

Acupuncture for PTSD: Veterans are benefiting from free group treatments

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You could be forgiven if acupuncture is not the first thing that pops to mind for the treatment of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other emotional disorders. After all, the [Madison Veteran's Project](#), a free weekly acupuncture clinic for veterans and their families, has been flying pretty much under the radar for its nearly four years of operation.

Local acupuncturist Kelly Hora coordinates volunteer practitioners for the weekly clinic under the umbrella of [Acupuncturists Without Borders](#), a group that became active in 2005 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Using a protocol developed to balance the overactive nervous systems of recovering drug addicts and alcoholics, the AWB practitioners offered these treatments to Katrina's first responders. Reported benefits include increased calmness, along with a reduction of anxiety and improved mental clarity.

"Physical and emotional trauma affect the nervous system," Hora says, "so that even years after the original impact, the body can stay frozen with the nervous system on alert until some discharge of that held energy can occur." Acupuncture, she says, "helps create movement at the energetic level."

Offered to all veterans and their families, the free walk-in clinic is held every Thursday night in the community room of the Quarry Arts Building on Madison's near west side. Volunteer practitioners, all licensed acupuncturists, staff the clinic on a rotating schedule. Because the treatment protocol involves tiny needles inserted into reflex points on the ears, it can be offered community style - that is, with everyone together in one room.

The evening I visited, six people - one man and five women - arrived for the treatment. After a brief, friendly introduction, two acupuncturists quickly administered the ear protocol, checked to make sure everyone was comfortable, and then dimmed the lights. A few people took cushions from a pile stacked in a corner and sat or lay down to rest. The others remained in their chairs, eyes closed as if in meditation, while relaxing music of the sort you might hear at a massage played in the background.

After about 40 minutes, the acupuncturists turned up the lights and removed the needles. For those who wished, a small ear bead was placed on one of the points stimulated during the needle treatment - a point known to specifically address stress, anxiety and heightened sensitivity. Held by an adhesive, the bead is meant to extend the calming benefits of the treatment throughout the week.

Sam, who chose not to use his real name, is a Vietnam veteran who has been coming to the acupuncture clinic regularly for two years. He reports that after three or four months of these treatments, his mood levels, as measured by his psychiatrist at the VA, have significantly improved.

Sam, who had struggled for years with worsening flashbacks and physical pain, also uses

counseling, meditation and daily exercise to manage his PTSD symptoms. He credits the acupuncture treatments with helping him find the balance he needs to follow through on his self-care routine. In addition, he experiences fewer flashbacks and less pain since he began to attend the Madison Veteran's Project clinic.

Kelly Hora sees these treatments as "an effective tool that can work harmoniously with other treatment modalities such as counseling and medication." It helps that the actual cost is quite low compared to other forms of treatment: "The therapeutic effects happen quickly and can last a long time."

It helps, too, that the overhead cost of providing acupuncture treatments community-style can be a lot lower than with other forms of treatment. Aside from low cost, there are other benefits to group treatment. Hora says that it "creates a sense of community and commonality," and that the combined energy of the group enhances the effects of the treatments.

Madison acupuncturist Michael Killian agrees with Hora about the benefits of group treatment for a whole range of emotional and physical disorders. He has based his practice on it, allowing him to charge a sliding scale of \$15 to \$40 per treatment, as opposed to individual sessions of \$75 to \$150 at most acupuncture practices. Treatments at Madison Community Acupuncture are given in a community room - after a private consultation - using arm, leg and ear points so that clients do not need to undress.

"Acupuncture is a powerful healing system," Killian says, "well-suited to treating habituated emotions like anxiety and depression."

He points out that Chinese medicine has never seen a separation between mind and body, a concept that Western medicine seems finally to be catching up to. "While pharmaceuticals are amazing in what they can do," he says, "taking pills for your whole life is not a palatable solution for many of us."

That acupuncture is being made more widely available as a free or affordable service is one more sign that it has come of age in the West as a valuable tool in the healing of trauma, stress and emotional imbalances.

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"We know plenty of veterans, Vietnam vets were all around during college," says Liz. She says they were often struggling with

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