



## BOB WOODRUFF FOUNDATION

# Understanding the Role of Complementary and Integrative Health in Treating PTSD

## ISSUE/CHALLENGE

Complementary and integrative health (CIH) involves products and practices that are not currently part of mainstream, conventional medical practice. (“Complementary” refers to using those practices in combination with conventional approaches; “integrative health” refers to coordinating conventional and complementary approaches to provide care for the whole person.)<sup>1</sup> Recently, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) approved various CIH practices—including acupuncture, biofeedback, and yoga—as part of its standard package of medical benefits for veterans (see list to the right).<sup>2</sup> VA will cover such treatments, either at VA facilities or in non-VA settings, when they are deemed clinically necessary by a veteran’s care team.

Many CIH practices have proved to be popular with veterans who are struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, those practices are not supported by strong evidence for their effectiveness as primary treatments for PTSD. Providers and patients should understand both the limitations and the benefits of CIH.

## KEY FINDINGS

The popularity and availability of complementary and integrative health practices are increasing in both civilian and military spaces, especially for veterans with PTSD.<sup>3</sup> Such veterans are 25 percent more likely than veterans without PTSD to use CIH practices, particularly biofeedback and relaxation techniques.<sup>4</sup> Access to CIH is growing as VA expands the availability of related services. According to the department, all VA facilities now offer CIH approaches to care, though not all of them offer the full range of CIH services approved by VA.<sup>5</sup>

Various CIH practices can provide relaxation, decrease stress, and reduce migraines—things that can all be challenges for people with PTSD. But there is not yet sufficient evidence that CIH is effective as a primary treatment for PTSD.<sup>6</sup> As a result, VA’s and the Department of Defense’s latest clinical practice guidelines for managing PTSD encourage the use of CIH as a supplemental treatment.<sup>7</sup> For primary treatment, those guidelines continue to recommend conventional trauma-focused psychotherapies, such as prolonged exposure (PE), cognitive processing therapy (CPT), and eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR).<sup>8</sup>

## TYPES OF COMPLEMENTARY AND INTEGRATIVE HEALTH PRACTICES

The CIH practices approved by VA include acupuncture, biofeedback, clinical hypnosis, guided imagery, massage therapy, meditation, tai chi, qigong, and yoga. Some of those treatments were developed in modern times; others date back thousands of years.

- In acupuncture, practitioners insert fine needles into a patient’s skin at specific points to treat health problems.
- Biofeedback involves using the body’s own signals (such as breath, heart rate, and skin temperature) to learn how to make healthy changes. Sensors applied to a patient’s skin monitor those signals and display them on a screen. With guidance from the practitioner, the patient adjusts things like posture, movement, muscle clenching, or types of thoughts to see how they alter those signals (such as by slowing down breathing or heart rate). With practice, patients can learn to create the same bodily changes on their own to promote relaxation and reduce stress. Biofeedback also includes neurofeedback, which focuses on changes in brain-wave signals.
- Clinical hypnosis involves putting a patient in a trance state, which typically makes someone more open to suggestions about behavioral changes. The clinician uses that state to encourage the patient to make helpful cognitive, emotional, or physical changes. Without such encouragement from a clinician, hypnosis rarely has lasting benefits beyond relaxation and temporary stress reduction.
- Guided imagery is a multisensory visualization technique that encourages patients to imagine themselves in situations or places that promote a sense of well-being, triggering therapeutic changes in physiology, emotions, or mental state.
- Clinical massage therapy manipulates muscles and other soft tissues of the body for therapeutic purposes.
- Meditation primarily involves learning how to regulate attention, with the aim of cultivating general mental well-being or specific capacities such as concentration, compassion, or insight. Meditation includes mindfulness and related approaches, such as a type of therapy called mindfulness-based stress reduction.
- Tai chi is a mind and body exercise that combines slow-flowing intentional movements with breathing, awareness, and visualization. Qigong is a related practice that focuses on cultivating the body’s vital energy (qi) and coordinating breath, posture, awareness, visualization, and focused movements.
- Yoga is a mind and body practice that combines physical positions, breathing techniques, and meditation or relaxation.

## DISCUSSION

CIH practices are popular among veterans because they are easy to use, often pleasurable, frequently delivered in informal settings, and sometimes less expensive than clinical care. CIH can be an opportunity for service members and veterans who are hesitant to receive clinical services.<sup>9</sup>

The veterans and service members most likely to benefit from CIH include those with minor PTSD symptoms, those who have not improved with traditional treatment, or those who use CIH as a supplement to traditional treatment. For veterans reluctant to participate in clinical therapy, seeing benefits with CIH might encourage them to seek clinical care as further treatment.

Unfortunately, some CIH providers overpromise positive results, do not follow medical guidance, or offer CIH as a primary treatment without considering which patients it would be most appropriate for. Those failings risk the health of veterans with PTSD by making such veterans less likely to seek effective clinical care.

## About Stand SMART For Heroes

The Bob Woodruff Foundation is proud to partner with best-in-class scientific organizations to provide important research findings to the community of organizations that represent and serve post-9/11 veterans, service members, families, and caregivers.

For more information on the Bob Woodruff Foundation and Stand SMART For Heroes, please see [bobwoodrufffoundation.org](https://bobwoodrufffoundation.org).

## GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

Clinical treatment supplemented by complementary and integrative health practices can provide some benefits to veterans and service members with PTSD. The likelihood of that outcome will increase if organizations that serve those populations pursue the following goals:

- Help veterans and service members with PTSD understand that evidence-based clinical care is more likely than CIH to resolve their PTSD symptoms.
- Present CIH accurately, as an additional tool for reducing PTSD symptoms when used with evidence-based therapy.
- Screen appropriate participants for CIH and refer clients to evidence-based clinical care if appropriate.

## RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer L. Strauss, Ariel J. Lang, and Paula P. Schnurr, "Complementary and Integrative Health for PTSD" (Department of Veterans Affairs, October 30, 2018), <https://tinyurl.com/2t4khdau>. Previously, CIH practices were called complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), but providers have switched to calling them CIH because "alternative" suggests unproven practices that are used in place of conventional medicine rather than alongside it. See, for example, National Institutes of Health, "NIH Complementary and Integrative Health Agency Gets New Name" (news release, December 17, 2014), <https://tinyurl.com/yc77dn59>.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, "Whole Health: Integrative Health Coordinating Center" (February 14, 2023), [www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/professional-resources/IHCC.asp](https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/professional-resources/IHCC.asp).

<sup>3</sup> Strauss, Lang, and Schnurr, "Complementary and Integrative Health for PTSD."

<sup>4</sup> Mark A. Micek and others, "Complementary and Alternative Medicine Use Among Veterans Affairs Outpatients," *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, vol. 13, no. 2 (March 2007), pp. 190–193, <https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2006.6147>.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, "Whole Health: Integrative Health Coordinating Center."

<sup>6</sup> Strauss, Lang, and Schnurr, "Complementary and Integrative Health for PTSD."

<sup>7</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense, *VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for Management of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder*, version 4.0 (June 2023), pp. 33–34, <https://tinyurl.com/37zt67t5>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>9</sup> Strauss, Lang, and Schnurr, "Complementary and Integrative Health for PTSD."