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Writing may help troops with TBI, PTSD heal

By [Patricia Kime](#) - Staff writer

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Patients at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence in Bethesda, Md., paint, sculpt and create music as part of their medical treatment, examining and confronting the symptoms and emotions of having a traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Starting in January, they'll be able to use words as well, incorporating writing into the mix of "healing arts" designed to improve cognition and mental health.

National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Rocco Landesman and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center Commander Rear Adm. Alton Stocks announced a pilot program Tuesday at the Intrepid Center that will team authors and therapists with patients to use writing as part of the clinical rehabilitation process.

Similar to the center's current visual arts program, the expressive writing and storytelling program, called Operation Homecoming, will allow patients to manifest their trauma in the form of poetry, journals, diaries or stories, which can be used, according to curriculum designer and retired Army Lt. Col. Ron Capps, to confront a traumatic experience and manage it.

"Writing gives you the chance to take a memory that might be stuck in the back of the mind, make it physical and shape it so that eventually you understand that it's a memory and it can't hurt you anymore," Capps said.

At the National Intrepid Center, or NICoE, patients undergo a holistic treatment approach, engaging in physical and occupational rehabilitation, psychotherapy, arts classes and alternative treatments such as yoga and meditation to recover from the "invisible wounds of war" like TBI, PTSD and other psychological trauma, according to Director James Kelly.

The new writing program will fall under "healing arts," consisting of expressive writing therapy in a clinical setting and informal creative writing workshops offered during the off-hours at Fisher House, the homes where patients and families stay during treatment.

In addition to serving patients, Operation Homecoming also will be evaluated for its effectiveness to see whether it should be replicated at other Defense Department and Veterans Affairs Department facilities, Landesman said.

"We want to see the effect of the arts as a catalyst for healing," he said.

The National Intrepid Center of Excellence is a four week program for service members afflicted with TBI, PTSD and other psychological trauma.

The 72,000 square foot center was built through private funding led by the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund based in New York. The facility, on the Walter Reed-Bethesda campus, transferred to the Defense Department in June 2010.

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