

Study finds ‘mantram’ repetition helpful for veterans, VA staff

A simple spiritually-based focusing and relaxation technique taught to 30 veterans and 36 hospital employees at the VA San Diego Healthcare System was used effectively by most of them to deal with stress and other negative emotions, according to a study published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* last month.

In five-week training sessions held in 2001 and 2002, a team led by nurse-researcher Jill Bormann, PhD, RN, taught the volunteers to silently repeat a word or phrase with spiritual meaning—a “mantram”—when confronted with stressful situations, such as traffic jams, arguments or pain. The mantram could also be practiced simply to relax. (Bormann points out there are differences between “mantram” and the more familiar “mantra,” which in its colloquial use has lost some of its original meaning.)

In phone interviews conducted about three months after the volunteers had completed their training, 55 of them—83 percent—reported successfully using the technique and cited 147 incidents where it was helpful. The researchers used the respondents’ own words to categorize the responses. The most frequently reported use was for managing negative emotions other than “stress,”

such as anxiety, impatience, anger or frustration. Other reported uses were for handling stress, or dealing with insomnia or unwanted thoughts.

“These findings suggest that spiritually inspired psychosocial interventions that are properly and sensitively adapted to the healthcare system might fill gaps in current health care, as well as [provide] additional options for enhancing mental health,” wrote the authors.

In December of last year, Bormann and colleagues reported on a related pilot study in the *Journal of Holistic Nursing*. Sixty-two veterans learned the mantram method and were given wrist-worn counters to track their practice. They used their respective mantrams—which ranged from traditional spiritual words such as Jesus or shalom, to more secular words such as “one”—an average of nearly eight times per day over the five-week study period, and reported significant reductions in stress and anxiety, as well as

improvements in quality of life and spiritual well-being.

According to Bormann, the technique used in her studies differs from most other relaxation or meditation techniques in that it can be used anywhere, anytime—even while driving, for example, or standing in line at the supermarket.

“It’s personal, portable and invisible,” she said in an interview with WebMD, a medical-news website. “It’s immediately available, inexpensive, nonpharmacological and non-toxic. [It can be a] stress-reduction technique for our modern day and age, when people say they don’t have time for stress-management techniques.”

Bormann’s research, which has explored mantram effects on study populations including veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder, family caregivers, and VA employees, is supported in part by VA and the National Institutes of Health. ■

MIDDLETON (cont. from pg. 1)

important discoveries. Most notably, his research contributed to the discovery of presenilin and tau genes involved in Alzheimer’s disease and frontal temporal dementia. The genes have become important targets for drug development. Scientists have also used this knowledge to develop animal models that have been instrumental in dementia research, such as those used in studying the pathology of the tangles found in the brain cells of Alzheimer’s patients.

In 1974, Bird established the nation’s first neurogenetics clinic for adults, at the University of Washington, and remains its director. Each year, the clinic offers evaluation, diagnosis and counseling for more than 300 clients with genetic diseases of the nervous system, such as Huntington’s disease, Charcot-Marie-Tooth neuropathy, muscular dystrophy, and familial dementia.

A professor in the departments of neurology, medicine and psychiatry at the UW School of Medicine, Bird was interviewed for a 2000 article in a university publication about the opening of the school’s division of neurogenetics. He offered this perspective on neurodegenerative disease: “The brain is what makes us human. You’re dealing with diseases that really impact the humaneness of people. ... To be able to do something about them is very important.” ■

VA Research Currents

is published monthly for the

Office of Research and Development
of the Dept. of Veterans Affairs

by VA R&D Communications

103 S. Gay St., Rm. 517
Baltimore, MD 21202

(410) 962-1800, ext. 223
research.publications@va.gov
www.research.va.gov