

Nicholas P. Jelacic
546 N. 67th. St.
Wauwatosa, WI 53213

Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs
Division of Veterans Benefits
201 West Washington Avenue
Madison, WI 53707

2nd September 2018

To Whom It May Concern,

PTSD in veterans is a difficult topic to discuss, and an even more difficult topic to understand. Every veteran's situation is different, and every veteran deals with it in various ways. Some have it worse than others, and some aren't even aware that they have it. The traditional Cognitive Behavioral Therapies include Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) and Prolonged Exposure (PE) therapy. Both of these therapies involve the veteran gradually re-living their trauma, and discussing it. The issue with these therapies is actually getting the veterans to participate. The stigma our society places on PTSD is a major issue that prevents many of the veterans I have worked with from seeking out such therapies. Additionally, medications can be used as management for PTSD. These medicines can produce a vast array of side effects. When I have asked veterans why they do not like the prescription medication route of therapy, their immediate response is that, "It isn't that simple", and the medications make them feel like they are not themselves.

At the Medical College of Wisconsin, I was the president of the Military Medical Student Association. We held multiple events that brought community veterans together, many that have PTSD. An issue that we discussed every year was the issue of their medical care after they return home. One amazing veteran told us that he went to see a Psychiatrist and was immediately diagnosed with PTSD and sent home with a medication. Two weeks later, he tried to kill himself. Clearly, there is not one best therapy for PTSD. This story set me on the path of seeking out alternative therapies that veterans could use.

During the summer between my first and second years, I did research with the VA studying alternative therapies for PTSD patients. A main part of the study was to seek out what veterans are struggling with or missing in their daily routine to actually overcome their symptoms or fears. Some of the things I learned that veterans lack included a lack of the sense of ownership, a lack of self-confidence, a lack of the sense of freedom, and the lack of unconditional love. Overseas, veterans owned what they were doing. They knew their weapon inside and out, and they knew that if they did not complete their job, lives would be at risk. They had to OWN this, they had to bear this weight on their shoulders, and they did a damn good job at doing it. When they return, they don't have this job anymore, they don't have the ownership of a task, and some are left feeling like they cannot contribute to society. Additionally, the brotherhood mentality that is deeply engrained in the military culture is also a characteristic of military life that most veterans struggle with. There isn't this sense of unconditional love back home, every one in their unit is gone. They feel judged by the ones around them, and miss the

military culture where they used to be able to talk to their units like they were more than family.

While discussing complementary and alternative therapies with a group of veterans that I meet with regularly, a common theme that I found with all of them was a love and passion for the great outdoors. They were telling me whether it was fishing, hiking, kayaking, or simply sitting in the outdoors, it all made them feel more at ease with their PTSD. They didn't have to worry about large crowds, or the fear being judged, they just had to live in that moment. The problem was that only one of those veterans had found a veteran group to participate in that shared their interest for the outdoors. That night, I went home and started researching outdoor therapy groups for my veteran friends and colleagues to get involved with, and my search led me to Wisconsin Hero Outdoors.

What Wisconsin Hero Outdoors does, is that they help connect Veterans and First Responders to outdoor activities in Wisconsin. They support existing 501c3 organizations, as well as sponsor the creation of new organizations that have a focus on outdoor activities. Some of the organizations that they are involved with have focuses on Hunting, Kayaking, Equestrian Therapy, and Biking, to name a few. What Wisconsin Hero Outdoors is doing, is that it provides the resources, and serves as a catalyst, for multiple organizations in Wisconsin to ultimately provide their services to a broad demographic of veterans and first responders.

After learning about Wisconsin Hero Outdoors, I decided to attend a kayak fishing outing with one of the organizations that they supported. It was a cool brisk morning off the shores of Lake Michigan when we left land. There were five veterans, and myself, and I immediately realized that all of these veterans were very close to one another. The relationships they had made, similar to the ones experienced over seas, was that unconditional love that I found so many veterans longing for. They can let themselves go, relax, and not worry about the troubles that may be affecting them back home. After speaking with the five veterans, they told be stories about how their lives were changed after finding individuals that shared not only their love for the outdoors, but also shared a past that no common man or woman could understand.

Through my research and first hand experiences, I am confident that complementary and alternative therapy groups, such as the ones Wisconsin Hero Outdoors sponsors, really do help veterans. Wisconsin Hero Outdoors is bridging the gap between these organizations and veterans by providing the resources for them to cast a wider net to reach more individuals, and to ultimately provide outdoor services to all veterans that are interested.

Sincerely,

Nicholas P. Jelacic, 2d Lt, USAF
Medical College of Wisconsin
MD Candidate, Class of 2019