The Impact of Veterans Perception of Therapist Empathy on Continuation in Treatment: A Research Proposal

Christine Allen
Jackson State University
April 23, 2015
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is defined as a complex and serious disorder affecting veterans from every conflict.

- Causes of the symptoms of PTSD are the experiencing or witnessing of a stressor event involving death, serious injury or such threat to self or others in a situation in which the individual felt intense fear, horror, or powerlessness.
Symptoms of PTSD

- Intrusion symptoms
- Avoidance of stimuli
- Marked alterations in arousal
- Negative cognitions
Critical Issues

- Employment
- Relationship Conflicts
- Emotional Instability
- Parent/Child Relationship
Veterans struggling with symptoms of PTSD often deal with the following:

- Anxiety
- Shame
- Guilt
- Anger
- Depression
The aim of this study is to explore the use of empathy as a tool with veterans diagnosed with PTSD and its relevance to duration of treatment.
This study will examine the participants point of view of how empathy can impact continuation of therapy; facilitate interaction; and enhance treatment outcome at the individual level.
The review of literature revealed limited empirical data regarding the affect of empathy when treating military veterans.
One study discussed the problems faced by veterans during readjustment from active duty to civilian life. Another study described a military social work course that was developed to increase student preparedness to work with a military or veteran population and the learning outcomes achieved.
Alexandra Bachelor (1988) attempted to provide a clearer conceptualization of "received" empathy by examining how clients actually perceive therapist empathy and what constitutes an empathic response from the client’s perspective.
Empathy is defined as “the skill with which the therapist is able to understand and communicate the client’s inner being” (Truax & Carkhuff, 1965) and as “the ability to recognize, sense, and to associate with his behavioral and verbal expressions, and to accurately communicate this understanding to him” (Carkhuff, 1971).
Veterans who perceive the therapist as empathic are more likely to continue in therapy. The use of trauma focused therapies such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Cognitive Processing Therapy, and/or Prolonged Exposure has shown reductions in PTSD symptoms.
Hypotheses: (1) Veteran’s perception of therapist empathy will impact veteran’s continuation in treatment, and (2) duration in treatment will contribute to more effective treatment.
Methods to be used

Data will be collected from veterans 18 years and older with PTSD; receiving treatment in the outpatient Trauma Recovery Program and Evidenced Based Program at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi.
The researcher will employ a Mixed-Method study to explain participants' point of view of how empathy can impact treatment outcome at the individual level.
CARE: Consultation and Relational Empathy Questionnaire
10 questions, five responses ranging from poor to excellent
5 face-to-face interviews
Sample will be identified from referrals to outpatient Trauma Recovery and Evidenced Based Program.
This study will improve the knowledge gap; examine the importance of empathy on continuation of therapy; and impact of duration of treatment on veterans employment, emotional stabilization, and level of social adjustment.