medicine it addresses the range of physical, mental and emotional symptoms which are typically experienced with PTSD. Acupuncture is relatively non-invasive, non-stigmatizing, and highly accessible, requiring minimal materials, space, and staff for delivery. One review indicates that “numerous studies have shown that acupuncture is well tolerated by patients, safe, and cost effective compared to routine care [4].” While treatment styles vary between acupuncturists, a widely accepted acupuncture approach for PTSD and trauma is the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) protocol. This treatment was devised in the early 1970’s, and utilizes 5 specific points in the ear to help rebalance the body systems by accessing an auricular microsystem. It was initially designed to address substance addiction and detox symptoms, but has since been acknowledged as a central element in trauma treatment. It can be performed in a community-style setting, allowing a single practitioner to work on multiple patients simultaneously. Based on the mission statement of the NADA organization, it “encourages community wellness through the use of a standardized auricular acupuncture protocol for behavioral health, including addictions, mental health, and disaster & emotional trauma [5].” This approach allows for modifications based on individual symptoms, but creates a highly effective base treatment for a broad range of patients.

The ability to address such a complex and diverse condition through acupuncture is invaluable. With many cases of PTSD, verbal engagement of the trauma can trigger flash-backs and cause the individual to re-experience the event, exacerbating impacts. In these instances, it can be particularly useful to engage a non-verbal therapy. Acupuncture utilizes a variety of diagnostic tools, such as pulse, tongue inspection, abdominal palpation, and reported physical symptoms, which provide information to the practitioner without requiring full details of the patient’s history. This enables the acupuncturist to diagnose and treat very specifically based on

the unique impacts of the event on that individual. As the patient progresses in treatment, it can help ‘digest’ the experience, manage the systemic impacts, and support them in addressing it from a verbal perspective. This progression, in turn, facilitates further recovery through treatment approaches such as psychotherapy and biomedicine. Beyond the positive effects for the patient, healing from trauma can take on a larger meaning. Not only does it increase the quality of life for that individual, it allows them to return to their familial, social and occupational roles—dynamics which are often compromised by the impacts of PTSD. This is particularly significant for first responders and military personnel who are still actively serving.

The precedent has been set for including acupuncture in PTSD treatment, within the state, across the country and internationally. Benefits of acupuncture have gained more mainstream recognition, creating a place for it in medical facilities, private organizations and government programs. Within the state of Connecticut, numerous hospitals and integrative health centers offer acupuncture. This includes medical facilities through Yale, UCONN, Hartford Hospital, Middlesex Hospital, St. Francis Hospital, Windham Hospital, Norwalk Hospital, Bridgeport Hospital, and Stamford Health Medical Group. Outside of these networks, organizations have formed specifically to provide acupuncture treatment for trauma management. Acupuncturists Without Borders is a non-profit organization that developed following hurricanes Rita and Katrina to support those who had experienced trauma during the natural disasters. It has since collaborated with mental health organizations, free medical clinics, homeless shelters, New Orleans firefighters, police and SWAT teams, the military and Coast Guard, and FEMA, among other trauma recovery groups. They have expanded to provide international trauma relief following natural and sociopolitical crises. One program, Military Stress Recovery Project, focuses specifically on management of PTSD and chronic pain for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. They note that “research in the past decade has shown that acupuncture is a helpful somatic therapy that rebalances the brain after significant stress, as well as the nervous and hormonal systems. Acupuncture treatment, especially shortly after exposure to traumatic events, can help prevent the development of post-traumatic stress (PTS). With more extended treatment, acupuncture can also restore resiliency for those who suffer from long-term PTS [6].”

Government facilities have also incorporated acupuncture into treatment approaches, including at VA Medical Centers and within active military duty. Within VA centers, acupuncture is used to address PTSD and chronic pain in a veteran population. Earlier this year, an updated publication of the Department of Veteran’s Affairs (VA) Handbook included acupuncturists as a recognized occupation within the system [7]. This acknowledges the profession and its role within the Veteran’s Health Administration, as well as establishing credentialing standards to add consistency of care. Locally, this is being utilized through the Battlefield Acupuncture Group Clinic at the VA Medical Center in West Haven, CT. Employing a protocol developed for use during active duty, “‘We found that 80% of the people,’ says Dr. Federman, ‘will have a decrease in their pain score immediately after completion of the first treatment [8].’” Other individuals have employed acupuncture therapy within active duty, including “in a multitude of tactical settings, both inside and away from the Battalion Aid Station (BAS), including the interior of tactical vehicles, passenger terminals, even “fighting holes” (fox holes),” and found that the treatments “can rapidly create a calming and centering effect in psychologically traumatized service members [9].” In addition to the direct impact on management of PTSD symptoms and body pain, acupuncture provides an alternative to pharmaceutical treatment strategies. An article written by the National Certification Commission

for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM) cites, “a report by the American Public Health Association in 2011 found that the fatal overdose rate among VA patients is nearly double the national average [7]”. This point illustrates the need for care in this population, and for management—such as acupuncture—which limits pharmaceutical dependence.

