CENTER FOR RETURNING VETERANS

Rotation Coordinator: SCOTT LITWACK, PH.D.
Psychology Service (116B)
VA Boston Healthcare System
150 South Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA  02130

Telephone: (857) 364-4806
Email: scott.litwack@va.gov

Training Location:
Jamaica Plain Campus

Number of Interns: 1

~ Overview ~
Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) are a rapidly growing segment of the VA population. The number undoubtedly will continue to grow as veterans from this era continue to present for care for the first time. The mental health needs of a large, recently returned veteran population are significantly different from that of other era veterans. Critical components include developmental considerations related to treating primarily younger veterans and veterans who may have ongoing military commitments, as well as the challenges of increasing motivation among a group of veterans who often present with ambivalence about engaging in mental health care.

The core of the intern’s clinical training will involve the provision of mental health services within the Center for Returning Veterans (CRV) at the Jamaica Plain campus. The CRV is a mental health clinic established at VA Boston in 2005 to respond to the unique mental health needs of returning OEF/OIF combat veterans. The CRV team includes licensed clinical psychologists and clinical social workers, psychiatrists, and trainees (e.g., practicum students, psychology and social work interns, psychology postdoctoral fellows, psychiatry residents). The CRV’s mission is accomplished through assessment, the provision of individual, group, and psychopharmacological services, and referral to specialty mental health services. The intern’s training will therefore focus on developing expertise in responding to the full range of returning veterans’ post-deployment concerns.

To provide additional breadth of training experiences, the intern will also participate in adjunctive clinical work in the PTSD clinic at the Jamaica Plain campus. This work within the PTSD clinic provides interns with opportunities to foster competence in addressing the long-term sequelae of trauma.
Clinical Experience

The CRV intern will receive extensive training in the assessment and treatment of returning veterans experiencing a broad range of deployment-related difficulties. Interns will receive training in individual and group therapy. The presenting problems of the CRV patient population are highly varied and include, but are not limited to, adjustment disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders such as panic disorder and social anxiety disorder, depression, and substance use disorders, as well as interpersonal, anger, and cognitive difficulties. The core clinical training provided in this rotation places special emphasis on treatment of adjustment disorders, PTSD (both full criteria and sub-clinical), and depressive disorders, as these are the most prevalent diagnoses treated in the CRV.

A central aspect of clinical work in the CRV is to engage in early intervention with the goal of preventing disorders from shifting into a chronic course. Whenever possible, clinical interventions are provided when symptoms are at a lower intensity level, without many of the more intense psychosocial sequelae that may occur as symptoms become more chronic (e.g., loss of relationships, long-term substance abuse). The aim of treatment is to help those with previous combat deployments move forward on a positive trajectory for readjustment. An additional central aspect of this rotation is working with a unique VA population with regard to development, as a large portion of patients seen within CRV are in young adulthood. Furthermore, these individuals have often experienced transitioning into adulthood in the context of military service and war. Clinical work within CRV, regardless of diagnosis, therefore often includes facilitating the development of a sense of identity, purpose, and meaning as the veteran transitions to life after deployment. Although the large majority of veterans seen in the CRV clinic are male, female veterans are also seen in this clinic, and interns regularly have opportunities to engage in assessment and treatment of female veterans. Patients vary considerably with regard to age, race, and current military status. Therefore, the intern will develop an expertise in working with OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans, while learning generalist assessment and treatment skills to address the wide range of presenting clinical concerns in this population.

The CRV patient population is diverse; therefore, the specific therapeutic methods taught and utilized within CRV are equally varied, focusing on a wide range of presenting complaints and incorporating multiple therapeutic approaches and theoretical orientations, where indicated. Training will emphasize the use of empirically supported treatments grounded in a strong evidence-based practice framework and take into account characteristics of the returning veteran clinical population and identified barriers to care (e.g., stigma). Interventions utilized are largely cognitive-behavioral and include psychoeducation, motivational interviewing, behavioral activation, cognitive therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, as well as trauma-focused therapy (e.g. Cognitive Processing Therapy, Prolonged Exposure, Written Exposure Therapy). Adjunctive therapy experiences in the PTSD clinic are consistent with the approaches described above. Individual therapy cases within the PTSD clinic emphasize flexibly providing empirically-based treatments to address the various needs of veterans diagnosed with PTSD. Group therapy experiences involve the provision of psychoeducation and empirically-based interventions to a broad population of veterans diagnosed with PTSD.
Training overall will focus on developing skills related to flexibly applying empirically supported treatments taking into account patient preferences, diversity considerations, and clinician expertise. Clinical work will also emphasize the development and maintenance of the therapeutic relationship as well as non-specific therapeutic factors that are critical to treatment engagement with returning service members. Finally, assessment training activities will incorporate diagnostic evaluation and history-taking, administration and interpretation of empirically-tested psychometric instruments (e.g., PCL, PHQ-9), as well as opportunities for more extensive structured clinical interviewing as clinically indicated (e.g., SCID, CAPS). These assessment procedures are conducted in the context of identifying and facilitating the most appropriate treatment plan and referral.

