

A Salute to
Those Who Serve

Reiki and PTSD

Easing the Burdens of War

By Heather McCutcheon

A staggering number of American veterans are coming home from service with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), 228,875 of those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with the debilitating condition, and new cases are being recognized every day.¹ Practitioners from a variety of healing modalities feel called to help ease their burden and are increasingly being sought out by individuals, service groups, and the VA itself. Reiki is one of the modalities receiving increased attention, as it can alleviate symptoms for the afflicted and help ease the stranglehold PTSD has on their lives.

IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON THE HUMAN ENERGY FIELD

All branches of the US military spend time and money to prepare soldiers for combat, but it's impossible to be fully prepared for the uncertainty, fear, and trauma inherent in a combat mission. The threat this poses to the human psyche can have potentially devastating consequences over the long term, which in some cases, even surpass those of physical injuries.

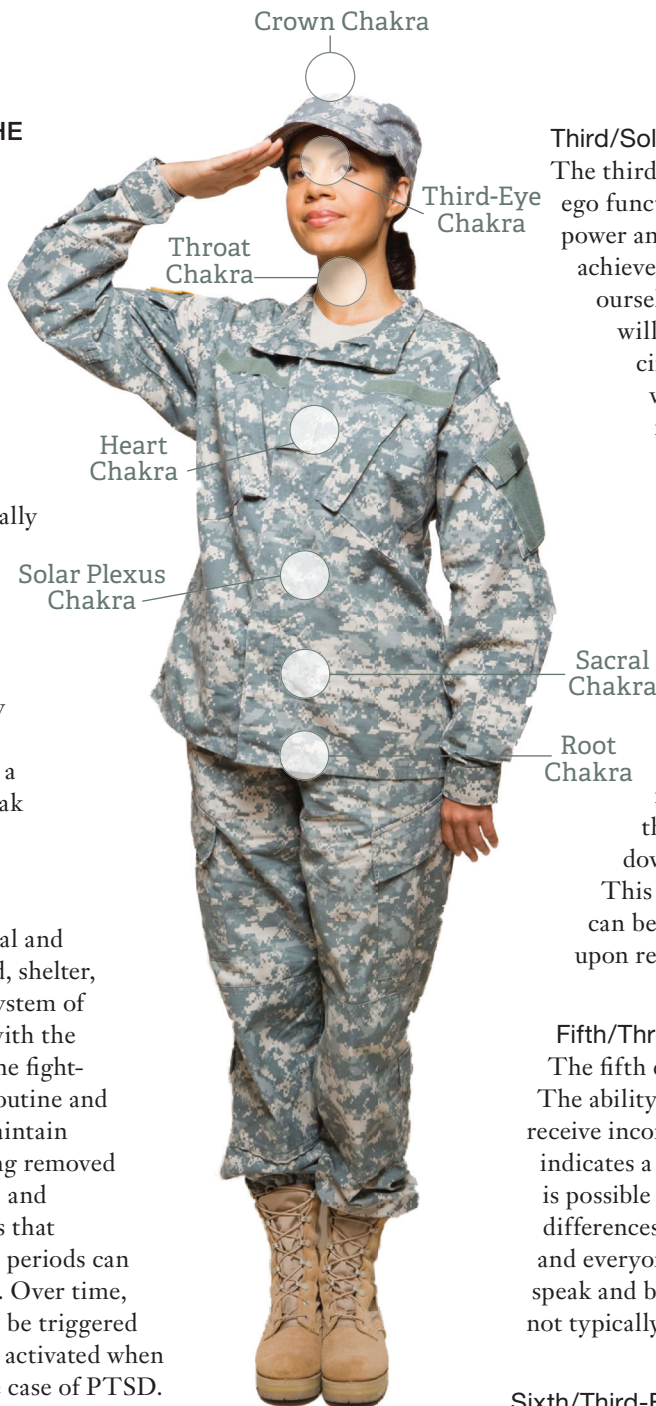
Physical, emotional, and psychological issues are directly tied to the human energy field. Following are some of the ways a traumatic tour of duty may wreak havoc on the chakra system.

