In my work over the past year, I have had the opportunity to interview many soldiers and Marines, and their providers, about their treatment for combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

I found that responses from patients fall along these lines:

“The doctor just pushes pills.”
“I gained 30 pounds on those meds.”
“The doctor asked me right away to talk about my worst trauma. I had just met her. I can’t talk about that yet.”
“Acupuncture is freakin’ awesome!”
“I had not been able to sleep more than 2 hours a night since I returned. After one session with the needles, I had the best sleep I had had in a year.”

Responses from providers focus less on the problems with medication and psychotherapy, but still point to some very interesting observations:

“When they first come to me, those guys who have been deployed three, four, five times, they can’t sit still for CBT (cognitive-behavioral therapy). We get them a few sessions of acupuncture or yoga, and they can settle down enough to do the trauma work.”
“We have one acupuncturist. His tables are always full and he is booked 2 months out. We could easily use three.”
“Acupuncture, yoga, all that stuff seems to cool down the ‘hot brain.’”

In the past, many have dismissed anecdotal comments such as these as placebo effect. However, as this article shows, the quickly growing literature indicate the rapid improvements can no longer be ascribed simply to placebo.

The mechanism of action for acupuncture to treat PTSD is not totally clear. Of course that is true for medication, eye movement desensitization reprocessing (EMDR) and psychotherapy. Electroconvulsive therapy is one of the most effective treatments for depression, but despite decades of use, mechanisms of action are still hypothetical.

Unquestionably, more research is needed. Randomized controlled trials are still rare. But the testimonials from both patients and providers are striking.

For combat veterans, acupuncture offers another advantage. Very few veterans of multiple deployments only have PTSD; musculoskeletal injuries from improvised explosive devices (IEDs), rocket attacks and accidents are the norm. The resulting pain and disability can lead to depression and addiction to narcotics. Acupuncture is clearly effective in treating pain and may be able to mitigate that slide downward.

“Come for the needles, stay for the therapy.”

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