



Exploring the Role of Physiotherapy in the Recovery of PTSD Among Veterans

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a widespread and debilitating mental health condition, particularly among military veterans who have been exposed to combat, violence, or other traumatic experiences during their service. While PTSD is often understood primarily as a psychological disorder, its effects are deeply physical as well, manifesting in chronic pain, muscle tension, fatigue, and other somatic symptoms. Traditional treatments for PTSD typically focus on psychotherapy and medication, but a growing body of evidence suggests that physiotherapy, with its emphasis on physical rehabilitation and pain management, can play a vital role in the holistic recovery of veterans affected by PTSD. This editorial explores the potential benefits of incorporating physiotherapy into PTSD treatment for veterans, examining its role in addressing both the physical and emotional dimensions of trauma.

The unique challenges of PTSD in veterans

Veterans are at a high risk for developing PTSD due to their exposure to traumatic events in combat zones, such as violent encounters, the loss of comrades, and the constant threat of death or injury. PTSD can have profound psychological effects, including flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, and hyperarousal [1]. However, the physical symptoms are often just as debilitating, with many veterans reporting chronic pain, muscle stiffness, headaches, and physical tension that result from prolonged stress and trauma. These somatic symptoms are frequently exacerbated by the hypervigilance and muscle tension associated with PTSD, leading to a cycle of physical discomfort and emotional distress that can hinder recovery.

The physical manifestation of PTSD is not merely a byproduct of trauma—it is an integral part of the disorder. Research has shown that PTSD can disrupt the body's autonomic nervous system (ANS), which regulates functions such as heart rate, breathing, and muscle tension. Veterans with PTSD may experience chronic pain syndromes, sleep disturbances, and heightened sensitivity to physical stimuli. These physical symptoms can be so intense that they interfere with veterans' ability to engage in daily life, let alone seek psychological treatment. As a result, addressing the somatic aspects of PTSD through physiotherapy may offer a complementary strategy to the standard psychological treatments.

The role of physiotherapy in PTSD rehabilitation

Physiotherapy is often overlooked in PTSD treatment, but it offers unique therapeutic benefits, particularly for veterans whose physical health has been compromised by trauma. At its core, physiotherapy is designed to restore physical function, alleviate pain, and enhance overall mobility—goals that align well with the needs of PTSD sufferers. Techniques like manual therapy, myofascial release, posture correction, and guided movement exercises can help reduce the chronic tension and pain that many veterans experience. These interventions not only provide relief from physical discomfort but also help to break the cycle of trauma-related physical symptoms, enabling veterans to engage in other forms of treatment more effectively [2,3].

Pain management and physical rehabilitation

Chronic pain is a common complaint among PTSD sufferers, particularly veterans, many of whom have experienced physical injuries during combat. Physiotherapy provides a comprehensive

approach to pain management, using targeted exercises and therapeutic modalities such as heat, cold, and electrical stimulation to relieve discomfort. For veterans with musculoskeletal injuries or chronic pain syndromes, physiotherapy can help reduce inflammation, improve range of motion, and enhance muscle strength, all of which can make a significant difference in daily functioning [4].

Restoring movement and posture

A hallmark of PTSD is its impact on the body's physical tension, often leading to poor posture and restricted movement. Veterans with PTSD may adopt protective postures as a result of heightened anxiety or physical discomfort, leading to musculoskeletal imbalances and further exacerbating their symptoms. Physiotherapists help patients regain proper alignment and movement patterns, improving posture and mobility. Exercises designed to strengthen core muscles, improve balance, and enhance flexibility can not only reduce pain but also restore veterans' sense of control over their bodies—an essential component of trauma recovery.

Addressing the mind-body connection

One of the key benefits of physiotherapy in PTSD rehabilitation is its ability to address the mind-body connection. The physical symptoms of PTSD—such as muscle tension, headaches, and pain—are often linked to emotional stress and trauma. Physiotherapy interventions that incorporate relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation, can help veterans lower their levels of anxiety, decrease hyperarousal, and restore emotional balance. These practices complement other therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or exposure therapy, by helping veterans manage the physical symptoms that often accompany traumatic memories and emotional distress [5].

Proprioception and body awareness

Another important aspect of physiotherapy for PTSD is its focus on proprioception—the body's awareness of its position in space. Trauma can lead to dissociation, where individuals feel disconnected from their bodies or unable to respond to physical cues. By engaging in therapeutic exercises that promote body awareness, veterans can reconnect with their physical selves and regain a sense of agency over their bodies. This reconnection is

vital for emotional healing, as it helps veterans re-establish a sense of safety in their bodies and regain confidence in their physical abilities.

Stress reduction and symptom management

Techniques such as yoga, Tai Chi, or meditation, which are sometimes integrated into physiotherapy practices, can also significantly reduce PTSD symptoms. These mind-body exercises combine physical movement with focused breathwork, promoting relaxation and reducing the stress response. Research has demonstrated that regular engagement in these practices can lower cortisol levels, enhance mood, and improve emotional regulation—critical factors in PTSD recovery.

The benefits of a multidisciplinary approach

Given the complex nature of PTSD, a multidisciplinary approach that integrates physiotherapy with traditional psychological treatments can be particularly effective. For veterans, this could mean combining physical rehabilitation with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), prolonged exposure therapy, or EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing). Physiotherapists working in collaboration with psychologists or trauma specialists can provide a more holistic approach to care, addressing both the body and mind. This integration ensures that veterans receive comprehensive treatment that not only alleviates physical pain but also promotes psychological healing.

Challenges and Considerations

While the potential for physiotherapy to aid in PTSD recovery is promising, there are several challenges to its widespread implementation. First, there is a need for greater awareness and training among healthcare professionals about the benefits of physiotherapy for PTSD. Many veterans may also be hesitant to engage in physical therapy due to their past experiences with trauma or the belief that their symptoms are purely psychological. Overcoming these barriers requires a coordinated effort between physiotherapists, mental health professionals, and veteran support organizations.

Additionally, more research is needed to better understand the specific physiotherapy interventions that are most effective for PTSD. While initial studies have shown positive results, large-scale

clinical trials are necessary to establish evidence-based protocols for integrating physiotherapy into PTSD treatment plans.

Conclusion

Physiotherapy plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation of veterans with PTSD, addressing the often-overlooked physical symptoms of trauma while complementing traditional psychological therapies. By alleviating chronic pain, improving movement, and restoring body awareness, physiotherapy not only aids in physical recovery but also promotes emotional healing. For veterans, the integration of physiotherapy into PTSD treatment offers a holistic approach to recovery, fostering a stronger mind-body connection and enhancing overall well-being. As research continues to explore the intersection of physical and psychological trauma, physiotherapy could become an essential component in the comprehensive care of veterans suffering from PTSD, improving their quality of life and aiding in their long-term recovery.

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