First/Root Chakra

The first chakra governs survival and the basic necessities of life: food, shelter, clothing, and connection to a system of social support. It corresponds with the adrenal glands, which initiate the fight-or-flight response to threats. Routine and comfortable familiarity help maintain balance in the first chakra. Being removed from home, family, and friends, and taking part in violent exchanges that threaten survival over extended periods can be very injurious to this chakra. Over time, energetically stored trauma can be triggered and the fight-or-flight response activated when no actual threat exists, as in the case of PTSD.

Second/Sacral Chakra

The second chakra governs emotional well-being and the ability to seek out and enjoy pleasurable experiences such as food, positive social interactions, and intimacy. When emotions such as fear and sadness are repressed and pleasurable experiences are scarce, healthy energy flow via the second chakra can be disrupted or blocked. This may inhibit experiences of joy, even after the soldier has returned home.



Third/Solar Plexus Chakra

The third chakra governs sense of self and ego functions. It is the source of personal power and dictates our ability to set and achieve short- and long-term goals for ourselves. The inability to exert individual will and influence over one's own life circumstances, as is often the case within the hierarchy of military life, negatively impacts the third chakra.

Fourth/Heart Chakra

The fourth chakra governs love, trust, unity, and one's sense of connection with others. Soldiers often struggle with the concept of "us" and "them" in combat, and with following orders that result in the deaths of strangers. For members of the military to successfully function in these roles, this chakra must be shut down and barricaded.

This self-imposed blockage can be difficult to clear upon return to civilian life.

Fifth/Throat Chakra

The fifth chakra governs communication. The ability to freely express one's truth and receive incoming ideas without censure indicates a healthy fifth chakra. This is possible in an environment where differences of opinion are permitted and everyone has an opportunity to speak and be heard. That, however, is not typically the case in military situations.

Sixth/Third-Eye Chakra

The sixth chakra governs intellect and the ability to integrate and utilize tangible and intangible forms of information. This includes data collected via the five senses, as well as intuition or instinct. These sensory abilities may be heightened in life-or-death situations. Yet, the inability to respond to one's own intuition by escaping or seeking safety may create a disconnect from this valuable, inner GPS system.

Seventh/Crown Chakra

The seventh chakra is the portal to the higher self and life purpose. We each have our own unique path to follow, which can become most evident to us when the lower chakras are clear, strong, and functioning at optimal levels. When we are more concerned with survival or baser tasks, the fulfillment we might experience with an open crown chakra may not be available to us.

We store trauma in our bodies energetically, not only within our chakras, but all the way down to the cellular level. Because reiki helps balance and fortify energy fields while clearing energetic blocks, it can address issues similar to those mentioned here. Reiki helps restore the chakras back to a healthy, vital state and eases and even eliminates the symptoms of stored trauma.

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

According to the *Washington Post*, the number of military deaths due to suicide in 2012 surpassed that of deaths in combat.² In addition to depression and hopelessness, erratic behavior and the inability to recreate a productive life means the impact of PTSD reaches beyond individuals to their families, communities, and society as a whole.

The response from the VA has been a push to develop initiatives and protocols to bring veterans some relief, including energy healing modalities, massage, meditation, yoga, and other means of promoting relaxation. The VA estimated it would spend \$600 million in 2013 to treat PTSD,³ though programs are expanding beyond the VA to independent service centers created to meet the rapidly growing need.

USING REIKI TO REACH OUT

In early 2012, I contacted the Jesse Brown VA facility in Chicago to see how members of the Midwest Reiki Community could connect to veterans in need. I was invited to bring a group of practitioners to the next VA Stand Down, a service fair for homeless veterans that is held in locations across the country. These events offer food, shelter, clothing, health screenings, VA and Social Security benefits, counseling, an opportunity to reconnect with other veterans, and referrals to services such as health care, housing, employment, and substance abuse treatment.

