

Trauma, Health & Hazards Center

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Special points of interest:

- VHTC's new Strategic Alliances
- Trauma Regulation and Education Experience (TREE)
- Psychology Ph.D. Student Interview Day

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VHTC Reaches More Veterans, First Responders with Community Engagement and Education

By VHTC Staff

On February 15th and 16th, the UCCS ENT Center played host to the first Colorado Springs Creative Forces Summit. Fort Carson is one of 11 sites nationwide chosen to participate in the Creative Forces program, a unique partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts and the Department of Defense. The Creative Forces program is designed to bring creative therapeutic interventions to active duty service members (and their families) affected by traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. The purpose of the community-wide Summit was to expand this work into the greater, off-post veteran population. As part of her role as Strategic Alliances Liaison, Veterans Health and Trauma Clinic (VHTC) clinical therapist, Erin

Fowler, was part of the planning committee that made the Summit a reality. Furthermore, she hosted a round table discussion on the use of writing as a therapeutic tool during the Summit itself. "I had folks from the VA at my table, veterans, family members, professional writers...it was wild to see so many people come together to have these conversations on helping and healing veterans and their families." This event was just one of many community engagement projects that Ms. Fowler has been involved with as she works on broadening community awareness of and increasing access to the VHTC.

In addition to helping coordinate community engagement events, Ms. Fowler has committed to providing ongoing education to the community on post-traumatic stress disorder and general issues of mental health and trauma. One way is through the Colorado Springs Police/El Paso County Sheriff's office



Erin N. Fowler, LPC, Veterans Health and Trauma Clinic Strategic Alliances Liaison

Crisis Intervention Team Training in which she participates multiple times per year. Sgt. Eric Frederic, CSPD coordinator for the CIT training, spoke about Ms. Fowler's role: "PTSD is a very big reality that our officers face every day in the community...Ms. Fowler's training and participation in the CIT program equips the officers to deal with this effectively and efficiently as well recognize it in themselves and ask for help when they need to...the program would not be the same without her there."

As the needs of the community at large evolve, the VHTC will remain as a leader in not only treatment but in engagement and education.



Innovative Mindfulness-based TREE group at the Veterans Health and Trauma Clinic

By Lisa Hains Barker, Ph.D.



In TREE, clients learn about the brain and the response to stress. They practice techniques that include yoga and breathing to mitigate the stress.

For the past year, clients at the VHTC have been able to attend a new 6 week treatment group, affectionately known as TREE, or Trauma Regulation and Education Experience. Unlike a traditional group where the discussion may focus on traumatic events, in TREE, participants learn about how mindfulness-based exercises can help them feel more calm and relaxed. These activities are practiced in the session. The conference room tables are pushed to the side to provide more room for chairs and yoga mats; and often the overhead lighting is exchanged for a soft lamp. This group combines psychoeducation on topics such as organization of the nervous system, the body's response to stress, neuroplasticity and how this is sometimes unhelpful, memory, and sleep - with experiences in mindfulness, relaxed breathing, and basic yoga. Clients are invited to practice the skills they learn

at home. Any challenges that may come from those attempts are processed in group to promote success. Blankets are recommended, yawning is encouraged, and stress is (hopefully) banished. Both men's and women's TREE groups are offered. For more information on TREE or other groups offered at the VHTC, please call 719 255-8003.



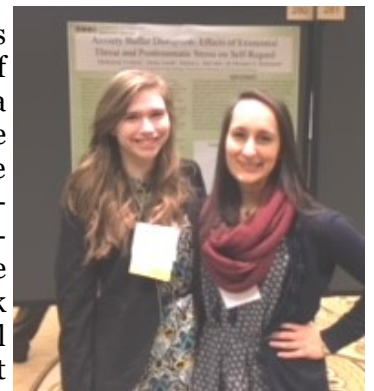
Ph.D. Student Examines Lack of Emotional Awareness and its Role in Feelings of Isolation in Trauma Survivors

By Tom Pyszczynski, Ph.D.

McKenzie Lockett joined us as a doctoral student in the trauma program in Fall 2016 after finishing her BA at the University of Missouri. While at Mizzou she did research on the disruption of the anxiety-buffering function of self-esteem among people dealing with PTSD. She is currently working with Tom Pyszczynski on understanding the role of alexithymia (the inability to recognize and label one's emotions) and existential isolation (the feeling one does not understand other people's subjective experiences and that no one really understands one's own experiences) in dysfunctional reactions to traumatic stress.

In an initial study, that she recently presented at the meeting of the *Society for Personality and Social Psychology* in Atlanta, GA, McKenzie found alexithymia to be positively correlated with both PTSD symptom severity and existential isolation, and that alexithymia mediated the relationship between PTSD and existential isolation. This suggests that lack of awareness of

one's own emotions plays some role in the feelings of isolation that many trauma sufferers experience. She is following up on these findings with an experiment using a placebo paradigm to provide an "in the moment" measure of lack of awareness of emotional states. People who are not aware of their emotions should be especially prone to placebo effects. This is a first step toward developing a laboratory paradigm for studying what leads to the emotional numbness and lack of emotional insight experienced by many people dealing with PTSD and related problems and what might be done to remedy these problems.



