

Art Therapy for Veterans, Military Service Members, and Their Families

*Donna Betts, PhD, ATR-BC, AATA President
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“We are finding ways to help today’s and tomorrow’s service members heal – in finding the resources within them that they can call upon to heal themselves.”

[Melissa Walker](#) (via TED Talks)

Art therapy helps Veterans and military service members. The evidence is building, and the public is taking notice. The AATA dedicates this special report to America’s Veterans, and highlights the ways in which art therapy is improving their lives.

On October 6th, I attended an exhibit of art by military service members, “Unmasking the Trauma of War,” at the Department of Veterans Affairs headquarters, in Washington, DC. The exhibit was prominently mounted in the main lobby, and remained on display throughout October. It was sponsored by the VA National Center for Ethics in Health Care and the DoD [National Intrepid Center of Excellence](#).

The exhibit featured a sampling of the paper-mâché masks created by service members who received art therapy services with art therapist Melissa Walker at NICoE – some of the same masks that were featured by [National Geographic](#) in their February, 2015 issue. Similarly, the VA exhibit elevated awareness of art therapy and the ability of art therapists to help their clients unmask the otherwise unseen wounds of war.



From left: Rusty Noesner, Melissa Walker, Dr. Carolyn Clancy, and Dr. Donna Betts, at the Dept. of VA, Washington, DC, October 6th.

This exhibit grew out of a VA-wide presentation on “Moral Injury and Recovery from the Moral Wounds of War” presented by the VA National Center for Ethics in Health Care in April, 2016, which featured a number of these artworks. Dr. Carolyn Clancy, Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Organizational Excellence, Veterans Health Administration, gave opening remarks. I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Clancy, and convey efforts to increase recognition of art therapy in the VA.



*Onlookers at the “Unmasking the Trauma of War” opening,
Dept. of VA, Washington, DC, October 6th.*

As Melissa Walker explained, since NICOE opened to patients in 2010, more than one thousand masks have been created. She described the masks as representing themes of psychological and physical pain, a split sense of self, and patriotism. I spoke with Rusty Noesner, a former US Navy SEAL who participated in art therapy at NICOE. He attributes his healing to his work in art therapy. In his remarks, Noesner said that at first he was reluctant to try art therapy – “But I quickly learned how

wrong I was,” as was featured in [this report](#) in *The Journal*. He further described how art therapy helped him reintegrate after returning home from Afghanistan with combat-related TBI.

The 1,000 masks tell their own story. Art therapists who work with military service members know the impact of their work. And the preliminary research is promising – such as this recent publication by Campbell, Decker, Kruk, and Deaver, [Art therapy and cognitive processing therapy for combat PTSD](#). Veterans ($N = 11$) were randomized to receive either individual CPT, or individual CPT in conjunction with individual art therapy. Art therapy in conjunction with CPT was found to improve trauma processing, and Veterans considered it to be an important part of their treatment as it provided healthy distancing, enhanced trauma recall, and increased access to emotions. This pilot study lays a foundation for further research.



*Laura Spinelli, MA-ATR,
LPC, Director of Giant
Steps, VA Connecticut*

The American Art Therapy Association is dedicated to increasing recognition of art therapy’s benefits with service members and their families. The [AATA’s resources](#) point to art therapy as an effective and needed treatment for returning military personnel suffering from PTSD and TBI. A newly established volunteer position on the AATA’s Governmental Affairs Committee – Veterans Affairs Policy Advisor – has recently been filled by art therapist [Laura Spinelli](#). In this role, Laura will assist in our work on the state and federal levels, related to the provision of art therapy services. She will also assist in monitoring changes in policy and regulations affecting delivery of services to Veterans, military service members and their families, provide expertise and assistance to the GAC, and related tasks.

The AATA is also well-represented at pertinent events in Washington, DC. As a recent example, on May 25th, I gave opening remarks at a [briefing and exhibition](#) co-hosted by the Congressional Military Mental Health Caucus in the Cannon House Office Building.

In July, in conjunction with our Global Outreach Initiative, the AATA was pleased to host Janice Lobban of the [British Association of Art Therapists](#) and [Combat Stress](#) at our annual conference in Baltimore. While visiting the US, Lobban also fulfilled her objective as a 2016

Churchill Fellow, in researching the status of art therapy for service members. Her work resulted in this comprehensive report, [Art Therapy for Military Veterans with PTSD: A Transatlantic Study](#). Lobban's report presents a solid case for increasing access to art therapy for service members in the UK. According to Lobban, art therapy can help Veterans to work through each cluster of PTSD symptoms and assist in recovery on a neurobiological level. Additionally, participants have responded favorably to art therapy in the US and the UK through surveys and patient satisfaction questionnaires, such as [Lobban's 2016 study](#) on factors that influence engagement in an inpatient art therapy group.



From left: Dr. Sarah Deaver, Melissa Walker, Janice Lobban, and Dr. Donna Betts, Baltimore, MD, July 2016



*Melissa Walker and Dr. Donna Betts,
Dept. of VA, Washington, DC,
October 6th.*

The AATA is not alone in our efforts to increase awareness of and access to art therapy services. We collaborate with national entities and international groups together to advocate for the profession. Very recently, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Department of Defense [announced the expansion](#) of their partnership, [Creative Forces: NEA Military Healing Arts Network](#). This program places art therapy and the creative arts therapies at the center of patient-centered care at 10 additional clinical sites and increases access to services in local communities for Veterans, military members, and their families. The program is also investing in research on the benefits and impact of the arts therapies.

Today, on Veterans Day, and throughout the year, the American Art Therapy Association honors our Veterans, military service members, and their families.

