

Understanding Military Culture and the Role of Art in Healing



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The Integral Role of the Arts

We have looked at themes spanning from the military experience, to veteran identity, the role of families and caregivers, and clinical trends. How do we summarize what works best in terms of engaging the military & veteran community along these complex journeys? The truth is that there is a long list of best practices that are proven to be effective, including clinical treatment, exercise, holistic practices, support groups and much more. The most effective methods are integrative, and often include expression and art for a number of reasons that we will look at.

Why Art Works

Humans are sensory beings, basing the majority of our existence on what we see and what we do. **Visual processing and enactment are important tools to use with the military & veteran community as they create movement, interpersonal connection, and develop voice.** The arts are unifying in a society that can be divided, and with a population who may be undergoing their own divisions (internally, within family, or with the external world) art can build cohesion along these fault lines and offer an outlet that helps put the pieces together and create a cohesive narrative. The arts are our cultural imprint on the world, defining eras, civilizations, milestones, landmarks, memorials, movements, and barriers. **There is great power in the arts and giving this power to others provides voice, outlet and connection.** Based on what you have read in prior sections, these outcomes are in alignment with what the military & veteran community needs. Many in the military & veteran community feel disempowered in their civilian identities. The arts can be a source of creation in the face of disempowerment. They provide a positive outlet based in construction, which is particularly significant to those exposed to destruction and suffering, as with trauma.

Let's reflect back on what trauma and stress does to the mind and body and position that with how the arts can counter these effects.

- Trauma can shatter and distort our belief systems. The arts build inner cohesion and narrative, making sense of experiences, and paving the way for clarity and insight.
- Trauma and stress block the creative process, and the relaxation process. Activities like painting, sculpting, drawing, drama, music, and photography are relaxing and rewarding hobbies that lower your stress levels and leave you feeling mentally clear and calm.
- Trauma causes the individual to feel distracted and potentially haunted by regrets and memories of the past. The arts bring individuals into the present moment.
- Trauma can cause stagnation. The arts provide movement.
- The stress response elicits brain activity that prevents us from developing rational thought patterns and formulating a grounded sense of self. The arts are proven to slow down metabolic processes, calm the brain, and thus help individuals find solutions and think clearly.

- Stress and trauma precipitate feelings of disorder. The arts provide feelings of control and autonomy.
- Trauma blocks our ability to communicate. The arts open up channels of communication and expression.
- Lastly, trauma can become stuck. The arts can unlock and heal trauma.

Let's look more closely at this last point before moving on. Traumatic memories are stored in the right hemisphere of the brain, the sensory center which is responsible for limbic functions and memory storage under heightened stimulation. When memories have been encoded under flight, fight and freeze conditions they are experienced as fragments of highly charged visual images, tactile sensations, or sensory reactions in connection to the event. **Healing needs to occur from the same side of the brain where trauma was encoded.** In "Invisible Heroes: Survivors of Trauma and How They Heal" Belleruth Naparstek quotes Cleveland psychotherapist Linda Gould as saying, "Oftentimes, in trauma, healing cannot be fully completed because traumatic experiences become locked in various areas of the brain. We can't work trauma through just by talking about it. Talking is primarily a left hemisphere activity. In order to complete the healing process, a person must access the limbic system and the right hemisphere, where images, body sensations and feelings are stored. By accessing them, a person is then able to attach meaning to them and move this traumatic material to a more adaptive resolution."

The use of art has great interpersonal benefits for the veteran & military community. The arts serve as a communication bridge within the military & veteran community, as well as between veterans and civilians. Drama and other art forms allow for safe exploration of identity while figuring out what the content is and how to go about expressing the message. The use of drama and role play are powerful tools for enactment, storytelling and action-oriented expression, which many veterans respond well to as they are used to action-oriented tasks. The formation of roles and relationships can be a challenge to individuals who have suffered disruptions in family dynamics and relationship establishment. The arts provide in vivo reparative relational work, building trust and connection. As an effective outlet, artistic expression is healthy and cathartic, but it is most productive when connected to an audience. There is something far less pressured about creating something to relay your story rather than relaying your story face to face. **Art as a triangulated form of communication can be a relief to someone who has stories to tell but is uncertain about how to do so.** One can learn a lot about self and their relationship to others, with minimal interpersonal effort.

