

Faces of

One Journalist's
Crusade to
Improve Treatment
for Our Veterans



Combat



PTSD & TBI

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING JOURNALIST

ERIC NEWHOUSE

FACES OF COMBAT

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One Journalist's Crusade
to Improve Treatment
for Our Veterans

Eric Newhouse

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Helping the brain adjust

Neurotherapy helps reduce the symptoms of PTSD. The VA is not currently allowing the treatment to be used in some government facilities. However, private practitioners are using it with success and hope to convince the VA to change its current position.

As has been mentioned, there are some very interesting treatment options, but not all of them are available to combat vets through the VA, a government agency that can be cautious, stodgy, and bureaucratic. One of them is a new form of neurotherapy, Alpha-Stim, now offered through the Rimrock Foundation of Billings, Montana. Rimrock has been offering neurotherapy to civilians for the past few years after it lost its government contract to provide care to combat vets. Rimrock treated 176 combat vets between 2002 and 2004 before the VA switched its contract to Billings Mental Health. “If we’d had Alpha-Stim [direct electrical stimulation of the brain] when we were doing our vets, every one of them

would have been on this,” Mona Sumner, Rimrock’s chief operations officer, told me.

Rimrock is finding that this therapy is working wonders with abused women suffering from PTSD, as well as drug addicts and alcoholics. It said neurotherapy cuts down on the desire to use drugs, as well as reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia.

In a short session, that relief came to Mandy Smith, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and seeks help from the thoughts shooting uncontrollably through her mind. It’s been a day of tears and anger for this 24-year-old abuse victim and former drug addict, who can feel the tension in her forehead and all but see the etched lines that arch up across her forehead from the bridge of her nose.

Soft music is playing and the lights are dim as Smith plugs onto each earlobe an electrode attached to a device resembling an iPod. Her session will be 20 minutes.

Developed by Dr. Daniel L. Kirsch, onetime clinical director of the Center for Pain and Stress-Related Disorders at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, the device blows a gentle electrical current through her brain. It has the same frequency as an alpha brainwave, the state that people who meditate seek to achieve. It’s described as being awake but relaxed, the peace you feel on awakening or just before going to sleep.

The current is believed to stimulate groups of nerve cells located near the stem of the brain. Those clusters produce neurotransmitters (serotonin and acetylcholine), which modulate brain activity.

“This has been a brutal week for me because of a relationship I was in and because I’m having delusional thoughts of an eating disorder,” said Smith as the treatment begins. “Now that I don’t drink or do drugs anymore, the eating disorder is a way of messing up my head.”

After her best friend died in a car wreck at 15, Smith became an alcoholic and then a drug addict. Now she’s in recovery. “I’ve been smoking a lot of cigarettes this week, and I’ve been isolating because I don’t want to be around people,” she said.

Therapist Shelly Hocking sits with Smith, watching her face for signs of relaxation. “For the first three or four minutes, my thoughts were just racing,” Smith said. “But now I’m feeling some relief.”

One intrusive thought is often the brutal beating she took outside a Phoenix, Arizona, crack house before dawn one morning a few years ago. “It was just a total act of violence,” she said. “He beat me nearly to death, stabbed me eight times, including one good shot to the arm that went in one side and out the other.”

By now, the treatment is beginning to work. “Before this started, I was thinking about a lot of things, but now I’m just focusing on this conversation,” Smith said.

Although she survived the assault, Smith has seen her share of death as she abused LSD, cocaine, and methamphetamines. “I saw one friend die who was drinking and driving,” she said. “He was racing and wrapped his car around a tree. We ran up to pull him out, but he was gargling blood so it was no use.”

With about four minutes left in her treatment, the tension lines in Smith’s forehead dissolve and she just looks terribly tired. “I’ve been medicated for years, but this is the best way of dealing with this anxiety,” she said. “You feel a lot better, and you’re not numb.”

