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Pentagon researches alternative treatments

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon is seeking new ways to treat troops suffering from combat stress or brain damage by researching such alternative methods as acupuncture, meditation, yoga and the use of animals as therapy, military officials said.

"This new theme is a big departure for our cautious culture," Dr. S. Ward Casscells, the Pentagon's assistant secretary for health affairs, told USA TODAY.

Casscells said he pushed hard for the new research, because "we are struggling with" post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) "as we are with suicide and we are increasingly willing to take a hard look at even soft therapies."

So far this year, the Pentagon is spending \$5 million to study the therapies. In the previous two years, the Pentagon had not spent any money on similar research, records show.

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About 300,000 Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans suffer from PTSD or major depression, and about 320,000 may have experienced at least a mild concussion or brain injury in combat, according to a RAND Corp. study released this year.

The Army reported a record 115 suicides last year, and suicides this year are at a rate that may exceed that, said Col. Eddie Stephens, the Army's deputy director for human resources policy. The Department of Veterans Affairs reported last month that suicides among Iraq- and Afghanistan-era veterans from all services reached a record high of 113 in 2006, the latest year for which there were figures.

Some military hospitals and installations already use alternative therapies, such as acupuncture as stress relievers for patients. The research will see whether the alternatives work so the Pentagon can use them more, said Army Brig. Gen. Loree Sutton, head of the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury. Many of the treatments have been used for centuries, Sutton said, "so it just makes sense to bring all potential therapies to bear."

Her office issued a request for research proposals this year on therapies ranging from art and dance, to the ancient Chinese healing art of *qigong* or a therapy of hands-on touching known as Reiki.

Sutton's office narrowed a list of 82 proposals to about 10 projects this year, and research should begin, with servicemembers as subjects in some cases, in the next few months, said Col. Karl Friedl, head of the Army's Telemedicine and Advanced Technology Research Center, which oversees the work.

Friedl said research will include how meditation can improve emotional resilience; how holding and petting an animal can treat PTSD and how acupuncture pain relief can relieve headaches created by mild brain damage from blasts.

"We want to add everything we can to our tool kit" for these injuries, said Col. Elspeth Ritchie, an Army psychiatrist.

Some soldiers who suffer from PTSD are reluctant to share their experiences in traditional psychiatric therapy, said Col. Charles Engel, an Army psychiatric epidemiologist. He said those soldiers may be more willing to use acupuncture and other alternatives if they are effective.

Initial research this summer with combat veterans showed that acupuncture relieved PTSD symptoms and eased pain and depression, Engel said. "Improvements were relatively rapid and clinically significant," he said.

About one third of sailors and Marines use some types of alternative therapies, mostly herbal remedies, according to a survey conducted last year. A recent Army study shows that one in four soldiers with combat-caused PTSD turned to herbs, chiropractors, acupuncture or megavitamins for relief.

Although the Pentagon's study of alternative medicine for combat diseases is unique, research into such therapies for broad public use is not new, said Richard Nahin, a senior adviser for the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. The NIH spends about \$300 million a year on similar research.



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