HORSES HELPING VETERANS

Therapeutic riding clinics like BraveHearts in Illinois offer alternatives to traditional means of treating PTSD.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TRICIA CARZOLI

Former U.S. Marine Cpl. Nicholas Montijo returned from Afghanistan with a back injury and a plan that had become derailed. With his dream of lifetime service in the Marines snatched away and a failed attempt at culinary school souring his future employment, his world had come to a screeching halt.

Once an outgoing, gregarious young man who enjoyed spending time with friends and family, Montijo became increasingly withdrawn. Eventually, he spent months alone without leaving his home and not taking care of himself.

Post-traumatic stress disorder has a harrowing affect on veterans such as Montijo. It prevents them from living lives unfettered by the pain of their past. Montijo sought to find refuge earning his college degree. But the stress and large crowds aggravated his PTSD symptoms so much that he...
had to leave. He found himself alone, unmotivated and needing help.

It is that isolation which can lead to suicidal thoughts and feelings of worthlessness, explained retired Navy commander and Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International Certified Riding Instructor Mary Jo Beckman. “When [veterans] have a lot of time on their hands, they get into trouble,” she said.

TROUBLING STATISTICS
VA reports that the suicide rate among veterans is highest during the first four weeks home after deployment, as well as in those in their 60s. Statistics reveal that 22 veterans take their lives each day.

PTSD is a key factor—and it is common among every generation. VA estimates that between 11% and 20% of veterans from both Afghanistan and Iraq, 10% from the Persian Gulf and 30% from Vietnam will have or have experienced PTSD.

Addressing these numbers, VA advocates for research to help veterans and their families cope with PTSD. Standard protocols include cognitive behavioral therapy, exposure therapy and medication. When those options fail, some veterans seek unconventional help.

BRAVEHEARTS
Montijo chose therapeutic horse riding to combat his symptoms. In the spring of 2012, the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee offered a horse riding opportunity at BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding and Educational Center in Harvard, Ill. Unsure of what to expect and still heavily medicated, Montijo went anyway.

Initially, his release paperwork never made it to BraveHearts, so all Montijo could do at the facility was groom the horses. He painstakingly cleaned hooves, smoothed manes and acquainted himself with the horses.

After being released from the hospital, he continued his prescribed medical treatment—and he went back to the barn. This time, he started riding.

As his confidence in riding increased, so did his ability to deal with PTSD—so much so that he found himself competing in the Heroes on Horseback Horse Show at the Midwest Horse Fair in front of an audience of 4,000—something once unthinkable to Montijo.

“It forced me to look for that inner calm.”
—NICHOLAS MONTIJO, ABOUT RIDING HORSES

of an audience of 4,000—something once unthinkable to Montijo.

“A horse feeds off your emotions,” he explained. “I couldn’t remain in that agitated state—the horse would be agitated as well. It forced me to look for that inner calm. And as I spent more time working on calming myself, I carried that feeling long after I put my horse in the stall.”

A former Navy petty officer, Tim Stratton suffered unspeakable nightmares following his service in Vietnam. Struggling with PTSD, he found respite in his palomino horse, Golden Boy. Stratton sought to help other veterans find healing through this unique bond. He found an opportunity to volunteer his time and skills assisting veterans at the same facility Montijo visited.

“Veterans are comrades in arms,” he said. “We never ask other veterans about their service, but those horses, sometimes they are just what these men and women need to open up.

“There was a man who came to BraveHearts with the thousand-yard stare. He never spoke. One time, after a few months, he said, ‘Tim, thank you.’ I said, ‘You’re welcome,’ and I went to the back of the barn,” Stratton recalled, tears in his eyes. “The horses are the tool—the gift—we have to help veterans grow in confidence and open up.”

THERAPEUTIC HORSE RIDING SUCCESSES
Beckman adds: “One of the reasons therapeutic riding helps veterans with PTSD is that the veteran experiences a partnership with the horse, and there is a give-and-take relationship that develops. This transfers into a real-life setting because veterans who were once so isolated and lonely—which leads to suicidal feelings—learn that life is not something they are meant to go through alone—that we are there to help each other as we go. When that connection is made, it is fabulous.”

She works extensively with the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., in conjunction with Rock Creek Park Horse Center located in Washington, D.C.

