

Journeys of Healing for Military Veterans: A Pilot Study

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Abstract : Military personnel encounter a number of challenges when separating from military service to include career uncertainty, relational/family dynamics, trauma as a result of military experiences, reconceptualization of identity, and existential issues related to purpose, meaning making and framing of the military experience(s). Embedded within military culture are well-defined rites of passage and a significant sense of belonging. Consequently, transition out of the military can result in the loss of such rites of passage and belongingness. However, a pilgrimage journey can provide the time and space to engage in a new rite of passage, to construct a new pilgrim identity, and a to develop deep social relationships that lead to a sense of belongingness to a particular pilgrim community as well as to the global community of pilgrims across numerous types of pilgrimage journeys. The aims of the current paper are to demonstrate the rationale for why pilgrimage journeys are particularly significant for military veterans, provide an overview of an innovative program that facilitates the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage for military veterans, and discusses the lessons learned from the initial pilot project of a recently established program. Veterans on the Camino (VOC) is an emerging nongovernmental organization in the USA. Founded by a military veteran, after leaving his military career, the primary objective of the organization is to facilitate healing for veterans via the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage journey. As part of the program, participants complete a semi-structured interview at three time points - pre, during, and post journey. The interview items are based on ongoing research by the principal investigator and address such constructs as meaning-making, wellbeing, therapeutic benefits and transformation. In addition, program participants complete The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe). The pilot program occurred in the spring of 2017. Five participants were selected after an extensive application process and review by a three-person selection board. The selection criteria included demonstrated compatibility with the program objectives (i.e., prior military experience, availability for a 40 day journey, and awareness of the need for a transformational intervention). The participants were connected as a group through a private Facebook site and interacted with one another for several months prior to the pilgrimage. Additionally, the participants were interviewed prior to beginning the pilgrimage, at one point during the pilgrimage and immediately following the conclusion of the pilgrimage journey. The interviews yielded themes related to loss, meaning construction, renewed hope in humanity, and a commitment to future goals. The lessons learned from this pilot project included a confirmation of the need for such a program, a need for greater focus on logistical details, and the recognition that the pilgrimage experience needs to continue in some manner once the veterans return home.

Keywords : pilgrimage, healing, military veterans, Camino de Santiago

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