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Oklahoma therapists get training to help soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder

The leader of the Oklahoma National Guard wants a network of trained professionals in place when soldiers return from Afghanistan following a deployment next year.

BY BRYAN DEAN [Leave a comment](#)

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The soldier in E.C. Hurley's office couldn't sit in his chair for more than two minutes without getting up and pacing.

Hurley, a licensed clinician who often treated soldiers, didn't know what to do to help the man with his post-traumatic stress. So he turned to Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, or EMDR, a psychotherapy method that helps those with traumatic stress learn to treat painful memories like any other event in their lives.

Hurley, who now trains others in the method, was in Oklahoma City Friday teaching a few dozen therapists from across the state how to use the method. The training was organized and sponsored by the Oklahoma National Guard and Veterans Families United, a local nonprofit.

There are several accepted therapy approaches for treating post-traumatic stress, but Hurley and many others attending Friday's training said they are enthusiastic about EMDR for one main reason — it works.

"What drove me with desperation to learn about EMDR was that nothing I had in my toolbox worked," Hurley said. "The soldiers would come in and sit down and they were so hypervigilant. They would jump up ranting, raving, irritable, blaming everyone."

The soldier who couldn't sit was the first Hurley treated with EMDR. Progress was quick after two sessions in the first week. Before the third session, Hurley experienced a first in his time as a therapist.

"I went out to meet him and his wife was there," Hurley said. "She said 'I just want to stop by and thank you. I don't know what you are doing with him, but it's working. I have him back.'"

Why others attend training

Stories like that are what motivated Cindy Washington to drive to Oklahoma City for the training. Washington is a licensed clinician with the student counseling center at Oklahoma State University. She sees an increased number of students who have deployed with the military and experienced post-traumatic stress, but the treatment

can be used to help any student who has had a traumatic event, including abuse or the death of a friend or loved one.

"When you are talking to someone in therapy who is dealing with trauma, there is so little that works to help that person quickly," Washington said. "It's such a long process. This doesn't just work quickly. It's effective. The research has shown it over and over again."

Maj. Gen. Myles Deering, adjutant general of the Oklahoma National Guard, said there is an unprecedented need for counselors trained to help soldiers with post-traumatic stress.

The guard is set to deploy about 3,400 soldiers with the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team to Afghanistan next year. Hundreds more from the Army and Air National Guard are also set to deploy to various locations in southwest Asia.

Studies have shown 10 to 20 percent of service members deployed to combat areas experience combat stress after they return.

"If 10 percent of those come back with some PTSD issues, that's over 400 in the state," Deering said. "I want to mitigate those issues."

Although returning service members are screened for mental health after they deploy, it can often take months for symptoms of post-traumatic stress to develop. By that time, guardsmen are usually back in their civilian jobs, which can be in hometowns a long way from any help the guard could offer.

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