



Reiki Resources for Veterans

BY EILEEN DEY, M.A., LMHC

FIVE YEARS AGO I BEGAN CONTACT with the veteran's center in my city of Seattle, which ultimately led to fellow members of the Reiki Fellowship and I offering Reiki classes to veterans. An article about our work was published in *Reiki News Magazine* in 2008. As a result of that article, servicemen and women, as well as Reiki practitioners working with veterans emailed me from around the world, asking for advice and sharing their own experiences.

"... I am a Navy Veteran and learned Reiki six years ago. Wow, has Reiki ever helped me and in so many different ways! I have been volunteering at the VA's CFA (Center for Aging) and recently have been asked to give a presentation to outpatient veterans at the main center in Honolulu.¹ After introducing Reiki to the CFA three years ago, a policy was written and approved a year later, which allows me to provide sessions easily (hands on and off)." —Dawn Gold, Reiki Master Teacher, Honolulu, HI

"As a Vietnam Veteran...my own passion for Reiki healing and trying to help others came after my first experience receiving Reiki (two years ago)...As a Hospice of Cincinnati Reiki volunteer, I see a good number of World War II veterans who are accepting Reiki before passing in peace."—Robert Grote

"... I am also an Army Vet...My husband is also in the Army. It was a year on the 10th that he returned from a 15-month deployment to Iraq. My husband is currently in a lot of pain (from wounds he suffered there)...I recently became a Reiki Master myself...I try to send him distance Reiki on a regular basis and he's stated that it has helped him get through the day. He will be home for the holidays and I plan on attuning him to Reiki I so that he can do self healing..." Lucy Hellein, LMT, NCTM

Peter Hayward, Reiki Master for the Military Trauma Charity in the UK shared with me the benefits of Reiki reported by one of his patients:

"Since having Reiki treatment I have now:

- Sat in the doctor's waiting room with young babies present
- Sat with friends' children
- Shook hands with my friend's 18-month old baby
- I do not walk away from kids crying
- I'm in the best relationship in the world with the most amazing girl and we talk about having children of our own!!
- I mix in groups
- I no longer need or take anti-depressants as Reiki is now my way of dealing with the 'big D'

I still have a long way to go but the Reiki really helps and it does not harm me the way medication can. I have started to have a 'normal' mental life. Now I see a future and not just PTSD. I urge all sufferers like me to at least try Reiki, can't harm."

I also found out about other practitioners who are doing this important work. Psychologist John E. Fortunato had already started the Fort Bliss Restoration and Resilience Center. Patients who want to remain in the Army volunteer for the program. They receive about half the medication that those in other programs receive. The program makes use of many complementary therapies, including Reiki.² I also learned that Fort Hood has begun offering both massage and Reiki treatments to help "wounded warriors."³

Reiki is an invaluable tool for working with individuals who suffer from PTSD. Dr. Edward Tick, author of *War and the Soul* says: "The key to healing post-traumatic stress disorder is in how we understand PTSD. In war's overwhelming violence, the soul—the true self—flees and can become lost for life. PTSD is a true identity disorder." He terms it "Post-traumatic soul disorder" and presents ways to nurture a positive identity based in compassion and forgiveness..."⁴ Through receiving Reiki treatments and the practice of Reiki, one learns to tap into his or her own compassion for humankind and through that process, often much mental/emotional clearing does occur. As the recipient/practi-

¹ <http://www.hawaii.va.gov>

² http://www.healingreikienergy.com/PTSD_Information.html

³ <http://www.forthoodsentinel.com/story.php?id=3453>

⁴ Taken from book description on his organizational website, <http://www.soldiersheart.net>.

tioner undergoes that clearing process, often one of the keys is forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others.

Statistics say that 30% of US troops develop serious mental health problems within three to four months of returning home.⁵ Several feature films have come out in the last several years that capture the stories of the struggle of veterans returning home with PTSD. Both *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Brothers* (2009) provide gruesome cinematic examples of the horrors of war and their effects on the soldiers involved. Both have gotten much press for their content and the actors involved. Recently I had the opportunity to see a screening of *The Dry Land* (2010) by Ryan Piers Williams at the Seattle International Film Festival. The film, which will be released nationally this fall, features a veteran who returns from Iraq to face a new battle of reintegrating into his small-town life in Texas.

Of all the three films, *The Dry Land*, in my opinion, probably best brings home the reality of PTSD and its effects on veterans and their families. It doesn't have any footage of war but portrays the inner struggles that occur. It can be a challenge to watch because of the depth at which it portrays that inner hurt, but it provides a way for viewers to cultivate their compassion towards the suffering that has occurred. I feel films are a way of increasing consciousness about veterans' issues and, hopefully, inspiring more Reiki practitioners to offer circles of healing for veterans and their families.

Reiki Heals the Past

Many of the veterans Reiki Master Michael Emanuel and I have taught over the last three years have been working in earnest to help heal the wounds they experienced from being in combat and from returning home and attempting to reintegrate into their families and communities. The Vietnam veterans especially have had difficulty in finding acceptance of their past role, but in learning Reiki for themselves, they have been able to practice self-treatment, and those that have taken Level II have been able to send distant healing back in time to the traumas they experienced.

