

Yoga Nidra (iRest) - Emotional & Cognitive Empowerment Training: A "New Twist" on Treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

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How does having mental armor or "mental fitness gear" to treat and possibly prevent PTSD sound? As members of the Armed Forces, we're very aware of the paramount importance of physical fitness in meeting the needs and duties of accomplishing the mission. In a similar fashion, psychological hardiness is the armamentarium that empowers our US Military service member to optimize human performance and cope with psychological trauma. How would it be if we could cultivate the emotional and mental dexterity to access a full spectrum of internal resources to activate optimum health and well-being?

An estimated 300,000 US service members have returned from the OEF/ OIF wars with PTSD (Rand, 2008). PTSD is more prevalent in military personnel than in the general population, particularly in war veterans. More than 17% of soldiers returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD, and nearly 40% report stress-related symptoms and dysfunction that significantly prevent reintegration into a full and productive life. Within this population, only 13-27% reported having received mental health care in the past year. Additionally, there is a growing concern over the increasing number of suicides, homicides, divorces, and homelessness associated with military service, which may appear long after the conclusion of active duty service. The service members with the greatest distress and PTSD symptoms at the time of return from the war zone reported mistrust of mental health professionals, concerns about being stigmatized, and doubts about the effectiveness of mental health treatments. The prevalence of PTSD and other trauma-linked disorders increases significantly throughout the first post deployment year. Efficacious, evidence-based early interventions are available, but many military personnel are reluctant to access services provided in specialty mental health care settings.

Current standards of care for PTSD include psychotherapies and pharmacotherapy (e.g. cognitive behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, etc). Studies have shown that these conventional therapies may not be maximally effective in addressing the full complexity and overlapping co-morbidities. The most prevalent diagnoses associated with PTSD include mood disorders (e.g., depression and anxiety), pain, drug/opioid desensitization (with abuse potential) and somatic (sleep, appetite, sexual and energy) dysfunction. The data highlights a lack of non-stigmatizing evidence-based early interventions for military personnel and veterans with PTSD. There is a pressing need for efficacious, non-stigmatizing, self-management for recently returned OIF/OEF military personnel and veterans who do not have access, refuse, delay, lack confidence or feel stigmatized with standard treatments.

The Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) has seen a growing interest and demand for effective, innovative Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) treatments. CAM modalities include natural products, dietary supplements, chiropractic manipulation, massage, guided imagery, and mind-body practices, such as yoga and meditation. Yoga Nidra is one such CAM modality that has been found to be particularly effective amongst military personnel. In 2006, The Department of Defense Deployment Health Clinical Center (DHCC) conducted a feasibility study, funded by Samuelli Institute, on the use of Yoga Nidra, as an adjunctive therapy to treat symptoms of PTSD in soldiers returning from battle. On the basis of these initial findings, DHCC has, for over 3 years, successfully incorporated the modality into the Specialized Care Program (SCP), a multi-disciplinary treatment program for active duty soldiers with PTSD and Medically Unexplained Physical Symptom.

Having recently served as the Chief of Fitness Policy at USAF HQ, my duties entailed developing regulations and instructions on keeping our forces physically fit. The position increased my awareness about the importance of overall

I found the Yoga Nidra very useful in everyday life. Overall I think Yoga Nidra is the best program I've ever had the pleasure to participate in. It has helped me physically, spiritually and mentally. I've learned techniques that I will use for the rest of my life. I would recommend Yoga Nidra to anyone from any walk of life or social class. I really and truly hope that Yoga Nidra will become a main stay of the main stream military.

