

## ART THERAPY FOR VETERANS WITH PTSD

Art therapy has a long association with treating the psychological injuries associated with war. The profession is rooted in the regeneration following the Second World War. Adrian Hill, who is often credited with coining the term 'art therapy', was a war artist on the western front during the First World War. Hill and his contemporaries were convinced that art could restore health. However, it is only in recent years with developments in clinical neuroscience that evidence has confirmed this belief by showing exactly **how** art therapy can assist recovery. Research has shown that art therapy is able to access non-verbal parts of the brain that communicate in emotions, visual imagery and body sensations, and how it can assist recovery on a structural level. By tapping into primitive brain networks it can help to establish new neural pathways that can alter function. Bypassing the rigid, repetitive thoughts patterns that hamper recovery, art therapy can help veterans to express experiences they find hard to put into words, thereby assisting the processing and integration of trauma memories (Belkofer & Konopka, 2008; Lobban, 2014; Lusebrink, 2004).

Veterans who have been physically or psychologically injured through service are the responsibility of the National Health Service (NHS). Currently, only two of the ten NHS England regions offer art therapy as part of Specialist Veterans' Services. There has been an increase in the number of combat-related casualties in recent years due to UK involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Consequently, it is likely that there will be an increase in veteran mental health referrals, so now is the time to present a case for the inclusion of art therapy into all Specialist Veterans' Services. In the US, Creative Arts Therapy is a core treatment provided in Veterans Administration Healthcare Systems and at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence for serving military personnel. Further research and evaluation to establish a firm evidence base for art therapy as a treatment for PTSD could encourage service providers in the UK to invest in art therapy, thereby making it available to all veterans who would benefit.

Veterans are slow to seek help with stigma connected with mental health problems being a significant barrier. On average veterans come to Combat Stress 13 years after leaving the Forces by which time problems can be highly complex. This puts veterans at risk of social exclusion and contributes towards the high number of veterans who are homeless or in prison. Consequently art therapy aims not only to treat PTSD but to encourage veterans to seek help by increasing public awareness through the exhibition of art therapy imagery. Despite the intensely personal meaning of the imagery created in art therapy sessions, veterans are keen to share their work often in the hope that it might help other veterans in some way. Participating in events in which veterans' families and the wider public can share the imagery created has proved to be beneficial to recovery. Receiving recognition can foster a sense of personal achievement that increases confidence and assists social integration.

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### REFERENCES

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