For Rimrock’s Mona Sumner, the therapy is simply extraordinary. “Mandy is pretty much a miracle child,” she said. “Her disease (addiction) is so far progressed that our staff says she doesn’t have one more relapse in her. If she relapses again, she’ll be dead.”

Lasting benefits

After the session, the peace can remain for days. Patients who have been stabilized usually use the machine once or twice a week, Sumner said. “This particular intervention has been one of the most significant therapies that we’ve found. It was a defining moment for the Rimrock Foundation when we began to use it.”

It’s particularly helpful for treating depression, anxiety, and insomnia, all of which are symptoms of PTSD, said Jon Gjersing, Rimrock’s director of nursing. Also called cranial electrotherapy stimulation, Alpha-Stim has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as a treatment. Stimulators cost \$400 to \$600, and are available only with a doctor’s prescription.

The Center for Mental Health in Great Falls, which has one of the VA contracts to treat combat vets, doesn't offer neurotherapy; its medical director, Dr. Michael Mason, said he was unfamiliar with Alpha-Stim. Teresa Bell, spokeswoman for the VA at Fort Harrison, said the agency doesn't normally use neurotherapy as a treatment. Instead, it relies on cognitive therapy, medications, and a program called Vet-to-Vet in which combat vets help each other with common problems.

But Gjersing said it has proven valuable in treating depression. "Statistics show that 65 percent of all people in treatment suffer from depression," he said.

With PTSD, the brain is hyperactive and can't slow itself down, he added. "A lot of people go from the sleep mode directly into the anxiety mode. This machine sets up a low-frequency radio wave, and the brain responds to it by slowing down." The anxiety will probably return in hours or days, but not as severely as it did before, said Gjersing.

It's also effective on traumatic brain injuries, said Sumner, adding, "It seems to target the damaged part of the brain to work on." And it can be used to reduce chronic pain, Gjersing said. "It seems to change how the brain processes pain. We do know that depression and anxiety exacerbate pain."

A study group of 3,200 patients in Texas showed no adverse side effects, said Sumner, although it shouldn't be used by patients with medical implants. Rimrock is now using Alpha-Stim on most of the young women it's treating for trauma and drug abuse, Sumner said, "And it's made a tremendous difference for them."

Paranoia becomes bearable

Anxiety attacks have been severe for Cara, a 26-year-old mother of two sons who asked that her last name not be used because she fears her ex-husband, whom she described as a wife-abusing meth dealer. "There's a restraining order against him," she said softly, "but that's only a piece of paper."

At 13, she said, she was molested by an uncle for several years before she ran away and turned to drugs for relief. When she got pregnant, she stopped doing drugs and got married. Meth tore that

marriage apart, she said. “I started using meth again shortly before our divorce, but it didn’t save our marriage,” said Cara.

Actually, it made things worse. He beat her badly, and she had to leave their home in Idaho with their children. “But after I filed for divorce, he wouldn’t let it go,” Cara said. “He stalked me and the people he sold meth to stalked me. It was a scary time.”

Cara came to Montana and sought treatment at Rimrock. She lived in constant terror in a group home with an undisclosed location. “I had to have all the blinds at the house pulled down, and I wouldn’t go outside,” Cara said. “I had to peek out the windows all the time, keep track of all the cars coming and going, make notes of all the different license plates. Living in a state of fear all the time made my heart race.”

The Alpha-Stim treatment has eased that anxiety a lot, she said. “The first two weeks I was here, I couldn’t sit and watch a movie with my kids,” Cara said. “But now I can sit and relax with them. I know that change is because of the Alpha-Stim because when one of my kids got sick and I missed my treatments for two weeks, I could feel the difference. I was back up at the windows again.”

Cara had originally been prescribed Wellbutrin, an antidepressant, but the neurotherapy treatments have been so successful she’s quit taking medications. “I’m grateful for that,” Cara said. “It numbed me, and I didn’t want to be dependant on drugs again.”

Shut down by the VA

Keli Remus, who runs Chinook Winds Counseling in Great Falls, is a big fan of Alpha-Stim. “I started using it on September 9,” he said. “You know something is working when you can remember the exact day you bought it.”