-- Vince
OIF Active Duty Soldier

physical and mental fitness, which includes promoting and instilling wellness across the many dimensions of health. This mind-body connection explains why psychological resilience can motivate and sustain physical fitness and enhance performance in challenging environments. With an interest in using an integrative approach to fitness, I was impressed with the potential benefits of Yoga Nidra for our service members. A team of us from DHCC, the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences (USUHS) Preventive Medicine Department, the Integrative Restoration Center, and Samueli Institute created a protocol to further study the effectiveness of Yoga Nidra as an adjunctive therapy for PTSD. The Yoga Nidra protocol has been tailored specifically for a military setting and is now re-contextualized as Integrative Restoration (iRest).

WHAT IS YOGA?

Yoga is a set of principles, which for thousands of years, have shown to foster a clear mind and healthy body. Experts are quick to point out that yoga is not a religion, but rather a system of practices to assist people in leading more purposeful, healthy, and fulfilling lives. On the physical level, yoga postures, called *asanas*, are designed to tone, strengthen, and align the body. On the mental level, yoga uses breathing techniques and meditation to quieten, clarify, and discipline the mind in developing psychological resiliency and proficiency when presented with challenging life events. Given the wide variety of personality and body types, many types and forms of Yoga exist.

WHAT IS YOGA NIDRA (aka Integrative Restoration (iRest))?

The iRest military program, based on the ancient practice of Yoga Nidra, is designed to systematically reduce physical, emotional, mental, and even subconscious tension that characterizes PTSD. Participants are taught to manage disturbing moods and memories with a skill set that enables them to objectively respond to intense emotional experiences through conscious choices rather than unconscious reactions. The simple techniques can also be used in all aspects of daily life to feel more mentally and emotionally balanced when encountering difficult situations. A sense of emotional mastery is developed. These techniques are presumed to cause a relaxation response through a multi-faceted approach of psycho-physiological mechanisms to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and innate healing capacities of the mind-body complex.

The protocol is a synthesis of modern psychology and ancient yogic wisdom. It teaches progressive relaxation, breathing, stress reduction, cognitive and meditation techniques aimed at raising awareness and healing various aspects of the mental, emotional, and physical relationship. Its approach is non-dogmatic and secular, which does not conflict with personal religious beliefs. Regular practice enables participants to activate their potential to live more fully aware, accepting and welcoming of each moment and situation they encounter. This in turn strengthens participants' abilities to respond rather than react to life's changing and challenging circumstances. Supportive evidence shows the intervention leads to transformative and sustainable psychological changes.

WHAT IS THE iRest PROTOCOL?

The iRest protocol is composed of 10- steps, which can be used in their entirety or in segments. Once the knowledge and skills are acquired through participation in group classes, it is practiced independently using a self-practice CD. An emotional bank account is cultivated, to withdraw from, when a sense of safety, comfort and control is needed in daily life. The objective is to restore a sense of wholeness.

The series of techniques include body scanning, cognitive and emotional restructuring, visual imagery, deep breathing, systematic desensitization, reciprocal inhibition and habituation. The protocol consists of a series of 25-45 minute sessions where participants are:

1. Guided through a meditation sequence that releases negative body sensations, emotions, thoughts, images and beliefs.
2. Taught non-resistance training techniques to experience, welcome, and accept changing phenomena of emotional states, in order to relinquish the extremes of seeking pleasure and resistance to discomfort.
3. Trained to develop an internal locus of control, in order to modulate and control their responses to internal triggers
4. Empowered, through a foundation of psychological hardiness, with a skill set to cultivate the ability to release the

grip of internal conflicts secondary to anxiety, fear, mental or emotional suffering.

Benefits reported by providers and participants thus far include:

- A low cost, mental and physical health intervention that is easily taught in group settings. Once trained, participants can readily self-administer the technique with the use of home practice CDs
- A non-pharmaceutical method to manage symptoms and relieve stress
- Improvement in: sleep hygiene, effectiveness under pressure, self confidence and self-worth, social functioning, concentration and focus on tasks, enhanced ease, joy, contentment, and equanimity in daily life.
- Minimization of: negativity, fear, chronic stress, anxiety, panic, depression, chronic pain, insomnia, and alcohol and substance abuse

Reports indicate iRest is relieving the impact of PTSD-related symptoms manifesting in psychological and physical conditions. This is lessening the stress on families, improving social/family relationships, and restoring a sense of interconnectedness with all of aspects life.

