



VA NY/NJ Healthcare Network & Kognito Introduce 'Family of Heroes' -- An Online Avatar-Based PTSD & Resiliency Training for Veterans' Families

Simulation Prepares Families of Region's One Million Veterans for Post-Deployment Life Challenges

NEW YORK, Nov. 3, 2011 /PRNewswire/ -- The VA NY/NJ Healthcare Network (www.nynj.va.gov), with New York City-based Kognito Interactive (www.kognito.com), today launched *Family of Heroes*, an interactive one-hour training simulation where families of the region's one million veterans can learn critical skills to manage the challenges of adjusting to post-deployment life -- including how to identify post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal intent -- and how to motivate the veteran to seek help at the VA. Families can access the training online at www.familyofheroes.com. It is available at no cost to veterans' families in the VA NY/NJ's service area (New York City, Long Island, Lower Hudson Valley, and New Jersey).

"Studies have shown that the enormous number of service members deployed and redeployed in Iraq and Afghanistan has led to difficulties for returning veterans and their families," said Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen, founder and president of *Give an Hour* (www.giveanhour.org), a nonprofit organization providing free mental health services to U.S. military personnel and families affected by these conflicts. With 40,000 troops returning before year's end, "innovative programs such as *Family of Heroes* can help give family members good coping skills and lead them to timely, appropriate treatment while also helping demystify mental health issues," she added.

VA experts report a third of returning veterans experience PTSD, traumatic brain injury (TBI) or major depression and only half seek mental health treatment. In 2010, more than 408,000 veterans with a diagnosis of PTSD received treatment at VA medical centers and clinics. Of those, almost 20 percent were veterans of Operations Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn or Enduring Freedom. Recent research suggests that, among veterans aged 18-29, rates of suicide are lower for those using VA health care services compared to those who do not, translating to approximately 250 lives saved per year.

Role-Play with Avatars

In *Family of Heroes*, users enter a virtual environment, assume the roles of different family members, and learn by engaging in three realistic practice conversations with avatars acting and responding like real veterans experiencing post-deployment stress. Conversation scenarios are based on real stories gathered in interviews with veterans and their families.

The result of a collaboration between Kognito and VA NY/NJ's mental health practitioners, the training incorporates feedback from over 100 veterans' families around the country. It utilizes Kognito's proprietary Human Interaction Game Engine™, which is based on research in social cognition and neuroscience, and has been proven effective in multiple studies. To view a short demonstration of the training go to: <http://www.kognito.com/products/ptsd/>.

Families Respond to Training

"When I saw the training, it was like I was experiencing some of the conversations I had with my son again," said Felicia Armour, mother of a returning veteran and one of the 100 family members involved in the training's development. "The way it is broken down -- with each step helping you figure out how to start a conversation and keep it neutral so it doesn't escalate into anger -- they covered all the possibilities."

According to one veteran, Clarence Pierre, the training is very realistic -- "especially the disagreements"-- which mimicked arguments he'd had with his wife. "I wish I had been able to have this training before. It will be very helpful for veterans' families, since it gives you the opportunity to deal with a situation before it happens and try out some different approaches." (Video commentary from these, and other, family members can be viewed at www.vimeo.com/28357942).

"Our goal was to provide family members with a virtual and risk-free environment where they can practice these challenging conversations, get personalized feedback, and learn conversation tactics to best approach and discuss difficult issues with their veteran," said Ron Goldman, CEO of Kognito Interactive. "We are thankful for the opportunity to participate in supporting our veterans and their families."

Research regarding the effectiveness of this new training appears in the October issue of *Games for Health: Research, Development, and Clinical Applications*, a peer-reviewed journal (<http://www.kognito.com/products/ptsd/research/>).

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