Celebrating Diversity

As individuals project their experiences onto the canvas, the stage, or the page there is a sense of emotional release coupled with validation in being seen, heard, and witnessed by others. This validation alone can bring many in the military & veteran community a long sought after sense of closure and acceptance. As they begin creating, using metaphor and enacting story they can, in

turn, envision self and future, set goals and align their intentions. Metaphor can liberate many, allowing them to express what they may never have otherwise. As psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott stated, “Artists are people driven by the tension between the desire to communicate and the desire to hide.” Art gives us that power of duality.

Perhaps most importantly, art is healing and powerful because it is inherently personal. When creating art a person must bring their whole self into the experience. Viewed through Kimberlé Crenshaw’s groundbreaking work on intersectionality, we can understand why this is so important in the military & veteran community. Intersectionality teaches us that each marginalized identity we hold—veteran status, gender, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, religion, socioeconomic background— is interwoven. One aspect of a person’s identity cannot be separated from the other, and when we walk through the world and interact with one another, we are holding all of those perspectives and experiences. However, we are often distilled down to one of those labels by our peers and thus feel misunderstood. This is especially prevalent in the way that civilians think about the military & veteran community. A woman’s experience of caregiving will differ from a man’s. A transgender service member’s experience of deployment will differ from a cisgender person’s. A black woman serving on a Navy ship will have a different experience than a Latino man, who will have a different experience from a Muslim service member. Still, all of these individuals share the experience of serving, and upon reintegration, civilians often find it easier to view them through one lens. **Practicing art in welcoming and supporting environments is intersectional in nature. One cannot create without infusing the work with their individuality and their soul, and in that space we see each other more fully, for all of our identities and experiences.** For many in the military & veteran community, it is through art that they finally feel seen as their full self. In this way, the arts are the perfect avenue to celebrate, commemorate, and respect both our differences and our common humanity.

Best Practices

The arts are forgiving in a world that demands we categorize ourselves and put each aspect of our personality in a separate box. The veteran & military community requires methods that are forgiving so that individuals can explore and navigate their experiences while setting reintegration goals. **For this reason best practices are holistic, spiritual, and creative methods based on narrative, connectivity, trust, empowerment and movement.** They allow for tangible depictions of the human experience that can be explored through ritual and ceremony. Healing and connection in group settings is important because it parallels the military experience and for some, the traumatic events, but on the other side of the tunnel— the reparative side. Most psychological injuries cause people to feel lonely, disconnected and misunderstood. **Trauma is relational, so healing must be as well.** In “Trauma and Recovery” Judith Herman states, “Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connection with other people, the survivor re-creates

the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic operations of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy.”

Keep in mind that every member of the military & veteran community is different, and one person may require yoga while another may require mixed martial arts and yet another may require a drama program. As people access the practices that work best for them they begin setting and aligning goals into actions. This process of actualization is important to consider when working with the military & veteran community. Thoughts become words, which become actions, which become habits, which become character, which become legacy. Recovery and reintegration goals become life goals. Visualizations and creative representations make an individual’s hopes, fears and desires into tangible reference points.

In review, art is a tool for:

- Experiencing and holding emotions as a community thus creating social accountability.
- Deriving strength from others and finding purpose.
- Reflective mirroring and validation .
- Increasing self-awareness.
- Developing insight.
- Accessing traumatic material.
- Reforming inner landscape and reinterpreting life experiences.
- Decreasing feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- Increasing sense of community and healing.
- Redefining yourself and your environment.
- Being a part of something bigger than oneself.
- Experiencing reintegration processes through ritual.

Let’s discuss with one final notion that is critically important to most people— legacy. When asking a veteran why he or she joined the service, you will get a variety of different answers. Some will say because of their family, or for a political cause, because they wanted to contribute or serve, and many more reasons. Throughout the military & veteran community many identify with the idea of giving, serving and contributing, whether it developed during or after their service. When working with and engaging the military & veteran community consider the concept of legacy. For better or worse, it usually means something of significance and connects to a sense of fulfillment. The arts allow people to create and leave their imprint on the world, thus immortalizing their process and their identity through the artwork and its reception.

We will close with a brief story from US Navy veteran Donald A. Nicholson, who underwent a series of post-service struggles but ultimately found his way through them by using photography.

One of his photographs depicts footprints on the beach during a golden sunset, and is entitled *Footsteps* after a quote from author Mike A. Lancaster, included below.

“I think that's what we all want, in the end. To know that we left footprints when we passed by, however briefly. We want to be remembered. So remember us. Please. Remember us.”



Photograph courtesy of Donald A. Nicholson.