During the first year volunteering at Stand Down, we had a difficult time selling people on reiki initially. As we offered demos to the crowd, we were met with a variety of responses ranging from “no thanks,” to winks and chuckles. Overseas, our troops are exposed to all manner of hands-on “services” and misconceptions were to be expected. I had

What is Reiki?

Reiki is a valuable addition to any massage therapist's toolbox. It is an energy healing modality in which the practitioner makes a flow of life-force energy—called *chi* or *prana* in other cultures—available to the recipient.

Everything is made of energy, so reiki is able to address healing on all levels: physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. Its noninvasive nature is what makes reiki a great resource for those suffering from PTSD.

The benefits of reiki are sometimes immediate and profound, and usually found to be cumulative over time. In addition to its ability to alleviate pain and stress and promote an overall sense of well-being in very little time, reiki has two unique features: it can be learned quickly by anyone, and it can be used as an effective means of self-healing on a daily basis, much like the practices of yoga or meditation. The first level of reiki training takes place over a one- or two-day

class, and children as young as 7 years old have attended reiki classes and gone on to offer reiki and its myriad benefits to others.

As awareness of its efficacy in reducing physical pain and anxiety grows, reiki is being increasingly incorporated into hospital treatment programs around the world, and the corresponding body of anecdotal and clinical data is mounting in its support.



Author Heather McCutcheon and other volunteers administer reiki to veterans during a VA Stand Down event.



Reiki for Vets with PTSD

The following guidelines can help inform you when working with PTSD clients.⁴

- Create a safe, relaxing environment.
- Be mindful of music (e.g., some Vietnam vets hold a negative connotation with Asian music).
- Veterans are usually grounded people, so keep explanations in simple terms and refrain from incorporating props that may detract from their experience, such as crystals or pendulums.
- Show respect by making eye contact and referring to veterans by name.
- Don't approach a client with PTSD from behind without announcing yourself—no surprises.
- Ask for permission to touch; hover in the energy field if it is preferred.
- PTSD clients may wish to keep their eyes open to feel in control.
- Use your intuition to follow the energy. In very traumatized individuals, the signals are not subtle.
- Be a good listener, but don't ask them to tell their story, as it may be retraumatizing.
- In the event issues come up for a PTSD client and they wish to talk it out, be able to refer to a talk therapist. Don't exceed your scope of practice.

You can see video recaps of the Jesse Brown VA Stand Down events and other outreach efforts on the author's blog at www.herestherub-llc.com.



advised all the volunteers to dress conservatively—despite the intense heat—to minimize confusion.

We persevered and soon signed up our first takers. One of these individuals was so moved by his session, he took it upon himself to stand guard near us and respond to the negative comments from passersby: “No, it ain't like that; you got to try this!”

And several of them did. Over the course of the day, the five volunteers were able to work on more than 20 veterans, most of whom were very grateful for the experience. Several walked away scratching their heads, unable to understand how they could feel so much more relaxed after just a few minutes of someone touching their head, shoulders, and chest.

After receiving an invitation to participate in the Stand Down event again in 2013, our group of volunteers was enthusiastically greeted at the venue by event staff and vets who remembered us from the previous year. There were very few inappropriate comments this time, and we were able to work on more than 90 veterans and VA volunteers over the course of two days.

At one point, the director of volunteer services approached us to ask, “What's happening out here? Everyone's talking about you guys!” That conversation led to an invitation to give a presentation to the Jesse Brown VA's Patient Centered Care committee, where I proposed a two-phase reiki service and training program for veterans, offering not only healing possibilities, but also job opportunities. I've received approval to implement phase one. It includes a large group of reiki volunteers providing 10-minute sessions to vets in the VA medical center several times a week, right alongside, and under the supervision of, the medical doctors and mental health professionals.

