



**Pyramid**  **Military Therapy  
& Recovery Programs**  
UNDERSTANDING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED

# Understanding & Treating Substance Use Disorders in the Veteran Population



# Understanding Substance Use Disorder Treatment Needs of Our Veterans

In order to successfully treat any population, you must be able to understand their individualized needs.

- Complex needs call for a more intensive approach to treatment
- Drastic differences in life/deployment experiences necessitate a more individualized approach to treatment
- Evidence-based treatment modalities specific to the population are needed
- Complex physical and mental health needs require stabilization
- Those who have been exposed to combat have higher rates of co-morbidities that must be stabilized and addressed





# Barriers to SUD Treatment for Veteran Population

## Extensive Trauma History

Before, during, and after enlistment, the veteran population is subject to traumatic experiences oftentimes at a much higher rate than the civilian population. Additionally, their specific traumas can often be specific to their individual circumstances. This type of trauma can make it difficult for veterans to feel others are able to understand and relate to their experiences.

## Emotional Dysregulation

Veterans are often required to regulate their emotions in high-pressure situations in order to be successful in their job. Long term, these behaviors will result in a disconnect in normative emotions and behaviors that can impact the veteran's ability to express emotions in a healthy manner.

## Moral Injurious Events

These are situations that are perceived to violate an important moral value in a high-stakes context. Moral injury stems from moral pain. These types of events create difficulties for individuals to process past traumatic experiences and progress in their treatment.



# Moral Injury

What is Moral Injury (Evans et al., 2020): a moral injurious event is a situation that is perceived to violate an important moral value in a high-stakes context. Moral injury stems from moral pain.

## Examples may include:

- Something you have done or failed to do
- Something that someone else has done or failed to do, to you or for you
- Something you have witnessed
- Something you learned about after it happened

## Warzone examples (Borges, 2019):

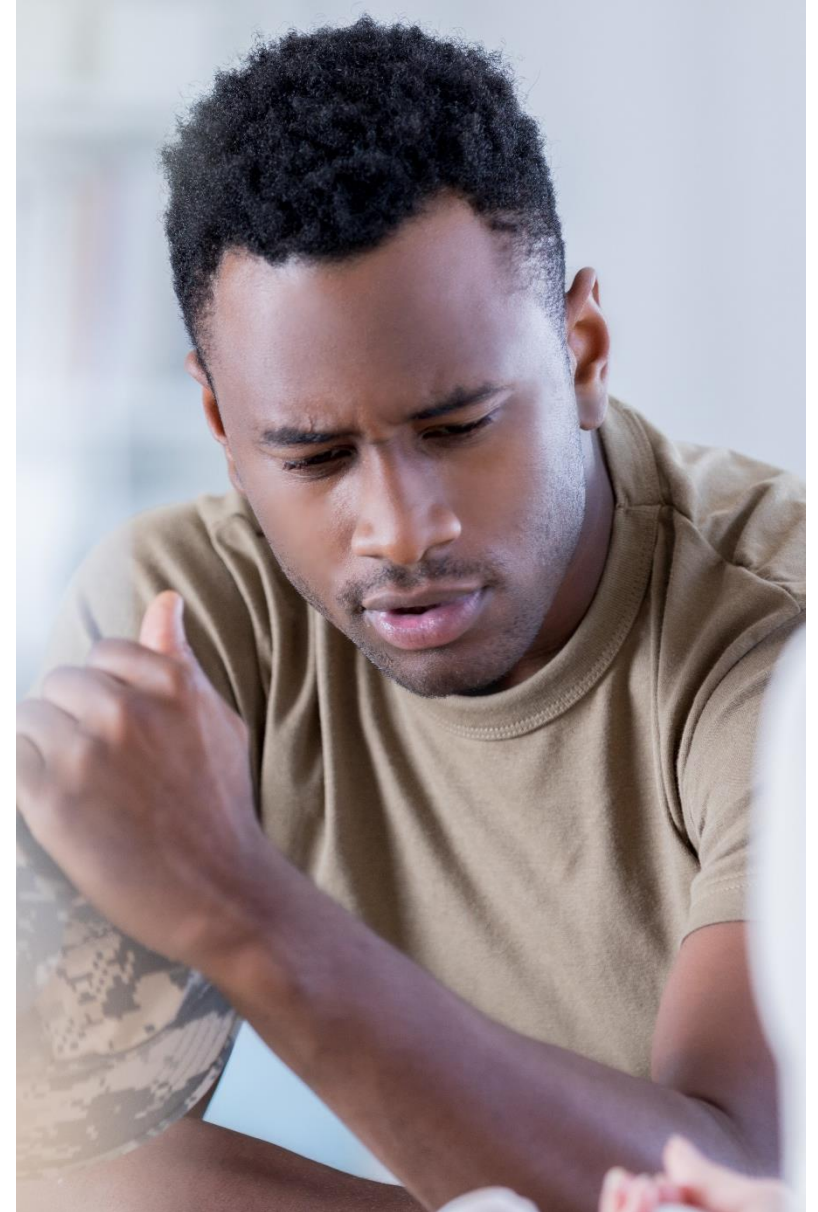
- Killing an innocent person in war
- Witnessing a moral atrocity & not intervening
- Violating rules of engagement
- Killing a child
- Betrayal by once trusted leaders
- Betrayal by fellow service members



