

Research: Word, Phrase Could Help Erase Painful War Memories

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SAN DIEGO -- The horrors of war can seriously damage a person's psyche, experts said. Studies have shown that many people never get war experiences out of their minds. Now, researchers say that repeating a simple word or phrase could help erase painful memories and much more.

Decades of military conflict are taking a toll on men and women in the armed forces. "I was just suffering from anxiety following the first Gulf War," said one war veteran. Another veteran said, "I had classic symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder." Many war veterans at the Veteran's Administration Hospital suffer from PTSD.

However, life is not so hard for them anymore since they began using a mantram. "You are able to step outside of your anxiety and your anger; you can feel your respiration sort of slow down," said Vietnam War veteran Terry Fechter. Army war veteran M.C. Tucker added, "If I think I am going into a stressful situation, I use it." Air Force war veteran Lee Everroad said, "The mantram eased the pain right away." VA researcher Dr. Jill Bormann said, "Mantram is actually an ancient universal practice that has been around for centuries."

Experts said a mantram is like a "Jacuzzi for the mind," a simple way to interrupt negative thoughts. Bormann is teaching veterans how to use a mantram -- a word or phrase with spiritual associations that are repeated silently throughout the day. "We can learn to calm the mind and train our attention by focusing on a word or phrase, over and over internally," said Bormann. "What mantram repetition does is allows us to engage in the relaxation response. We refer to it as a mind, body, spiritual technique; not religious, but spiritual."

Bormann is leading a four-year study comparing veterans who use a mantram to those who do not, to see if it could help with stress management. "Veterans who use it and use it particularly at times when they don't need it find that it has the effect to calm their anger, reduce their anger, to reduce some of their severity of symptoms," said Bormann.

Everroad said, "One of the first things that made me use my mantram was we had three jets catch on fire." Everroad said repeating his mantram has helped him relax when his mind fills with anxiety when he lights his outdoor grill. "For instance, lighting the grill, my mantram stopped my aggravation that came with the fire," said Everroad.

Vietnam War veteran Eric Wright said, "Post traumatic stress disorder is an insidious disease and it always starts with a thought, it may be an obsessive thought; it may be anxiety, it may be a flashback." Wright said his mantram has finally given him peace of mind and control, something he has been looking for since he walked off the battlefield that day so long ago. "I am just so grateful that it's here now for this new generation of warriors who are coming home," said Wright. When stressed, repeating a mantram buys us time before we act, experts said. The VA study for veterans is ongoing. For more information, call 858-642-3443 or visit www.easwaran.org.