

Short communication

## Behavioral couples therapy for comorbid substance use disorders and combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder among male veterans: An initial evaluation

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### Abstract

Outcomes after behavioral couples therapy (BCT) were compared for 19 dually diagnosed veterans with combat-related PTSD and a substance use disorder (SUD, primarily alcohol dependence) and 19 veterans with SUD only. Clients with and without comorbid PTSD had very similar pre-treatment clinical profiles on dimensions of substance misuse, relationship functioning, and psychological symptoms. Further, both PTSD and non-PTSD clients showed good compliance with BCT, attending a high number of BCT sessions, taking Antabuse, and going to AA. Finally, both PTSD and non-PTSD groups improved from before BCT to immediately after and 12 months after BCT. Specific improvements noted were increased relationship satisfaction and reductions in drinking, negative consequences of drinking, male-to-female violence, and psychological distress symptoms. Extent and pattern of improvement over time were similar whether the client had PTSD or not. The present results suggest that BCT may have promise in treating clients with comorbid SUD and combat-related PTSD.

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*Keywords:* PTSD; Couples therapy; Alcohol dependence; Dual-diagnosis; Treatment outcome

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## 1. Introduction

Substance use disorder (SUD) and PTSD comorbidity are quite high in treatment and community samples, with especially high SUD rates among military veterans with combat-related PTSD (e.g., Boudewyns, Albrecht, Talbert, & Hyer, 1991). Also, veterans with PTSD have more severe SUD problems than veterans without PTSD. Further, some studies have found worse substance abuse treatment outcomes for veterans with PTSD compared to those without PTSD (e.g., Ouimette, Finney, & Moos, 1999). These studies generally found that PTSD negatively affected treatment outcome in that SUD patients with PTSD drank more and had more severe psychosocial problems in the 2 years after SUD treatment.

Veterans with PTSD have more severe marital and family problems than veterans without PTSD (e.g., Jordan et al., 1992). Symptoms of PTSD, such as emotional numbing and interpersonal withdrawal, often impair the veteran's family relationships. In recognition of this fact, family concepts and therapy have appeared in the clinical traumatic stress literature. However, in the only controlled study of its kind, behavioral family therapy did not improve outcomes of an exposure-based treatment of combat-related PTSD without SUD (Glynn et al., 1999).

Returning to the treatment of SUD patients, behavioral couples therapy (BCT) has received consistent empirical support. BCT produces greater abstinence and better relationship functioning than individual-

Table 1  
Demographic information on the SUD-PTSD sample ( $n=19$ ) and on the SUD-only matched comparison sample ( $n=19$ )

|                               | PTSD sample   | Comparison sample | $t$ or $\chi^2$ | $p$  |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|-----------------|------|
| <i>Matching variables</i>     |               |                   |                 |      |
| Client                        |               |                   |                 |      |
| Age                           | 48.32 (7.70)  | 48.16 (8.30)      | 0.21            | .836 |
| Years education               | 13.05 (2.51)  | 13.00 (1.60)      | 0.11            | .916 |
| Length of relationship        | 14.53 (13.03) | 13.42 (11.47)     | 0.83            | .419 |
| Race/ethnicity                |               |                   | 0.00            | 1.00 |
| White                         | 94.74%        | 94.74%            |                 |      |
| African-American              | 5.26%         | 5.26%             |                 |      |
| Other                         | 0             | 0                 |                 |      |
| Partner                       |               |                   |                 |      |
| Age                           | 44.79 (7.51)  | 45.47 (8.21)      | -0.39           | .702 |
| Years education               | 13.79 (2.10)  | 12.95 (2.32)      | 1.22            | .238 |
| Race/ethnicity                |               |                   | -1.51           | .132 |
| White                         | 84.2%         | 89.5%             |                 |      |
| African-American              | 10.5%         | 5.3%              |                 |      |
| Other                         | 5.3%          | 5.3%              |                 |      |
| <i>Couple characteristics</i> |               |                   |                 |      |
| Marital status                |               |                   |                 |      |
| Married                       | 84.2%         | 89.5%             | 0.00            | 1.00 |
| Cohabiting                    | 15.8%         | 10.5%             |                 |      |

Note. Data presented are mean with standard deviation in parentheses for continuous variables and percentage of subjects in each category for categorical variables. The two samples were compared with paired  $t$ -tests for continuous variables and McNemar Chi-Square for categorical variables.

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