Research indicates significant potential for the use of acupuncture in trauma therapy. This has come from clinical trials and observation of successful case management. A recent Boston Globe article assessed the impact of a collaborative medical approach in treatment of veterans at a VA Medical Center in White River Junction, VT. The therapies included acupuncture, psychotherapy, physical therapy, and chiropractic, as well as biomedical treatment by physicians, nurse practitioners, and pharmacists. Through this treatment approach, the center was able to reduce opioid prescriptions by 42% [10]. That article also cited that “the total number of VA patients at White River Junction that received opioids for chronic pain plummeted from 2,088 in early 2014 to 1,221 late last year,” and further detailed the reduced doses of those still receiving medical treatment.

Further studies reinforce the dramatic impacts of complementary alternative therapies. Outcomes of one control trial indicate that “mean improvement in PTSD severity was significantly greater among those receiving acupuncture than in those receiving UPC (usual PTSD care)...Acupuncture was also associated with significantly greater improvements in depression, pain, and physical and mental health functioning [11].” Another trial compared acupuncture to CBT and a wait-list control. It implemented acupuncture sessions twice weekly for twelve weeks and found that “63% of those treated with acupuncture no longer met DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for PTSD at posttreatment [12].” Results from this study also indicated that “reductions of PTSD symptoms and loss of diagnosis were maintained 3 months after treatment. Treatment effects on depression, anxiety, and impairment were similar to effects for PTSD.”

Assessments of the available evidence-base reinforce the findings of these individual trials. In a systematic review of literature on the subject, authors cite studies which indicate “the results of this review suggest that acupuncture may be at least as effective as CBT and SSRIs in the management of PTSD [3].” Another literature review indicated “one high-quality RCT reported that acupuncture was superior to waitlist control and therapeutic effects of acupuncture and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) were similar.” They also found that “one RCT reported a favorable effect of acupoint stimulation plus CBT against CBT alone.” They concluded that “our main finding of this review is that acupuncture is effective for PTSD based on one high-quality RCT and a meta-analysis [4].”

In assessing the unique benefits of acupuncture treatment, organizations that have already recognized its importance, and the research available, the role of acupuncture for management of PTSD becomes clear. With ongoing political and social tensions inside our country and abroad, it is essential to support the population on the front lines. These individuals are in need of resources both during and after active duty—not only to manage their internal symptoms, but to engage effectively in family, social and occupational roles. By providing acupuncture as a resource at CORE Trauma Healing Center, we can stay at the forefront with our treatment approach and maximize therapeutic outcomes. Beyond the individual impact of this complementary system, the model of diversified integrative care can then be replicated in other facilities through the state—to serve this population in a far greater way.

## References

1. Gradus, J. L. DSc, MPH. (2017, March 30). *Epidemiology of PTSD*. Retrieved from <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSD-overview/epidemiological-facts-ptsd.asp>.
2. American Psychiatric Association. (2013) Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
3. Glickman-Simon, R., Alper, BS. (2013). Acupuncture for PTSD, Naturopathy for Cardiovascular Risk, Yoga for Osteoarthritis, Chasteberry for PMS, and Antioxidants for Cardiovascular Events. *Explore (NY)*, 9(6):385-8. doi: 10.1016/j.explore.2013.08.013.
4. Kim, Y.D., et al. (2013). Acupuncture for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Systematic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials and Prospective Clinical Trials. *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2013, 615857, 12 pp. doi.org/10.1155/2013/615857.
5. (n.d.). *NADA Mission and History*. Retrieved from <https://www.acudetox.com/index.php/about-nada>.
6. (n.d.). *History of AWB*. Retrieved from <http://www.acuwithoutborders.org/history-of-awb/>.
7. Perez, V. (2018, March 2). *Acupuncturists Now Included in the Veterans Health Administration*. Retrieved from <https://globenewswire.com/news-release/2018/03/02/1414126/0/en/Acupuncturists-Now-Included-in-the-Veterans-Health-Administration.html>.
8. Maminta, J. (2017, April 27). *Battlefield Acupuncture for CT Veterans*. Retrieved from [http://www.wtnh.com/news/health/battlefield-acupuncture-for-ct-veterans\\_20180322095939501/1068402799](http://www.wtnh.com/news/health/battlefield-acupuncture-for-ct-veterans_20180322095939501/1068402799)
9. Koffman, R. L., MD, MPH, Helms, J. M., MD, FAAMA. (2013). Acupuncture and PTSD: ‘Come for the Needles, Stay for the Therapy’. *Psychiatric Annals*, 43(5):236-239. doi.org/10.3928/00485713-20130503-09.
10. MacQuarrie, B. (2018, April 30). VA turns to alternative pain treatments amid opioid crisis. *The Boston Globe*.
11. Engel, C. C. MD, et al. (2014). Randomized Effectiveness Trial of a Brief Course of Acupuncture for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Medical Care*, 52:pS57-S64. doi: 10.1097/MLR.0000000000000237.
12. Hollifield, M. (2011). Acupuncture for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Conceptual, Clinical, and Biological Data Support Further Research. *CNS Neuroscience & Therapeutics*, 17(6):769-79. doi: 10.1111/j.1755-5949.2011.00241.x.