

# WRIISC *Advantage*

WINTER 2019

## **INSIDE THIS ISSUE:**

Read about our  
**ACCOMPLISHMENTS**  
in 2018

**FREE** phone-based  
**MINDFULNESS MEDITATION** and  
**iREST™ YOGA NIDRA CLASSES**  
for Veterans

**Learn about our**  
**TELEHEALTH SERVICES**





This issue of **WRIISC Advantage** focuses on highlights of our research, clinical, and education accomplishments over the last fiscal year (October 1, 2017 - September 30, 2018). In addition, as VA has increased the use of telehealth to improve Veterans' access to health services, the WRIISC is looking to reach and support more Veterans using telehealth. Here we discuss some of those efforts.

## DIRECTORS' CORNER

Over the past 18 years WRIISC has continued to advance our research, clinical, and educational services. While our services have changed and expanded, one thing that has remained consistent over the years is our commitment to giving Veterans' exceptional care. To date, WRIISC programs have provided over 10,000 Veterans with clinical evaluations, exposure assessments, and/or health education services. This past year WRIISC has looked at how to utilize telehealth to reach more Veterans. Provider education about difficult to diagnose conditions remains a top priority. WRIISC has created educational content to support clinicians to better respond to Veterans with these conditions and review best practices to effectively manage symptoms. Our accomplishments this past year (discussed below) illustrate ongoing efforts to remain on the front lines of excellence in post-deployment health care. We're excited to move forward by continuing to offer **services that will make a positive difference in Veterans' health!**



*Wes Ashford, MD, PhD*  
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Director, NJ WRIISC

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Director, DC WRIISC

# TELEHEALTH SOARS!

## WRIISC Mindfulness Meditation/iRest™ Yoga Nidra Meditation Classes

**IN THE LAST YEAR,** WRIISC began providing telephone-based Mindfulness Meditation Classes and iRest™ Yoga Nidra (also known as yoga sleep) Meditation Classes. Classes are offered nationwide at no cost to Veterans. This past year over 800 Veterans have participated in Mindfulness Meditation classes. Some VA practitioners have also participated, and facilitated Veteran groups listening in together from their local VA. In one recent session, 106 lines were used! Since 2016, attendance for Yoga Nidra continues to grow with over 1,470 Veteran visits to date.

**MINDFULNESS MEDITATION** is an evidenced-based, VA-supported mind-body technique that helps Veterans face challenges and stressors of everyday life. Studies have shown that by regularly practicing mindfulness meditation, one can manage stress, deal with pain, and boost the immune system. By learning to focus on the present moment, we free ourselves from reliving the past (including past regrets) and we spare ourselves from worrying about the future and events that may never occur. When practicing mindfulness, we make a deliberate choice or decision to pay attention to whatever is happening now, pleasant or unpleasant. We treat ourselves with patience, kindness, and without judging. When we find our mindfulness is distracted by a thought we simply acknowledge it and gently bring ourselves back to the practice or activity underway. Mindfulness can easily be woven into all activities of daily living-breathing, moving, walking, eating, even walking the dog!

**iREST™ YOGA NIDRA (YOGA SLEEP)** is an evidence-based, spoken word guided meditation that helps Veterans develop a sense of deep calm. The class follows the 10 stage iRest™ protocol emphasizing a different step each week. During the meditation Veterans start by establishing their own mission and purpose for their life and what might serve them well for the current meditation session. They also begin to develop their own internal "safe haven", which they can use throughout the meditation and in daily life. Throughout meditation the physical body may enter a sleep-like state, but the mind is still active and aware. While in this sleep-like state, Veterans are led through an exploration of their current experience and become aware of how thoughts and emotions can affect the body and mind. Veterans slowly discover a sense of joy and well-being that is always within them— and with repeated practice they learn how to appropriately "respond" rather than "react" to situations in life. One side benefit is the rejuvenating "rest" many experience during class.

Feedback received from both classes has been overwhelmingly positive. Feeling peaceful after practice is an overwhelming sentiment voiced by many Veterans from dealing with chronic pain to those managing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms.

### VETERANS' MINDFULNESS MEDITATION EXPERIENCE:

- VA doing mindfulness is revolutionary- I need to relax and this is very helpful.
- I enjoy the opportunity to have some peace during a busy day. It's hard taking time for myself. I tell everyone I have an appointment.
- I have a sore shoulder. The pain went down.
- It was helpful hearing another Veteran say he has racing thoughts- I thought I was the only one. Happy I called in.
- I am appreciative of the [WRIISC] VA offering this. I suffer from anxiety and this class was really useful.

### YOGA NIDRA PROGRAM FEEDBACK:

- I've been using some of your knowledge in my recovery such as, 'You always have the perfect answer', 'I love and respect myself', and 'Namaste' (self-compassion).
- After taking the class, I slept for 8 hours [for] the first time in years. Also during class the tremors stopped. I will take your class every time it is available.
- The Yoga Nidra at home for me has been so cathartic and allowed me to express emotions that I could never express in group meditation.

