



# Researching THE HEALING POWER OF COMPASSION



New research at Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation will explore the science of compassion and the role it might play in the recovery of returned service personnel struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder.

**RIGHT** now, doctors and scientists at the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation (GMRF) are developing and testing new treatments and interventions for a range of serious illnesses impacting our veteran community. These are cutting-edge, innovative treatments, but they don't always come in the form you might expect. This is certainly the case for one of our latest studies exploring the therapeutic benefits of compassion.

When you think of compassion, it may be in terms of a vague concept of kindness or caring, but there is growing evidence to suggest there is significantly more science behind this powerful emotion. While everyone may have a differing understanding of what compassion is, in the context of therapy it is considered to be the sensitivity to suffering in self and others, with a commitment to alleviating and preventing it.

Thanks to Medibank's 'Mental Health & Wellbeing Fund', researchers at GMRF are exploring the science of compassion by working on improving the adaptive coping skills of returned service personnel struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Feelings of shame and self-criticism can be common among former service personnel, as they struggle to reconcile deployment experiences. When compounded with PTSD, the effects can be devastating. Shame has been proposed as a significant contributing factor in suicide risk for this group.

The GMRF Veteran Mental Health Research Unit will trial the use of Compassionate Mind Training for veterans and their partners in what will be the first study of this approach to involve partners of our ex-service population. Compassionate Mind Training is a skills building off-shoot of Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT), which was developed specifically for individuals with high levels of shame and self-criticism, and has been used successfully to reduce distress symptoms in a variety of psychological and medical conditions. It has also been shown to have protective benefits, such as increased acceptance of self and others, and self-soothing following trauma exposure.

Measurements of life satisfaction, happiness and immune functioning are some of the indicators of wellbeing shown to increase following CFT.

GMRF clinical psychologist and project researcher Dr Sarah Hampton is investigating whether quality of life, relationship satisfaction, PTSD symptom severity and psychological distress symptoms will improve as a result of participating in the pilot study. Groups will participate in two sessions per week for six weeks, learning strategies to calm highly charged emotions and to more strongly engage feelings of warmth and self-reassurance. During the sessions, Dr Hampton says participants will learn ways to work with potential feelings of guilt and shame with compassion.

"Practising compassion towards

oneself is particularly effective because the veteran may feel they do not deserve self-care or kindness and this can be a significant block to PTSD recovery. There is increasing evidence that compassionate behaviours, such as the giving and receiving of affection, kindness and care, stimulates feelings of warmth, calmness and contentment, which can naturally help regulate difficult emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, stress and shame."

"We want to cultivate an attitude in veterans that says, 'I'm worthy of compassion,'" Dr Hampton says.

While the concept of compassion can be vague, the Compassionate Mind Training program certainly is not. The program includes evidenced-based techniques and strategies grounded within Professor Paul Gilbert's CFT framework, which uses compassion as an integral part of rehabilitation. Participants of the program will be educated on the three primary emotion systems: threat, drive and soothing.

- Threat System – Directs our attention to threatening situations and motivates us to engage in a response that will protect us. This system is linked to a variety of physiological changes in our brain and body that prepare us to take action. Undoubtedly, this system plays a crucial role for our Defence Force personnel in the duties they perform.
- Drive System – Evokes feelings such as excitement, joy and anticipation to help and energise us to pay attention to and pursue resources and opportunities.
- Soothing System – Provides a source of safety and reassurance, and directs our mind to recuperate from the threat and drive systems. The ability to rest and digest can help balance the otherwise dominant role that the threat and drive systems would play in our lives. Soothing is also related to a part of our nervous system that regulates and calms our threat systems.

Herein lies the issue for many

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Principal investigator of the study,  
Dr Madeline Romaniuk.

GMRF clinical psychologist and project  
researcher Dr Sarah Hampton.



ex-service personnel. During deployment, the threat system has been running at a heightened state for an extended period. The soothing system, on the other hand, is often not activated frequently enough to maintain balance. The evidence on which CFT is based suggests that receiving care, affection and support not only stimulates the soothing system, but also plays a role in down-regulating the threat system.

Another crucial feature of the GMRF pilot study is the involvement of partners of ex-serving personnel who themselves report high rates of mental health challenges. From her clinical experience, Dr Hampton has seen several veterans who, while they may be reluctant to seek professional help, have a strong desire to learn more ways to connect emotionally with their partners to improve their relationships.

“Partners undertaking therapy together learn a common language and strategies, they hold each other accountable and help each other when the treatment has finished. Our veteran/partner groups will be learning compassionate communication, such as expressing appreciation, asking for what we need and responding to criticism.”

Principal investigator of the study, Dr Madeline Romaniuk, wanted to bring together research and practice when developing this project. She noticed the lack of interventions aimed at both veterans and partners available in current clinical practice, despite scientific evidence demonstrating that partner involvement in mental health treatment leads to greater outcomes.

“It is very hard to change old habits or implement meaningful changes in your life if your other half is not on the same page. We want to give veterans and their partners the opportunity to learn and develop adaptive and healthy ways to manage difficult emotions, behaviours and communication patterns together.”

As researchers unpick the complexity of PTSD and associated psychological scars of war, programs that increase the participants’ understanding of their reactions to trauma and strengthen their sense of self-worth have shown to have a compounding effect on wellbeing.

“The potential benefits of compassion-based therapies are well documented, and yet there has been very little research done in the veteran space, until now.” Dr Romaniuk says.

**For more information about this study, visit [www.gallipoliresearch.com.au](http://www.gallipoliresearch.com.au)**



## COMPASSIONATE MIND TRAINING

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS:

Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation



Veteran Mental Health Initiative

Research to restore lives

This project is sponsored by

Medibank's Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund

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VETERANS AND THEIR PARTNERS

## COMPASSIONATE MIND TRAINING: PILOT STUDY

GMRF has launched its latest study investigating Compassionate Mind Training for ex-service personnel and their partners.

They are seeking couples willing to attend 12 sessions of Compassionate Mind Training within a small group. The training will occur twice a week for six weeks and each session will be two hours in length. The program will be held at Greenslopes Private Hospital in Brisbane. Participants will also be asked to complete 11 questionnaires on three occasions to help determine if this training improves compassion, psychological symptoms, general wellbeing and relationship wellbeing.

To be eligible for participation, you are required to:

- Be ex-service personnel with a current partner;
- Have a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder;
- Be able to attend the training sessions with your partner.

GMRF is unable to offer you a place in the study if you are currently hospitalised for a psychological condition or currently engaged in another group therapy program. There will be no costs or reimbursement associated with participation.

To find out more about the training, or to register your interest, please visit [bit.ly/GMRF-CTU](http://bit.ly/GMRF-CTU). Alternatively, you can contact the study coordinator, Dr Sarah Hampton, on 07 3394 7916 or via [hamptons@ramsayhealth.com.au](mailto:hamptons@ramsayhealth.com.au).