Gaining this approval was a long process. It involved background checks, and providing information about reiki training, outcomes, and liabilities to decision makers at the VA to inform new policies governing such a reiki volunteer program. Because these individuals needed to secure approval from VA leaders in Washington, DC, this conversation has had a much greater audience than I dared hope for in the early stages. It looks like we may be helping to pave the way for similar programs on a national scale.

As a result of these inroads, we also received an invitation to participate in the VA's Welcome Home event at Soldier Field in Chicago. The healing touch community had been asked to bring up to 50 energy healing practitioners to work on veterans

attending the event, and they offered the reiki community several of those spots. It was such an honor to be a part of this massive collaboration and witness hundreds of veterans being introduced to energy healing work throughout the day.

LESSONS LEARNED

As reiki volunteers continue to reach out to decision makers to gain acceptance for this modality, I hope they benefit from some of the lessons we've learned along the way.

Perseverance

It is within our power to overcome obstacles and elevate understanding and receptivity to our services through education—particularly by offering experiential opportunities. Energy healing modalities may not immediately resonate with those firmly rooted in the Western medical paradigm, but the more times they hear the same message coming from a wide variety of sources, the more readily they will come to understand what is being offered. Try not to become discouraged. Instead, delight in being part of this remarkable process.

Patience

Change may not happen overnight, but it will happen. Our collective efforts are shifting the way the public perceives complementary healing modalities and facilitating their integration into mainstream systems of physical and mental health care.

Going forward, I will personally continue to work to make reiki available to all veterans, soldiers, first responders of all kinds, and anyone holding trauma in their energy

fields. I would love to see reiki available in prisons and all manner of rehabilitative environments. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have all Peace Corps volunteers trained in reiki before they head out to their assignments, and have reiki practitioners dispatched in conjunction with the Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders? The value of the work is illustrated in this one simple quote from a grateful veteran who was basking in the calm that followed his 10-minute reiki session: "If we would have had this type of technology before we went to war, nobody would want to fight."

Now that's a goal we can all get behind. **m&b**

Notes

1. US Department of Veterans Affairs, "Report on VA Facility Specific Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) Veterans Coded with Potential PTSD," accessed September 2014, available at <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/551718/va-ptsd-report-september-2012.txt>.
2. Ernesto Londoño, "Military Suicides Rise to a Record 349, Topping Number of Troops Killed in Combat," accessed September 2014, available at www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/military-suicides-rise-to-a-record-349-topping-number-of-troops-killed-in-combat/2013/01/14/e604e6b4-5e8c-11e2-9940-6fc488f3fecdd_story.html.
3. Jaeah Lee, "Charts: Suicide, PTSD and the Psychological Toll on America's Vets," accessed September 2014, available at www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/01/charts-us-veterans-ptsd-war-iraq-afghanistan.
4. Kathie Lipinski, "Reiki and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," accessed September 2014, available at www.reikiwebstore.com/ProductPage.cfm?ProductID=668&CategoryID=39.

6 As a Reiki Master teacher, Heather McCutcheon is helping usher in the Age of Aquarius one class, one client, one session at a time. She can be reached at herestherub@gate.net.

Get Involved

If you are interested in offering reiki to veterans, get involved with your local VA Stand Down. Here's where you'll find the current schedule:

www.va.gov/homeless/events.asp. Once you have secured an invitation to an event where veterans will be gathered, these tips will help your event go smoothly:

- Recruit volunteers well in advance from within your local reiki community.

- Distribute information about PTSD to all volunteers in advance so they know what to expect (see Reiki for Vets with PTSD on page 68).
- Send out event reminders, including a map, recommended dress code, what to bring, and your contact information.
- At the event, use a sign or banner to attract attention and educate the crowd. (One veteran suggested our banner would be more

effective if it simply read, "Got PTSD? Try this!")

- Create a waiver/media release for all recipients to sign prior to their session.
- Provide handouts with information about reiki.
- Distribute stickers that say something like, "Ask me about my FREE reiki session."