For more information on WRIISC telehealth education and class schedules, visit: [www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov](http://www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov)

**“We teach Veterans to consider distracting thoughts not as failures but as more opportunities for success!”**

Doreen Korn,  
NJ WRIISC  
Mindfulness  
Meditation  
Instructor

**“Perhaps one of the biggest advantages of telehealth technology is that Veterans from all over the nation interact with one another and share their experiences with other Veterans— this can provide an unplanned measure of social and emotional support.”**

Louise Mahoney,  
CA WRIISC  
Yoga Nidra  
Instructor

## WRIISC Accomplishments:

# FISCAL YEAR 2018 AT A GLANCE



WRIISC researchers were involved in more than **25 funded projects** with more than **\$12 million** in total research funding. Their outstanding efforts have led to **70 medical journal publications**.



WRIISC served more than **1,075 Veterans** clinically. Every consult received gets a medical record review and we offered our personalized recommendations to over **750 Veterans** (e-consult process). Specialty exposure evaluations occurring either in person or over the telephone were completed for over **175 Veterans**. Multi-day, comprehensive clinical evaluations including that of airborne hazard concerns were completed for over **150 Veterans**.



VA Provider education efforts increased over the last year. WRIISC hosted 13 webinars on topics such as Agent Orange, Depleted Uranium, and Women's Health among others, averaging about **300 attendees each**. Three e-learning modules on deployment health topics- Gulf War Illness, Deployment Exposures, and Airborne Hazards reached over **1,100 doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers** and other health care professionals. In addition to the Veteran classes discussed above, individualized health education or coaching is a core part of Veteran clinical assessments.



Two editions of the WRIISC Advantage newsletter were sent to VA providers, Veterans, and community members totaling over **30,000 people**. The WRIISC website continues to be an important source of educational materials with over **89,000 website visits** for health information. ↗

## Research Matters

WRIISC continues involvement in research that relates to Veterans' health. Below is a study published by the DC WRIISC.

### PUBLICATION TITLE:

Psychophysiological Investigation of Combat Veterans with Subthreshold Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms

### QUESTION:

How do combat Veterans with symptoms of combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (subthreshold PTSD that does not fully meet diagnostic criteria) process fear through physiological (body) response?

### FINDINGS:

Veterans with more severe symptoms of PTSD showed:

- Higher sensitivity to danger as indicated by faster heart rate and stronger eye-blink startle reactions
- More self-reported depression and anxiety
- Poorer health status
- Challenges to their body's ability to respond differently to danger and safety with their physiology showing an alert response to both (measured by skin sweating)
- Slower recovery after stress as indicated by faster heart rate and breathing rate, even when danger is resolved
- Lower blood levels of dopamine (a naturally occurring chemical) present in the body play an important role in controlling symptoms of PTSD for those with higher heart rate when the task requires regulation (management) of fear.

### MEANING:

Overall, the responses we observed in our group with subthreshold PTSD are consistent with what have been previously reported in populations diagnosed with PTSD in numerous research studies. Our findings underscore the need to identify and help Veterans who report anxiety or other symptoms that are interfering with their quality of life, even if their symptoms do not meet the full definition of PTSD.

These findings help provide guidance for recommendations for Veterans with subthreshold PTSD.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** This research appears in the journal *Military Medicine* (Volume 181, Issue 8) and won the 2017 *Military Medicine* Article of the Year award. Author is Michelle Costanzo of the DC WRIISC. ↗



## WRIISC Educates Vietnam Veterans on Agent Orange via Telehealth

**MANY VIETNAM VETERANS REMAIN UNSURE** about the ABCs of Agent Orange exposure. To provide Veterans with accurate and up-to-date information about Agent Orange exposure, several years ago the WRIISC started offering the Veteran education class titled "Agent Orange: What you need to know". During this course, specialists in environmental exposure address Veterans questions and concerns related to Agent Orange, connect them with several additional resources, and share some healthy living tips. In Spring 2018, the WRIISC started utilizing telehealth capabilities where classes were held simultaneously with Veterans in Hamilton, NJ, and Buffalo, NY, while the instructor and additional Veterans were physically present in East Orange, New Jersey.

Recent positive feedback from participants of the courses hosted included: **"This course is very much needed for Vietnam Veterans, highly informative, and excellent,"** and, **"This was the first time I learned about Agent Orange and it was much appreciated."** In addition, evaluation results showed that most Veterans who took the course reported that after the course they were more knowledgeable about how to better manage health conditions related to Agent Orange. All of this is consistent with the feedback we received since the start of the program and inspiration to continue and expand this effort! For future possible Agent Orange and other classes visit: <http://www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov/education/local-offerings/>. ↗



# Around the WRIISC News



## WRIISC Advantage

WINTER 2019

### NJ WRIISC

#### Introducing AWARE

##### THE AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND BURN PITS CENTER OF EXCELLENCE (AHBPCE)

at the NJ WRIISC was established in 2013 and was officially recognized by Congress and the President in Public Law 115-929. The AHBPCE provides Veterans with comprehensive medical evaluations of symptoms related to airborne hazards and burn pit exposures. The AHBPCE also conducts cutting edge research and shares the most recent, up-to-date, research and educational findings. The AHBPCE is an important part of the VA's efforts to improve the health of Veterans with airborne hazards concerns along with the VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry (AHOBPR).