After teaching the veterans the Distant Healing symbol in Level II, we have them remember a past trauma and begin to send healing back in time to it. As they do, the veteran can interact with his or her younger self and see/feel the energy of healing being sent to that self. We emphasize that distant healing is also a communication device, and the vets can interact with that younger self and offer words of wisdom and also allow for space to "hear" any information that the younger self might want to offer their current self. Bringing the veterans back to the present, we allow ample time for the integration of their experience, as well as any discussions or debriefing that need to occur.

The psychologist at the Veteran's Center has been present during each class to address any issues that are beyond the scope of the class. We have never experienced any psychological breakdowns or issues that have required the intervention of the psychologist; it is more of an organizational policy than necessity. During one Level II class, participants sent distant healing to the recently deceased dog of the psychologist. Many of the veterans in the class had known this dog, who was often present during their treatment sessions with the psychologist. Because of their connection to the animal and their grief and loss at her passing, the veterans were able to send Reiki and have a recognized and acknowledged "closure" regarding the dog's death. For me, it was quite moving and an honor to witness their love of this canine healer.

Shifting perspectives with Reiki

The Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are slowly coming into the veteran's center where we teach and are taking advantage of the Reiki training there. Because they are of a different generation, they seem to be more accepting of alternative healing therapies than some of the older vets.

What I've often seen happen within the course of one day's training are veterans who; for years, were used to having their instinctual response turned up quite high (as is necessary in combat situations) begin to shift the awareness of fight or flight to one of sensitivity. A veteran I will call "Carl" could feel the presence of everyone in the room where we were teaching. He said he was "always on alert" (hyperawareness is a symptom of PTSD). With Reiki training, he was able to take that ability and instead of having it be a defensive strategy, he was able to perceive the subtler levels of energy of each classmate and also his own awareness (in this case coming through in visual sensation like colors) of the energy that flowed through him. He later reported that he was able to take this experience of healing energy into his daily existence with PTSD.

This experience seems to mirror the technique in therapy that is called the "Rewind Technique." "The aim of the technique is to help sufferers put the traumatic incident behind them by stopping unwanted thoughts and images intruding during their day-to-day lives. It is believed that the process works as the traumatic memory is 're-processed' and re-encoded in the brain. This re-encoding stops the automatic triggering of the fight or flight response whenever the memory is accessed and it is this process which stops the unwanted symptoms of PTSD from occurring."⁶

Storytelling Helps PTSD

I have found that listening to veteran's stories during Reiki classes not only helps them in their own journey but also enables us as teachers and others in the class to understand them better.

⁵ <http://www.iraq-war.ws/statistics>

“Stories that heal contain many of the values that are an important part of many native cultures. These values include, but are not limited to: acceptance, courage, truth, and spirituality. When these are in place, some individuals can begin to make meaning of their experiences. Through talking circles or other means of discussing military service, one can often recognize how storytelling is critical to the healing of emotional wounds for veterans.”⁷

Chris King, professional storyteller, talks about the “Everlasting Healing Power of a Story.” He suggests to those telling stories that “Our listeners are not our therapists, so not to tell a story that one is still having trouble dealing with. He mentions his experience of first telling the story of his son’s struggle with cancer and the relief he felt when he went into remission. Initially, he would burst into tears telling the story, but over time, and through his own process, he was able to tell the story more comfortably. Telling the story of his son’s cancer was therapeutic and inspiring for others. He realized the power of sharing his story and ended up submitting it to the *Chicken Soup* series where it was eventually published. Chris’s belief is that “we, as storytellers, can help others with their own healing by sharing some of our own difficult and heart-rending stories, along with encouraging others to tell us their difficult stories.”

“Start by writing your story in a journal for your eyes only. Soon, as you realize how helpful this has been for you, start sharing it with friends and family. In time, you will be able to share it with others who will benefit from your experiences, and you, as a storyteller, can encourage them to share their difficult stories. I find that others are more willing to share their stories once we

have shared ours with them. This isn’t always an easy process, but it is one of the most rewarding for our listeners and ourselves.”⁸

In addition to the Reiki classes that members of the Reiki Fellowship offer veterans, we plan to establish a weekly clinic for vets to practice giving Reiki to each other and to provide an avenue for storytelling and a forum for the greater healing of what they have been through. Because my training program is a licensed vocational school, we have also begun the paperwork to be considered for VA funding, but, like all roads to healing, it is often a slow process.

I feel what is important is to keep on with the mission of healing. Reiki practitioners have the responsibility to keep on holding the space for the light of Universal Energy to shine so that the lessons from what warriors have directly experienced can be insightful to those who have not had to go to battle. 

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⁶ <http://www.traumaregister.co.uk/Skills/Rewind.htm>.

⁷ <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ana/veterans/stories.html>

⁸ <http://www.creativekeys.net/storytellingpower/sphome.html>. Other useful websites for facilitating storytelling are: (1) Back from Iraq <http://wpsu.org/backfromiraq> is a project where student veterans learn to utilize video and web technologies to empower them to chronicle their stories and experiences of the Iraq War. (2) Veterans Education Project <http://www.vetsed.org> main mission is to help veterans volunteer their time to share their stories and to provide a service for their community.