# Treating Moral Injury

Acceptance of moral pain is often the pathway to values that can redirect suffering towards valued living and well-being.

Treatment interventions emphasize the need for expansion into moral pain as a way to transcend individual experience and redefine engagement with the world in the present moment.





# Treatment Best Practices

Development of a successful substance use disorder program for veterans and military personnel is a complex, multifaceted process that must emphasize structure and modular based intervention through a CBT-based treatment approach (CBT, ACT, DBT).

Additionally, it should have multiple clinical points of focus:

- ACT
- Phase One Stabilization
- Psychophysiological Approach

# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is an action-oriented approach to psychotherapy that stems from traditional behavior therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

“Clients learn to stop avoiding, denying, and struggling with their inner emotions and, instead, accept that these deeper feelings are appropriate responses to certain situations that should not prevent them from moving forward in their lives” (Evans, 2007).

- ACT is based on individualized flexibility within a process-based structure.
- ACT is evidence-based for the non-military population as well which allows for addressing pre-existing conditions and does not rely on population-specific outcomes.



# Phase One Trauma Process and Stabilization



## Safety

Often clients are unable to experience safety and are 'stuck' in defense against internal and external threats. Substance use and maladaptive behaviors serve the purpose of self-protection and avoidance of threats.



## Regulation

Developing the capacity for containment, reattunement, and flexibility processes (ACT) is required for trauma treatment and is the initial focus of treatment planning.



## Dissociation

The goal is to reduce the amount of dissociation for the client and increase the client's ability to reattune to the present moment. Mindfulness techniques and present moment awareness allow for the use of regulation skills and behavioral strategies that are in accordance with clients' values.



## Realization

Acceptance and willingness processes are important to treatment planning for clients. Reduction in unproductive avoidance strategies (i.e. substance use, creating conflict in relationships, shifting focus away from challenges) all contribute to clients' suffering and inability to function.