The AHBPCE recently developed the AHBPCE-WRIISC Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pits Registry Evaluation (AWARE) program. Spearheaded by Dr. Anays Sotolongo, a WRIISC pulmonologist, the AWARE program is specifically designed for Veterans who completed the AHOBPR online questionnaire, indicated interest in an in-person AHOBPR exam, report chronic respiratory concerns, and meet other eligibility criteria. These Veterans are invited for a specialty clinical evaluation designed to assess health concerns related to airborne hazards and burn pit exposures. The AWARE clinical team of experts develop recommendations for treating and managing those concerns. A copy of evaluation results is sent to the Veteran's home primary care provider for implementation and support. The AWARE program allows for an opportunity to learn about diseases or conditions of concern related to airborne hazards and open burn pit exposure. Additionally, through AWARE, the AHBPCE further explores registry information to develop research hypotheses and disseminate best practices to clinicians regarding performing airborne hazards and open burn pit clinical evaluations.

### CA WRIISC

#### Swimming Towards a Healthy Life

##### THE CA WRIISC,

in conjunction with the Palo Alto VA, recently developed a Swimming Program to help Veterans get and stay fit. This program introduces Veterans to swimming as a recreational or fun activity which also provides lifelong opportunity for achieving good fitness. The main purpose of the program is to assist Veterans with improved swimming time. For example, Veterans swim two or three hundred yards total in the first few workouts and then later can finish a more advanced or longer swim with time to spare. It's all about conditioning! Paired with a coach, Veteran swimmers become more confident in their abilities and still have the freedom to choose their own pace for workouts. Swimmers start to experience a sense of self-accomplishment which leads them to not only want to exercise and care for their physical health but to increase their own performance expectations.



VA PALO ALTO HEALTH CARE SYSTEM'S AQUATIC THERAPY CENTER

The Swimming Program at the Palo Alto VA is open to all Veterans who:

- ▶ Want a regular swimming program as a health fitness activity.
- ▶ Feel comfortable in the water.
- ▶ Live close enough to the Palo Alto VA to travel.
- ▶ Available Mondays and Wednesdays 2-3pm

To enroll, visit the pool at the VA Palo Alto Medical Center, Building 530, or call 1-888-482-4376.

CA WRIISC remains determined to connect Veterans to helpful services and inspire them to live healthier lives!

### DC WRIISC

#### Telehealth Coaching

##### TELEHEALTH COACHING

is an intervention that helps Veterans achieve a higher level of well-being and performance in their life and work, especially when change is difficult! The traditional medical model seeks to diagnose what is wrong with a Veteran and fix it. The telehealth coaching approach instead seeks to discover what is right with the Veteran and expand it. Early on in telehealth coaching a patient health inventory is completed to determine what part of life the Veteran would like to focus on improving. By linking a Veteran's values and strengths to their health goals, studies have shown long term lifestyle changes are possible.



TELEHEALTH COACHING AT A VETERAN'S HOME

A telehealth clinic began in May 2018 at the DC WRIISC and since the start, 19 Veterans have enrolled and flourished! Veterans who received coaching intervention through the clinic have lost weight, started exercising, made healthy dietary changes, reduced glucose levels, and improved sleep quality. The telehealth coaching clinic has also helped Veterans manage stress more effectively and make other meaningful changes to improve the quality of their lives. DC WRIISC looks forward to enhancing the health of more and more Veterans through telehealth coaching! 🐟

**ATTENTION READER:** Do you prefer to receive the WRIISC Advantage newsletter electronically? Email us at [wriisc.nj@va.gov](mailto:wriisc.nj@va.gov) with your full name and preferred email address.

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U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Office of Patient Care Services  
Post-Deployment Health Services



This newsletter contains a minimum of 30% post-consumer waste.

## On-demand post deployment training for providers now available on TRAIN (public) and TMS (VA-internal) with accreditation:


**WRIISC**  
War Related Illness & Injury Study Center  
Post-Deployment Health Services

### Common Exposures

**Solvents**  
Many Servicemembers use industrial solvents in regular military tasks such as cleaning, degreasing, paint stripping, and thinning oil-based paints. Too much exposure to some industrial solvents can cause short-term and long-term health effects. Solvents may impact your health depending on the specific chemical, level of concentration, length of exposure and how it enters the body. Such health impacts may manifest as:

- Blood disorders,
- Liver injuries or
- Neurological Disease,
- Kidney injuries.

For more information, visit:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/87-104/default.html>  
<http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/solvents/>  
If the links are not active, simply type the URL into a new browser window.



**Metals**

You must review all of the hazards before proceeding to the next page.

Access our training by visiting:

- <https://www.TRAIN.org> (public) or
  - <https://www.TMS.va.gov> (VA-internal)
- and search for "WRIISC"

