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The Safing Center Treatment Philosophy (06/03/2016)

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant and complex health issue faced by many Veterans and their families (Dichter, Cerulli, & Bossarte, 2011; Marshall, 2005; Sadler, 2000; Teten et al., 2010). Veterans are at increased risk for using and/or experiencing violence than their civilian counterparts, given the unique stressors posed by military life and higher rates of mental illness and substance use among Veterans. In particular, those who have served in the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan may be at even higher risk, given the multiple deployments and the increased percentage of couples who both served in the armed forces (Jakupcak, 2007; Millikin, 2007).

The Safing Center approaches IPV from a psychosocial rehabilitation framework (PSR) to guide screening, assessment, and intervention. The cornerstone of this approach is the recognition that **use or experience of violence does not define the individual**. As such, we use person-first language such as “Veterans who use violence” rather than “abuser” or “batterer” and “Veterans who experience violence” rather than “victim” or “survivor.” While we refer to those who use violence and those who experience violence, in some cases, these lines are not easily drawn and couples may be engaging in mutual violence. Adoption of this PSR framework includes the following assumptions:

- 1) IPV occurs because of a combination of personal, relational, societal, and contextual variables that will differ across individuals
- 2) IPV must be understood in context—that is, treatment must address and consider the role of contributing factors such as combat trauma; childhood trauma; ethnic, gender and cultural oppression; relationship dynamics; gender role norms; mental health symptoms; and beliefs about violence, among others
- 3) Violence cessation does not occur in isolation and therefore must be addressed comprehensively
- 4) Providers must approach their work with Veterans around violence from a collaborative and respectful stance
- 5) Violence is never condoned and safety is paramount. We work collaboratively and compassionately to achieve violence cessation

IPV-related care should be provided on a continuum with the recognition that IPV is not a psychiatric diagnosis, and Veterans presenting with this concern should be individually assessed to determine the best course of treatment. Treatment through the Safing Center incorporates IPV-specific interventions (e.g., safety planning, communication/conflict management) as well as education, supportive counseling for problem-solving and resource provision, group and individual treatments for correlates of DV/IPV (e.g., PTSD, depression, substance misuse), family consultation on an as-needed basis, and couples therapy as indicated.



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Eligibility Requirements

Individual Therapy

Whether they are using or experiencing violence, individuals seeking treatment through the Safing Center must demonstrate a desire to change and a willingness to engage in the therapeutic work. Additionally, individuals must commit to establishing safety in their relationship to the full extent possible. Contact with partners and/or children will be initiated as needed because holistic context informs more effective treatment. The treatment team will work collaboratively with individuals to determine the appropriate treatment plan and modality.

Couples Therapy

Assessment for couples therapy always occurs in individual meetings with each partner. There are a few clear criteria for non-inclusion:

- Either partner is unwilling to commit to work in treatment toward ending violence in the relationship
- Either partner reports fear of injury, death, or physical reprisal as a result of engaging openly and honestly in treatment
- History of recent and/or severe violence in the relationship (i.e., resulting in need to receive medical attention, whether or not it was sought)

If it is determined that couples therapy is not appropriate at this time, both partners could decide to pursue individual therapy in the Safing Center so long as they are eligible.

Non-Veteran Partner Therapy

When the treatment team determines that individual work with the non-Veteran partner would support the Veteran's goals and the safety of both partners, we will engage in brief, goal-oriented, individual treatment.

Justice-Involved Individuals

We provide treatment to individuals who are connected with the justice system with ongoing legal concerns, often in collaboration with Veteran's Justice Outreach (VJO). **The Safing Center is not recognized as a state-certified batterer intervention program (BIP)**, though some courts may consider the Safing Center as a viable alternative to traditional models of IPV treatment. Veterans who are mandated to treatment are encouraged to consult with their referrer regarding specific requirements for mandated treatment.

During the course of treatment, Veterans may request letters of support. These letters will be released directly to the Veteran and content is typically limited to a brief description of the Safing Center, dates of treatment, number of sessions attended, and rates of attendance. If a Veteran requires further documentation related to treatment, they will be directed to access their medical records (i.e., progress notes, treatment plan, and/or termination summary) which they may provide at their own discretion. We do not issue "certificates of graduation" – this is because how we measure successful treatment outcome is individually tailored. Our treatment goal, whenever



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possible, is to address the underlying contextual factors that led to use of violence in order to prevent future occurrence.

Families

When the treatment team determines it appropriate, other family members may be involved in treatment (e.g., children, close relatives). Family involvement may range from single-session consultation/family support to more intensive ongoing family therapy. The decision to involve family members in treatment is a collaborative process done with the Veteran.

Compassionate and Collaborative Care

Treatment in the Safing Center begins with an effort to understand each individual's unique needs and relationship context, with a focus on prioritizing safety first.

Individual Treatment

In the assessment phase of treatment, we work with the individual to understand:

- Why he/she is currently seeking support
- How he/she understands what has happened in his/her relationship
- Relationship history, including attention to relational style and beliefs about relationships
- What he/she think needs to change for things to get better
- What his/her communication styles or patterns are
- How he/she handles conflict
- Relevant risk and protective factors, including current and historic stressors

Couples Treatment

Before beginning couples therapy, we explore each of the questions above. We work with the couple during early treatment to ensure clear understanding of how these individual factors interact with one another in the context of their relationship. It is important to us to establish safety, and one key method to do so is to provide a space where both of their experiences can be heard. We believe that “no one can be accountable unless they feel counted.”

Working With Other Programs

The Safing Center employs an integrative approach to addressing IPV among Veterans, their partners, and family members. We coordinate care across a variety of available services, including Veterans Justice Outreach, psychiatry, mental health, and wrap-around VA programs such as supported housing, education, and employment services. Additionally, the Safing Center works collaboratively with community agencies to provide Veterans with access to safe housing during crisis situations, legal advocacy, and domestic violence services as needed.



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The Safing Center does not provide adjunctive therapeutic treatment. If a Veteran is already working with another therapist, we are happy to provide consultation to the therapist on how to integrate the IPV work into the current therapy. We do not, however, “treat just the violence.” We can provide crisis management for acute distress and facilitate referrals to community agencies as needed. If a veteran is interested in using couples psychotherapy in the Safing Center to supplement ongoing individual psychotherapy, we will work with the Veteran and their individual therapist to determine appropriateness and timing of this intervention.

If you have questions or concerns about how our treatment philosophy in the Safing Center aligns with specific clinical or legal needs, please contact us at 781-687-3998.