McKenzie Lockett (L), Trauma Psychology Ph.D. Student

Another Strong Applicant Pool for the Trauma Psychology Ph.D. Program

By Lori Bryan, Ph.D.

The UCCS Trauma Psychology Ph.D. Program garnered an impressive 178 applicants for the class starting in Fall, 2018. Ten students traveled to Colorado Springs to participate in a rigorous day complete with multiple information sessions, individual interviews with three different faculty members, and an evening social hosted by Associate Director of Clinical Training, Dr. Kristin Samuelson.

The number of offers that can be made to these top-tier students depends on their match with the program and the funding available. The cost to fund a single student through the five-year program is approximately \$100,000 and is provided in the form of UCCS Graduate School scholarships, endowments, individual and foundation philanthropy, and grant awards.

This year, the Trauma Psychology Ph.D. Program offered three students a place in the entering 2018 class.

Two of the students have accepted to date. We look forward to welcoming them in August and profiling them in our next newsletter.

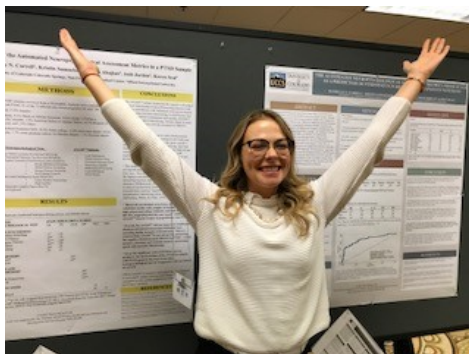


UCCS Students Continue to Make an Impact at ISTSS

By Lori Bryan, Ph.D.

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) held its 33rd annual meeting in Chicago last fall, 2017. The conference theme “Trauma and Complexity: From Self to Cells” brought together researchers, clinicians and administrators representing various areas (Psychology, Public Health, Social Work, Medicine) to share new developments, knowledge, and public policy regarding the effects of trauma and treatment.

Drs. Kristin Samuelson and Charles Benight’s labs presented a total of 13 scholarly posters, papers, and talks on various areas of trauma.



Danielle Correll, MA Student in Clinical Psychology presents her work on a Mood Scale as a predictor of PTSD status.

Trauma Psychology Ph.D. student, Alisa Bartel, presented a paper discussing the role of one’s perception of cognitive problems on coping self-efficacy in individuals experiencing post-traumatic stress. Alisa was also honored with the ISTSS Outstanding Student Advocacy and Service Award, given to students who work to improve the access and quality of services for those affected by traumatic events. Alisa received the award for her work in the areas of human trafficking prevention and with military service members and veterans through Team Rubicon and Team Red, White, and Blue.

Amanda Devane, a third year Trauma Psychology Ph.D. student, presented a poster with her findings that heart rate is a predictor of change in trauma coping self-efficacy when trauma survivors participate in an online intervention.

Dr. Benight shared his newly published theory “Self-regulation Shift Theory” which offers a new perspective on trauma adaptation over time.

Another year of excellent scholarly representation by UCCS!!

Director's Corner

By Charles C. "Chip" Benight, PhD

I often look at what is happening in the day-to-day news for ideas to write about in the Director's Corner. For this piece, I wanted to target an oft-used concept called resilience. This is one of those things that we know it when we see it. My entire career has targeted the importance of human capacity to recover from extreme events; basically, I have studied resilience. What I have learned is that human beings are amazingly adaptive. We can lose a spouse after 50 years of marriage and be ok with finding a way to move forward. We can experience a devastating disaster and come out with a deeper appreciation for what is important in life. A researcher, George Bonanno from Columbia, demonstrated that indeed the majority of people will recover just fine after a major life challenge.

We are now in the process of disentangling the day-to-day coping processes that promote positive versus negative trajectories after a serious life event. For the first time we are starting to look for unique positive and negative patterns of recovery that are predicted based on a new theory I have written called Self-Regulation Shift Theory. The theory predicts that certain individuals will demonstrate a negative sudden shift in coping when they come to a belief that they just cannot handle what is in front of them in terms of their recovery. I refer to this as a personal agency crisis. For others, the awareness of successful coping will engender a sense of personal mastery leading to the belief "I've got this!" "I can do this!".

For trauma survivors we often see this resilience when they receive wrap around social support that emboldens them to take each step toward recovery. I refer to this as a personal agency transformation. In the past year, we have witnessed weekly tragedies with major disasters, shootings, and war around the globe. We are deeply invested in understanding how human beings cope with such events, with an appreciation for human being's capacity to adapt.



Dr. Benight is the Director of the Trauma, Health & Hazards Center, Chair of Veteran Health & Trauma, and Professor of Psychology.



Mobile apps can be useful tools to reduce stress and improve well-being. Atmosphere: Relaxing Sounds is a free App that offering a variety of relaxing sounds divided into different environments. Choose sounds you like and create a combination of sleep, meditation, yoga, relieve stress and anxiety or enjoy the sounds of nature.

Atmosphere app download (Click on icon at left)

Wondering how YOU can make a difference?

Consider joining our Trauma Research Participant Registry.

Click on the brain and join our list of community members willing to participate in research projects. UCCS faculty and students are learning more about trauma, coping and interventions from people like you who become involved in these projects. Occasionally there is financial compensation for your time and, by signing up here, there is not an obligation to participate in any study.



Thank you for your interest and support!