Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy with Combat Veterans

National VA EBT Rollout

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The most extraordinary statistic of combat deployment: 66-80% of soldiers do not develop long-term MH difficulties.

Resilience implies a natural healing or stress resistance process.

Families are part of that process.
Family Systems and Resilience

- Recovery (or deterioration) does not take place in isolation.
- What affects a veteran dramatically affects a family system; what affects a family system dramatically affects a veteran.
- Transactional process.
- Divorce rates are high (50% and up).
Family Stress in the Context of Combat Deployment:

- **BEFORE DEPLOYMENT**
  - Preparations for being alone; single parenting
  - Anticipation and worry

- **DURING DEPLOYMENT**
  - Managing household without the soldier
  - Managing fear/anxiety; communication process
  - Infidelity and betrayal; “Dear John” letters
  - Dealing with fears and behavior changes in children

- **AFTER DEPLOYMENT**
  - Readjusting to soldier/veteran being home
  - Renegotiating roles
  - Dealing with changes in the soldier/veteran & partner
Role of Couple and Family Interventions

- Better family functioning leads to greater support for veterans—better outlook and functioning.
- The more distress a veteran experiences, the more disruption may occur in the family.
- Couple and family interventions remove barriers to recovery and promote resilience.
Department of Veterans Affairs National Rollout IBCT

Developed by Neil Jacobson and Andy Christensen
Why Choose IBCT?

- **Acceptance Focus**
  - From Traditional Behavioral Couples Therapy to IBCT: Acceptance and Change
  - Principle-based rather than set protocol
  - Idiographic and tailored

- **Evidence-Based Approach**
  - Efficacy with chronically distressed couples
  - Research ongoing with individual problems; Depression & PTSD
General Therapeutic Goals

- FROM Dysfunctional Interaction Patterns
  - Demand-Withdraw (accuse/defend)
  - Mutual Attack/Arguments
  - Mutual Withdrawal
- TO Constructive Interaction Patterns
  - Compassionate; Analytical; and Practical Discussions
IBCT Principles

- Problem Definition and Targets
  - Molecular vs. Molar
    - Specific, defined, & easily understood targets vs. Identifying broad patterns and response classes

- Types of Change
  - Traditional Change vs. Acceptance as Change
    - Increase/Decrease in frequency, intensity, or duration of behavior vs. Change in emotional reactivity

- Types of Behavior
  - Rule-governed vs. Contingency Shaped
    - Arbitrary vs. natural reinforcers
Acceptance in IBCT

- Acceptance is NOT
  - Resignation, submission, giving in, or permission to be abusive

- Acceptance IS
  - Problems as a window into vulnerability
  - Problems as a vehicle for intimacy
  - Letting go of the struggle to change
  - Reducing adversarial relationship
Overview of IBCT Procedures

- **Assessment**
  - Conjoint session & Individual sessions
  - Confidentiality
  - Questionnaires

- **Feedback Session**
  - Level of distress, commitment, strengths
  - DEEP Formulation of issues
DEEP Formulation of Relationship Problems

- DEEP analysis of issues
  - Differences or incompatibilities
  - Emotional sensitivities
  - External circumstances and stressors
  - Patterns of problematic interaction

- Collaborative
DEEP Formulation Example: PTSD

- DEEP analysis of issues
  - Differences or incompatibilities
    - Comfort with expression of negative emotion
  - Emotional sensitivities
    - Fear of strong emotional reactions; fear of PTSD stimuli
  - External circumstances and stressors
    - Noisy bad area of town
  - Patterns of problematic interaction
    - Avoidant withdrawing followed by explosive reactions
IBCT

IBCT Treatment Strategies

- Treatment Targets
  - Acceptance before Change
  - Emotionally Salient Issues

- Treatment Strategies
  - Empathic Joining
  - Unified Detachment
  - Tolerance Building
Empathic Joining

- **Purpose**
  - Promoting expression of feelings that may have not been shared before
  - Partner experiences understanding and validation from therapist and partner

- **Therapy strategy (emotional acceptance)**
  - Attend to emotional reactions (primary vs. secondary)
  - Prompt personal disclosure
Unified Detachment

● Purpose
  - Intellectual discussion about significant relationship experiences and interaction patterns

● Therapeutic Strategy
  - Engage couple in descriptive and nonjudgmental discussion
  - Distinguish intentions from effects
  - Problem as an “it” versus “you”
Direct Change Strategies

- Behavior Exchange
  - Increasing relationship focus and positive reinforcement

- Communication Training
  - Enhancing expressive and listening skills

- Problem Solving Training
  - Problem definition; brainstorming; experimenting
Tolerance Building

● Tolerance is on continuum of acceptance:
grudging tolerance ←----→ embracing differences 😊

● Goals of tolerance interventions
  – Make partner’s behavior less painful.
  – Enhance ability to cope.
  – Decrease intensity of conflict or shorten duration of recovery.

● Types of tolerance interventions:
  – Highlight positive features of negative behavior.
  – Rehearsal of negative behavior (desensitization).
  – Faking of negative behavior (relapse prevention).
  – Self-care: Promotion of independence, self-reliance.
IBCT Considerations

- Order of interventions
  - Acceptance before change

- Inappropriate couples
  - Severe interpersonal violence
  - Untreated substance use disorders
  - Lack of commitment

- Termination
  - Spaced joint sessions
IBCT in Couples with PTSD

- PTSD affects veterans, but it also affects their families.
- Veterans with PTSD report:
  - Poorer relationship adjustment
  - Reduced couple satisfaction
  - Less intimacy
  - More frequent conflict
  - Higher rates of divorce
  - More problems in parenting
Partners of those with PTSD report…

- Increased distress including depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints
  - “Compassion Fatigue”
  - “Secondary Traumatic Stress”
  - “Caregiver Burden”
- “Walking on egg-shells”
- Having to do things for or without their partner
- Feeling isolated and lonely
- Feeling confused, helpless, or frightened
IBCT with PTSD

- Unified Detachment around the PTSD
- Emotional exposure / empathic joining to increase emotional experiencing
- Behavioral exchange as in vivo exposure
- Decrease isolation
- Limited review of trauma
IBCT

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