Remus is a counselor who now specializes in PTSD patients under contract to the VA; he started as a sex-abuse counselor. He said that trying to help those victims gave him a secondary case of PTSD. “I was having nightmares four, five, and six times a week,” he said. “And nothing helped. But with Alpha-Stim, they’re almost gone, down by about 95 percent. I only get one or two a month now.”

Based on that personal experience, Remus began using the device on his VA patients and found that it was equally effective. “I was using it on guys who had anxiety and depression. They could calm down and relax so that things registered. Then they began to show a significant change, long-term. I saw that they could think better and function better. One of my guys who struggles with anger was able to remain calm while he sat in a traffic jam.”

Unfortunately, when his clients went back down to Fort Harrison for their checkups, they began to talk about how much better they were. “They called me in and ordered me to cease and desist,” said Remus. “So I did. Not only will they not pay for this treatment, but they won’t even let me use it in any session that the VA pays for. But I’m hoping and praying that the VA will change course and allow me to use it.”

Neurofeedback may help normalize the brain

At the EEG Institute in Woodland Hills, California, just north of Los Angeles, counselors use Alpha-Stim to relax patients in the beginning sessions of their treatment, but go far beyond that, clinical director Sue Othner told me. Their treatment is true neurofeedback.

“The essence of neurofeedback is that it’s training our brains, fine-tuning them,” said Othner. “We’re teaching the brain how to shift down to a calmer state and relax.”

That involves putting electrodes on a patient and allowing him to play computer games with his emotions. The two calmest brain waves are called alpha and beta, and the patient is working to achieve these calming frequencies. By watching to see what works, the patients learn to control their own brain waves and learn how to quiet their own anxieties.

That’s important, Othner said, because the anxiety tends to block the brain from processing the trauma that injured it. “You can replay minor incidents until you defuse them,” she said. “But in trauma, it’s hard to process anything. The experience sits there unresolved, so it has the weight of an ongoing experience.”

Her husband, Siegfried Othner, said PTSD is basically a physiological memory. “The memory of a traumatic event rivets itself

into the body-mind, a physiological memory. The whole body recalls the injury. So the remedy lies in restructuring the memory by allowing the person to benignly experience the memory. And that brings about a separation between the body memory and the mind memory. Then the person can go back and visit that memory safely.”

The first step is to put the person very much at ease, a state where the body has this healing experience. “We put him in a state just short of sleep. Then the brain ruminates about its own self because the external environment is absent. It ruminates about those traumas. They may come up in a veiled fashion, or they may come up rather vividly. But the brain doesn’t go anywhere that a person can’t handle because the vivid memories startle the person out of that state,” said Siegfried Othner.

The trauma has to come out and be processed before the true healing can take place, Sue Othner said. “In a deep state, you feel safe and calm and relaxed, and your brain can process that trauma. Your brain has wanted to do this work, but it has been blocked by your emotions. So it can be fairly dramatic when those images come forth. I did a session with a Vietnam vet, a medic, who basically saw every bad thing that had happened to him in Vietnam during a 40-minute session. In Vietnam, he was totally devastated, exhausted, covered with sores, and he totally fell apart. After the session, he told me he had developed a totally new image of himself, and that finally allowed him to talk about his experiences.”

She said their work builds on the research done during the 1960s by E.G. Peniston, a VA counselor who found neurofeedback very helpful in dealing with Vietnam vets. Now the EEG Institute offers that help free of charge to combat vets with PTSD. “It was clear that it had a huge influence for veterans,” said Sue Othner.

But her husband can’t figure out why this treatment hasn’t been more popular. “We see a couple of veterans at a time, but we should be flooded with them,” said Siegfried Othner. “We’ve got occasional vets, all doing well, but we’re not crowded. I don’t understand it. It gets to be enormously frustrating.”

Unfortunately, the vet that the Othners considered their star patient and recommended for an interview about his success told me he was too stressed out from his dealings with the VA to talk about the treatment.