Clinical training activities within the rotation include: 1) one weekly intake assessment focused on psychosocial and diagnostic assessment; 2) individual therapy, including predominantly CRV referrals as well as a small number of non-returning veteran referrals from the PTSD clinic (estimated caseload of 8-10 patients in total); and 3) group therapy (estimated two groups), including possible opportunities to co-lead skills-based and support groups within the CRV, PTSD, and General Mental Health clinics.

~ Interdisciplinary Interactions ~
The CRV hosts a weekly interdisciplinary team meeting attended by psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and a broad range of trainees (e.g., clinical and clinical research post-doctoral fellows, psychology interns, practicum students, psychiatry residents). These team meetings involve interactions around clinical administration issues, as well as clinical consultation regarding assessment, treatment planning, and ongoing treatment coordination. The intern is a vital member of this team and will have the opportunity to both receive and provide feedback to other team members. The CRV also holds a monthly interdisciplinary case conference to allow for a more in depth discussion of specific cases. Trainees as well as staff present cases during this case conference. In addition to these formalized opportunities, the intern will be encouraged to interact frequently with other providers related to the veterans they serve. These interdisciplinary interactions are likely to occur with primary care physicians, social workers and nurse case managers within the Transition and Care Management (TCM) program, and other mental health providers. Interactions with the TCM program are particularly frequent and relevant to the work of the CRV, as our programs are co-located, and a primary method for referral is “warm hand-off” of veterans from enrollment visits to CRV mental health staff to increase the likelihood of patient engagement.

~ Supervision ~
The CRV intern will be assigned to two individual psychotherapy supervisors (one hour per week each), with one supervisor designated as primary (i.e., overseeing any internship or clinic concerns experienced while on the rotation). The primary supervisors within the CRV are Dr. Kevin Brailey, Dr. Erin Scott Daly, Dr. Scott Litwack, and Dr. Jill Panuzio Scott. In addition, the intern will participate in weekly small group supervision (2-3 trainees) focused on
intake/diagnostic assessment. Finally, interns will receive weekly supervision for each of their group therapy experiences.

~ Training in Supervision ~
The Center for Returning Veterans rotation also offers training in the delivery of clinical supervision. This typically involves interns supervising graduate-level students (i.e., psychology practicum students) on one to two cases during the eight-month rotation. Interns will receive supervision of these supervisory experiences during individual supervision meetings with one of the CRV staff psychologists. Depending upon when practicum students elect to complete their rotation with us, the 4-month intern may or may not have the opportunity to provide direct supervision.

~ Selection Criteria ~
Applicants who would be the best fit with this rotation have broad experience with psychological treatment of adults for a variety of disorders, particularly PTSD, mood, and anxiety disorders, and have a specific interest in working with returning veterans.

~ Scholarly Inquiry ~
The level of intern involvement in scholarly inquiry activities during the rotation will vary based on interest level, available resources, and training needs. Interns may choose to participate in an ongoing clinical research study, assist with program evaluation activities, or independently propose and conduct a study under staff supervision. Engagement in scholarly inquiry will be facilitated by the intern’s primary supervisor and may take place either within or outside the CRV.

- **Research:** CRV staff work closely with psychology interns to identify the best mentor/trainee match to facilitate the intern’s research training goals. In many cases, interns have chosen to pursue research mentorship with full-time clinical researchers within the National Center for PTSD (i.e., Behavioral Sciences Division and/or Women’s Health Sciences Division). These opportunities are many and varied, and include several projects focused on returning combat veterans (please see the National Center for PTSD rotation descriptions for further details).

- **Program Evaluation:** The Center for Returning Veterans performs program evaluation by assessing patients prior to treatment using psychometrically-validated self-report assessments. The primary purpose of this information is to better understand the CRV patient population, monitor effectiveness of current interventions, and identify areas for further development of programming. Based on interest, the intern will have the opportunity to collaborate with staff psychologists in collecting and analyzing program evaluation data. Trainees will also have the opportunity to work with staff psychologists to suggest changes to current methods and measures of program evaluation within the
CRV. Exposure to program evaluation within CRV will facilitate the development of skills in using effectiveness data to inform clinical practice as well as program adaptation.

~ Research ~

► Selected recent publications from our staff (highlighted)


