Abstract

Objective: Evaluate the impact of expressive therapies on reducing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in military veterans.

Methods: Five databases were searched for articles published between 2014–2022 that addressed the effect of the expressive therapies of art, dance, drama, music, and writing on PTSD symptoms in military veterans. Articles were categorized based on decreases in PTSD symptoms, veterans’ triggered responses, participants recommending expressive therapy/finding it helpful, and increased well-being and/or quality of life. Discussion: Outcomes were not dependent on the setting, and art was the most commonly used expressive therapy. Combining two types of therapies was effective. Conclusion: Expressive therapies are effective in reducing PTSD symptoms in military veterans.

Background

PTSD is caused by traumatic events, and leads to symptoms such as distress, anxiety, and depression that decrease overall quality of life. Expressive therapies such as music, dance, art, drama, and writing are emerging as treatments for PTSD symptoms. The prevalence and complexity of PTSD make the use of newer interventions such as expressive therapies a pertinent area of interest for occupational therapists and other allied health professionals.

Methods

The following databases were searched: PubMed, Scopus, Embase, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature, and PsychINFO. Search terms: (“art” OR “music” OR “dance” OR “drama” OR “writing therapy”* OR “expressive therapy”*) AND (“post-traumatic stress disorder” OR “PTSD” OR “post-traumatic stress disease” AND (veteran* OR “military”)

Results

The final review included 20 studies of expressive therapies for treatment of PTSD symptoms in military veterans. Ten studies used art as an expressive therapy, one involved dance, six involved music, and four involved writing. The studies measured the following outcomes: decrease in PTSD symptoms, veterans’ triggered responses, participants recommending expressive therapy/finding it helpful, and increased well-being and/or quality of life. This review found that:

- 87.5% of studies directly examined participants’ decreases in PTSD symptoms after art, writing, or music therapy.
- 18.75% of studies noted that participants self-reported triggering symptoms during music or art therapy.
- 18.75% of participants reported they would recommend art music or writing therapy.
- 31.25% of participants found that art, music, or dance therapy improved their well-being and quality of life.

Discussion

Expressive therapies are effective in reducing PTSD symptoms. Structured expressive therapy sessions were more effective in reducing symptoms of PTSD than unstructured sessions.

Conclusion

Expressive therapies are effective in treating veterans with PTSD in various settings. While there is evidence supporting the implementation of expressive therapies as an intervention for veterans with PTSD, further research would strengthen these findings.