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# Veterans Experience Using Acupuncture as an Alternative Treatment

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# Veterans Experience Using Acupuncture as an Alternative Treatment

Stacy Leet University of Southern Maine. Mentor: Professor Gerstenblatt of University of Southern Maine

## Abstract

There is growing dissatisfaction within the veteran community with their conventional health care options. This dissatisfaction has led to an increase in seeking complementary and alternative treatments, like acupuncture. There is increased need to understand the experience of veterans who use acupuncture as an alternative treatment for their physical or mental health care needs.

This phenomenological study interviewed veterans (n=6) to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences using acupuncture as alternative treatment. The outcomes of this study will add to the knowledge base and provide social workers and health providers a wider range of care options that will continue to meet the needs of this population.

## Introduction

Acupuncture as an alternative treatment has proven effective for a number of different health issues. Some of these health issues include fibromyalgia, insomnia, chronic pain, and musculoskeletal pain. The Department of Defense and the VA have recently began to implement and actively support the use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) treatments for PTSD. Acupuncture in particular has been one of the most used CAM modalities used to treat veterans. This integrative approach for veterans is attractive within military and VA settings because acupuncture promotes a holistic approach to patient care, has minimal side effects, is a low-cost treatment, and potentially avoids the stigma of receiving mental health care services (King et al, 2016).

## Questions/Objective

**What is the experience of veterans who use acupuncture as an alternative treatment?**

- What has your experience been since you have been doing acupuncture?
- What was it about acupuncture that made you want to try it?
- Did you have any assumptions about acupuncture before you started.
- Do you also use the VA for additional health care needs?
- Would you have gone to acupuncture if it wasn't specifically for veterans?

## Methods

Phenomenology

- Phenomenology was used to understand the shared experience of veterans who choose acupuncture as an alternative treatment.
- Interviews were done to collect the experiences of the veterans.

Participants

- Three Acupuncture Clinics were contacted asking to help recruit participants.
- Two of the clinics offered to help, received six participants willing to be interviewed
- One female veteran, and five male veterans participated. One veteran was Post 9/11 and the remaining participants all served in pre 9/11 eras.

## Themes

### Theme 1: Acupuncture Helps my Body

Each participant reported a positive effect that doing acupuncture had on their bodies from overall feelings of wellness and contentment to alleviation of specific ailments. Six sub-themes emerged as ways that acupuncture helps each participant's body. (1) Helps with PTSD Symptoms. (2) Makes me feel more relaxed, (3) Helps me sleep, (4) Overall wellness and feeling more connect to my body, (5) Use as prevention, (6) Helps with specific ailments.

### Theme 2: Community.

"In a-- It's not like we're-- we have this camaraderie. I get there and when I chat with a couple of people who just happened to sit by and stuff like that. If you know that they're veterans, I had the sense, there's a certain way you can talk that you don't have to-- not to exclude people, but there is a certain shortcut to talking to fellow veterans that makes it even more comfortable."

### Theme 3: Work Around the System (figure 1)

A couple of participants felt that acupuncture was a good alternative treatment option to get help without fear of reprisal from the VA or their command if they were still serving. Another expresses concerns that since he is currently serving, he doesn't feel like he can go seek help for mental health issues.

### Theme 4: True Believer/Subscriber

"Like I said just-- I know it's helped me, I know it's helped me, I know". "I'm serious, I am a firm believer." "I just think it's good stuff. Really, I recommended it to as many people as I can almost all the time, I recommend it."

### Theme 5: Discovering Acupuncture

There were a few sub-themes around the experience of discovering acupuncture and how participants felt like it wasn't a well known/advertised treatment option, that because acupuncture has been around for thousands of years that it must be legitimate, and a feeling that they preferred a less invasive Eastern medical practice. "Like I said, I never knew about it. There was nothing out there to read, I just had no knowledge of it. When I go to Togus probably -- But I tell them at Togus. I tell them at Togus."

## References

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- King, H., Moore, C., Spence, D., (2016) Exploring self-reported benefits of auricular acupuncture among veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Holistic Nursing* 34(3), 291-299.
- Prisco, M. K., et al. (2013). Group auricular acupuncture for PTSD-related insomnia in veterans: A randomized trial. *Medical Acupuncture*, 25, 407-422.

## Results

This study aimed to understand the experience of veterans who use acupuncture as an alternative treatment. We know from previous research that a growing number of veterans are choosing to seek treatment outside of the VA system. The results of this study suggest that while this experience is also true of the six veterans who participated, there were also other significant experiences that led to continued interest and participation for using acupuncture.

The 5 themes of these significant experiences include, acupuncture helps my body, sense of community, a work around the system, true believer/subscriber, and discovering acupuncture.

Significant Statement	Meaning Units (MU)
Not a time because I'm still in and there are some risks with doing that. I try to stay away from the VA	It can be harmful to go get help at the VA since I am still serving
Then I went to VA, they're like oh we want to do all this stuff for PTSD because when I came back, the primary care was like "okay we want to get you evaluated for PTSD." As a service member who's still in-- If you separate from active duty or whatever and you're out, out, out, who cares? If you're still in and you hold a security clearance already. There's a lot of risk with going to the VA and saying, "Hey I need something to help me calm down" because I went to them and they were like "oh we should come on and we want to start this therapy blah blah blah". That's not cool, because the military tends to punish people for getting help even though they're trying to get rid of the stigma of not getting help. No one's going to do that really...	Acupuncture is a good alternative treatment for PTSD symptoms if you are still serving and are fearful that getting treatment from the VA will hurt your career
Because I told him (Dr.) about that, that acupuncture helped, he's almost lost interest in working on my legs. I think that the veterans, the young veterans, I think afraid to go into acupuncture. This is my thoughts. I think they're afraid to go into it because then the VA will say, "Hey, you don't need this. That's going to cure you." They're going to drop the VA claim.	Fear of going to VA and letting them know acupuncture helps. Might lose their VA service connected disability.

Figure 1: Theme 3

## Discussion

There is limited research on veterans and acupuncture, and even less on understanding the experience. Two recent studies found that the use of acupuncture improved sleep disturbances and insomnia in veterans with PTSD (Cronin & Conboy, 2013; Prisco et al., 2013). Another study also found that veterans who used acupuncture had improved symptoms in the following areas different body pain, headaches, medical complaints, such as allergy, respiratory symptoms, gastrointestinal dysfunction, and poor sleep, and psychological complaints, such as anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression (Huang et al. 2013).

This study found similar results with help alleviating specific body ailments, but it also found that acupuncture is helping in a broad way. There were physical as well as emotional benefits that gave people a sense of community to participate in weekly acupuncture clinics with other veterans and people who are there in support of veterans. Many of the veterans wished they had known about acupuncture sooner so they could have reaped the benefits of treatment.

Acupuncture served as a whole body experience and support for many of the veterans who attended the clinics, and the benefits went beyond just the physical, it also provided community and a sense of agency in their treatment that they didn't always feel like they were getting in other aspects of their medical/mental health care.

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