



COULD *adventure* BE PART OF YOUR JOURNEY TO *recovery?*

The Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation investigates the role adventure therapy programs can play in improving the health and wellbeing of former service personnel.

FOR many, part of the appeal of military service is the opportunity for adventure. You get to see the world, push your physical and mental limits and perform out-of-the ordinary tasks while forming strong bonds of mateship. When your service ends, the series of adrenalin-pumping experiences you've become accustomed to can often end abruptly as well. But how do you 'flick off the switch' and go back to normal life?

In partnership with RSL Queensland, the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation (GMRF) is committed to enhancing the health and wellbeing of our veterans and their families. We do this through innovative medical research. We have conducted research that has provided evidence on the physical toll of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), we're researching innovative ways of addressing the rising issue of

liver cancer, and we're trialling novel treatments for a range of serious illnesses.

Research not only has the potential to expand our knowledge and improve treatment options, it can also be vital in providing evidence and appraisal of existing therapies. There is an ever-increasing number of ex-service organisations providing services and support programs to veterans and their families. While you just have to talk to a participant to see the benefits, we believe conducting independent research and analysis of these therapies can enhance the benefit they provide.

Research Coordinator Rebecca Theal, from the GMRF Veteran Mental Health Initiative, recently conducted a comprehensive literature review of 26 studies relating to adventure therapy programs for military veterans. The review aimed to collate current peer-reviewed literature and identify themes relating to the benefits of adventure

BENEFITS OF ADVENTURE THERAPY

The literature review identified several reported benefits for veterans participating in adventure therapy, including:

- Positive peer experience (common theme in all qualitative studies);
- Increased confidence (common theme in most qualitative studies);
- Improved outlook on future (common theme described throughout qualitative studies);
- Reduction in depression symptoms (five studies);
- Reduction of PTSD symptoms (four studies);
- Reduced reliance on alcohol and other negative coping behaviours (one study).



therapy for current and former service personnel.

“Past literature reviews on adventure therapy have predominantly focused on children and adolescents,” Rebecca said. “We wanted to specifically review programs for veterans. There has been an increasing number of these types of programs, and we wanted to be able to identify empirical evidence on the impact they are having.”

Adventure therapy is the use of adventure-based activities, such as kayaking, camping and sailing, to provide people who have emotional and/or behavioural problems with experiences that lead to positive changes in their lives. The key elements of adventure therapy often include interaction with nature, a group-based environment and discussions or group therapy, which may or may not be facilitated by mental health professionals.

As part of other studies conducted by our PTSD and Veteran Mental Health Initiatives, we have had some veterans comment that civilian society can feel boring or mundane compared to their military experience.

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“Adventure therapy may be particularly beneficial for a military population due to parallels to military training, physicality and camaraderie,” Rebecca said.

While the organised programs reportedly provided a secure and structured environment, the review also highlights the potential benefit of being outdoors in general. Being outside gave participants the opportunity to connect with nature in a relaxing or peaceful environment. Additionally, being away from normal distractions gave participants time to process thoughts and emotions.

“There is a lot of research out there that suggests being outdoors is beneficial to your mental health,” Rebecca said.

However, in many cases, it is not as simple as telling a veteran to ‘get outside’. As we learned during our PTSD research, some veterans struggle to even walk out their front door. A common symptom of PTSD is hypervigilance, or being constantly on the lookout. Such a heightened sense of awareness can be useful in a military

setting, but potentially debilitating in a civilian one.

“Veterans with PTSD may avoid situations where they do not feel like they are in full control. They might struggle being around large crowds or they may avoid leaving the house altogether. There can also be reluctance to seek psychological treatment,” Rebecca says.

Adventure therapy can offer support, while potentially providing a step towards psychological treatment. Findings of the literature review indicated that across multiple studies, veterans highlighted the value of mateship in the activities they participated in and a sense of camaraderie similar to military service. The studies included in the review indicated that participants felt the programs provided a stigma-free environment where they could share a familiar experience with people who understand what they’ve been through.

Overall, adventure therapy may be a beneficial option for veterans, in addition to traditional psychological treatments, but more research is required. Findings of the review demonstrated commonly reported benefits of adventure therapy, including social connection and reconnection, skills building and positive perception of the future.

By engaging in adventure therapies, participants reported gaining a sense of confidence in their ability to overcome difficulties. With clearly defined activities, veterans felt a sense of accomplishment for a ‘job well done’, as they responded to both physical and emotional challenges in a controlled environment. Participants in this review commonly reported renewed motivation to go home and make improvements in their lives.

Some studies also reported perceived benefits such as reduction in depression, increased confidence, reduced reliance on alcohol and other negative coping behaviours, and a new hope for improved health.

The current literature demonstrates some promising trends, however more

research on adventure therapies for veterans is needed, as the current evidence has a number of limitations that prevents clear recommendations. From Rebecca’s research, there is indication that some of the reported benefits may be short term, and it is therefore important to look at the longer-term impact of these therapies.

“Our hope is that this review and other similar studies will provide a framework of evidence to qualify the benefit of these programs,” Rebecca said.

Before programs can be recommended, they need to demonstrate consistent and long-term positive outcomes. As well as this review, GMRF has been working with RSL Queensland to evaluate other adventure related programs and non-adventure programs such as equine-assisted therapy.

For more information, phone 07 3394 7294 or visit www.gallipoliresearch.com.au. If you are interested in getting involved in an adventure therapy program, please contact RSL Queensland on 134 RSL. ←



Rebecca Theal is a Research Coordinator in GMRF’s Veteran Mental Health Initiative. She graduated with Honours from the University of Guelph in Biomedical Toxicology and is completing her Master’s in Experimental Medicine with McGill University. Rebecca’s current research interests include veteran mental and physical health, physical activity and nutritional health.