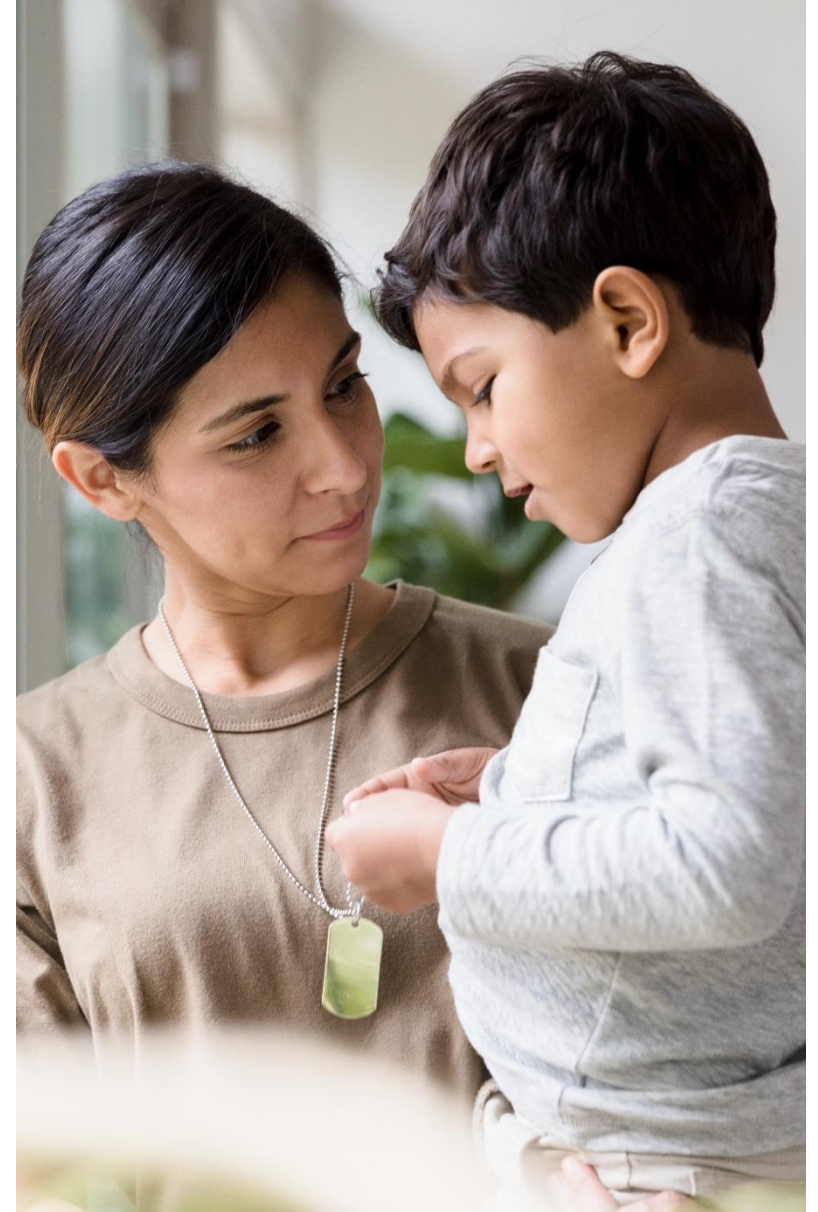
## Psychophysiological Approach

In addition to the ACT flexibility processes and the phase one stabilization goals, the veterans and military personnel program includes a specific treatment focus on increases of internal awareness and client's sense of safety through the clinical application of Polyvagal Theory.

“Polyvagal Theory provides a physiological and psychological understanding of how and why clients move through the continual cycle of mobilization, disconnection, and engagement. Through Polyvagal Theory, we see the role of the autonomic nervous system as it shapes clients' experiences of safety and affects their ability for connection” (Dana, 2018).

# Approach to Treatment

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Phase One Trauma Stabilization, and clinical applications of Polyvagal Theory provide clients with skills to focus on increases in the window of flexibility and containment skills, increases in understanding of internal and external safety, the establishment of a value based daily routine, and increases in mindfulness skills.





## **Our Approach to SUD Treatment for the Veteran Population**

Our program is an ACT, trauma-focused, mindfulness-based approach that provides clients with the traditional benefits of SUD treatment with added opportunities for positive shifts in well-being, life satisfaction, and valued living.

### **Process-Based Therapy**

(CBT, ACT, DBT, PE) structured, individualized (transdiagnostic - diagnostic heterogeneity); process-based on core themes in veteran/military clinical population: emotional dysregulation, suicidal ideation, and interpersonal issues.

### **Trauma-Focused Programming**

Phase One, ACT, Polyvagal Theory: goals of symptom reduction, ability to function across life domains, developing skills for containment and reattunement, establishing a sense of safety, and preparing for therapeutic work in aftercare.

# Program Highlights

- Process-Based Therapy
- Structure & Individualization
- Individual Psychotherapy
- Family Therapy
- Psychotherapeutic Process Group
- Peer Support Services
- Holistic & Alternative Treatment Services





## Our Approach

We have to treat the whole person and not just behavior.

Individuals are complex and more than their behaviors.

Phase One Trauma Stabilization is an evidence-based approach for the treatment of trauma and related conditions. It is the standard of care to utilize an evidence-based, phase-oriented approach for the treatment of trauma for clients.

# Program Specifics

## Core Treatment Services

- Psychiatric Evaluation and Stabilization
- Medication Management
- Medication Assisted Treatment
- Individual Therapy
- Group Therapy
- Family Therapy
- Psychoeducational Groups
- Psychotherapeutic Process Groups
- Peer Support Services

## Ancillary Treatment Services

- Trauma Sensitive Yoga
- Mindfulness/Meditation
- Expressive Art Therapy
- Music Therapy
- Experiential Groups
- Alumni/Aftercare Support



# Location & Referral Information

Our Military Therapy and Recovery Program is currently available at our Dallas, PA location.

To initiate a referral or for more information about our Military Therapy and Recovery Programs please contact:

**John Fusco**

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