I actually feel free from the prison of my mind, removing the feeling like there is something wrong with me. It brings a mental, physical and spiritual calmness that you have to have in the very fast paced chaotic life that is the U.S. ARMY. I've notice a sharper mental clarity and I'm able to relax myself faster to relieve stress [that is] both mental and physical.

--Jon
OEF Vet

WHY IS iRest WELL-SUITED FOR THE MILITARY?

The secular, down-to-earth language used to describe iRest is attractive and salient for military personnel. While many approaches of mental health treatment ask patients to verbalize and mentally interpret their experiences, iRest is non-verbal and body-based. The treatment program (whether on CD or live) help keep the participant alert and attentive to the moment while invoking a feeling of trust through a predictable structure. iRest, unlike many other kinds of meditation, encourages people to lie down on blankets or an air mattress, or to recline in a lounge chair, so it is physically comfortable and accessible of people of all physical conditions. Most participants feel successful at accessing a feeling of quiet stillness within themselves after just a few sessions and then use the home CDs to build additional skills for soothing the nervous system and calming the mind. Preliminarily successful in the treatment of stress and anxiety, it has the potential as a safe, effective and more acceptable treatment for combat-and non combat-related PTSD.





WHERE IS iRest BEING UTILIZED?

In addition to our military personnel, iRest has been expanded to a wide variety of populations, health and socio-economic conditions and is becoming easily adopted as a health maintenance practice. It is easy to learn and has been readily incorporated into various treatment facilities, namely at the DHCC at WRAMC specifically for veterans of WWII, Vietnam, and OIF/OEF as an adjunct treatment modality for PTSD. Additionally, the program is utilized in age groups from pre-school to seniors, homeless shelters, college campuses, business, and yoga studios, as well as those with a variety of medical diagnoses such as chemical dependency, PTSD, infertility, depression, and anxiety, chronic pain and multiple sclerosis.



Military affiliated locations where iRest® is administered:

1. Walter Reed Army Medical Center/DHCC, Washington DC
2. Miami Veterans Administration, FL
3. Veterans Administration, Washington DC
4. Brooke Army Medical Center, TX
5. Fort Thomas, KY
6. North Chicago, VA
7. Sacramento Veterans Resource Center, CA
8. Cape Canaveral, FL
9. Camp Lejeune, NC
10. Fort Bragg, NC
11. Camp Pendleton, CA

WHAT IS iRest's FUTURE?

While many studies have investigated the effect of yoga and meditation-based techniques for stress management, there are currently no large-scale clinical trials on iRest as an adjunctive treatment for PTSD. Thus, a Randomized Control Trial has been developed to have a three-phase research trajectory to determine if iRest is an acceptable, safe and effective adjunctive therapy for self-management of PTSD specifically in our Armed Forces population.

This [Yoga Nidra Meditation] is the piece that was missing from the PTSD program. It fits with everything else they teach us, but it also teaches us a way to find our own peace without drugs or counseling that we can use once we get out of the program. It is the one thing I know I'm going to keep doing when I leave.

-- *Martin*
Vietnam Vet

Programs such as these that cultivate mental fitness can play a role as treatment interventions for PTSD. Perhaps one day, they could play a role in prevention attenuating the impact of the emotional and physical trauma experienced in the battlefield. Skills-based mind-body programs, such as iRest, that employ psychological health strengthening components may be a modality to not only supports a culture that is physically and mentally fit to fight, but also one that cultivates resilience to the stressors of military and daily life. Those who seek further information on iRest programs or are interested in incorporating iRest protocols or research into their facilities or treatment centers may find further details at www.irest.us or may contact me directly at nisha.money@us.army.mil.