Beckman organizes each session based on the needs of the veteran. There always is a goal, she said. The instructor knows veterans thrive when presented with a mission.

Meggan Hill-McQueeney, president and COO of BraveHearts, PATH International master instructor and evaluator and member of the PATH Equine Services for Veterans Committee, agreed: “We choose each horse and each goal with the individual veteran in mind.”

DIFFICULTY RECEIVING SUPPORT
Beckman explained that “hard data to support therapeutic riding may be difficult to attain. ... There is much more qualitative data than quantitative data out there. How can you measure the fact that someone couldn’t leave their home for months and now leaves once a day? How can you measure the change someone has in relationships?”

“[Mental health professionals] really need to see [therapeutic riding] in action. There isn’t a way to truly describe what continued on page 50 >>
Benefits of Membership

AD&D Coverage: Learn the Basics

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, unintentional injuries are the fifth leading cause of death in the United States.* One person dies from an injury every three minutes. No matter how careful you may be, you are always at risk—at home, at work, in the car or even on vacation.

Yet few people are prepared for the sudden, potential financial loss brought on by an accidental death or the high cost of living when an accident results in the loss of sight or a limb.

One way to help ease the financial burden and provide small piece of mind could be by obtaining accidental death and dismemberment (AD&D) insurance coverage. AD&D insurance is meant to protect your family if you are killed in a non-work-related accident, or survive an accident but lose a limb or suffer another loss such as your sight or hearing.

WHAT DOES AD&D INSURANCE COVER?

AD&D insurance is designed to pay benefits in addition to other types of insurance coverage. It can be of significant help to a family reeling from the death or serious injury of a primary wage earner.

This type of insurance coverage generally applies to deaths and injuries from automobile accidents, falls, exposure to the elements, drowning, homicide and heavy equipment accidents. It usually does not cover situations where a person's injuries are self-inflicted or if he or she is under the influence of non-prescribed drugs or alcohol.

For some policies, the use of any drug or medicine is restricted. Other excluded circumstances may include illness, natural causes and war. There also may be flight-related exclusions, including pilot training, aircraft testing and skydiving.

Additional benefits included in some AD&D policies may include hospital benefits, seat belt benefit if you are killed in an accident while wearing your seat belt, and child care or education benefits to cover expenses for your dependent children.

HOW ARE DISMEMBERMENT BENEFIT AMOUNTS DETERMINED?

Dismemberment benefits are paid as a percentage of the coverage amount depending on the degree and type of injury. The more serious the injury, the larger the payment will be. When you review the terms of an AD&D policy, you'll see charts listing specific percentages paid for each type of loss.

GET THE FACTS

AD&D insurance provides you with the opportunity to plan ahead for the protection of you and your family from the unforeseen financial hardship of a serious accident causing death or dismemberment. If you aren't familiar with AD&D coverage, or you would like additional information about the benefit it provides to you and your family, contact the VFW Member Benefits and Insurance Department at 1-800-821-2606, Option 1.


Horses

<continued from page 20>

happens here," she said.

In addition to the lack of quantifiable data, cost deters VA hospitals from utilizing horse riding as a form of therapy. To combat this, many facilities offer reduced rates for veterans or for VA hospitals.

BraveHearts delivers riding programs at no cost to veterans or VA hospitals. Hill-McQueeny said, "The greatest benefit is that every veteran who wants to can attend. We do this because these men and women served our country and fought for our freedom."

BraveHearts has seen its numbers increase exponentially over recent years as more credence is given to therapeutic riding and as more veterans and therapists recommend it.

A LIFE FOREVER ALTERED

Montijo said that as he rode more frequently, he was more apt to interact with employees and volunteers.

"It was getting easier to be back in social situations," he said. "The lessons learned with the horses help me because it carries into real-life situations. Horses help me help others."

His medications continue to be reduced under the guidance of his psychologist. His life was so dramatically altered through riding that he chose to become certified through PATH International. Now he is among the first veterans at BraveHearts to become a therapeutic riding instructor after being a participant.

"I really felt that if I could reach just one person—one veteran—this journey would all be worth it," he said. "I hope to reach a hundred, or a thousand, but that one veteran was the reason I did it."

Montijo's future is hopeful. He now instructs veterans who are where he was just a year ago. And he continues to work with the horses that have brought him to the place of peace he so greatly sought.

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