VA Women’s Mental Health: Strategic Priorities and Helpful Tips for Engagement and Partnerships in Research, Policy and Practice

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Women’s Mental Health Services

Mental health care (and care models) that address the influence of ...

**Gender-related factors:**
- Female gender roles and inequities
- Female gender-linked traumas – e.g., intimate partner violence, sexual trauma

**Gender-specific factors:**
- Biological sex differences – e.g., effects on pharmacokinetics
- Co-morbidities more common in women – e.g., gynecologic diseases
- Female reproductive cycle stages
What is women’s reproductive mental health (RMH)?

RMH includes pregnancy-related influences on mental health:

- Infertility
- Preconception and pregnancy planning
- Pregnancy and postpartum
- Traumatic labor and delivery
- Pregnancy loss (e.g., miscarriage, stillbirth, ectopic pregnancy)
RMH also includes mental health implications of other reproductive cycle stages and reproductive organ comorbidities

- **Menstrual cycle phases**
- **Perimenopause and menopause**
- **Breast and gynecologic cancers**
- **Genital and pelvic pain**
- **Pelvic exam anxiety**
- **Contraception**
Women Veterans’ Mental Health - Overview

• Gender minority:
  • Women are 9-10% of VHA Veteran users and ~10% of the overall US Veteran population
  • Women are projected to be 15% of the US Veteran population by 2035

• High rates of mental illness:
  • FY 2021: 45% of women Veteran VHA users were diagnosed with mental illness
  • FY 2021: 26% of male Veteran VHA users were diagnosed with mental illness

• Suicide:
  • Women Veterans more than twice as likely to die by suicide than non-Veteran women
Key Women’s Mental Health Initiatives: Clinical Training

- VA/DoD WMH Mini-Residency
- DBT-Skills Group Training (DBT = Dialectical Behavior Therapy)
- Multidisciplinary Eating Disorders Treatment Teams
- Reproductive Mental Health (RMH) training curriculum
- STAIR (Skills Training in Affective and Interpersonal Regulation)
- WMH Monthly Teleconference Series
- IPT for RMH concerns – new in FY22 (IPT = interpersonal therapy)
Key Women’s Mental Health Initiatives: Clinical Resources

- National RMH Consultation Program
- Women’s MH Champions at all VA medical centers
- Clinicians with specialized training in RMH
- WMH discussion boards
- WMH tip sheets and brochures
Key Women’s Mental Health Initiatives: WMH/Peer Support Collaborations

- WoVeN in VA pilot (WoVeN = peer specialist-led support groups for women Veterans)
- WMH/Peer Support Mini-Series (3-day webinar co-led by WMH clinical subject matter experts and peer specialists)
- National peer support services needs assessment
- Guidebook development for 2 additional women-specific peer interventions
Women’s Mental Health, OMHSP

**MISSION**
- Provides national WMH subject matter expertise and program and policy guidance
- Supports VA Central Office to address congressional requests and stakeholder inquiries
- Fosters a national WMH community of practice within VA
- Develops extensive resources and training initiatives to ensure that VA clinicians have the skills and expertise to address women Veterans’ treatment needs and preferences

**REPRODUCTIVE MENTAL HEALTH**
- RMH training series - national roster of trained clinicians
- Reproductive Mental Health Consultation Program
- Interpersonal Therapy for Reproductive Mental Health training

**EMOTION REGULATION and SKILLS BUILDING**
- Dialectical Behavioral Treatment-Skills Group training
- Skills Training in Affective and Interpersonal Regulation

**WOMEN’S MH/PEER SUPPORT**
- WoVeN in VA
- Confident and Courageous
- Beyond MST + Peer Support
- National peer support needs assessment

**EATING DISORDERS**
- Multidisciplinary eating disorders treatment team training
- Multidisciplinary eating disorders treatment individual training
- Case consultation for eating disorders
- Multidisciplinary eating disorders teleconference series

**EDUCATION & DISSEMINATION**
- WMH monthly teleconference series
- WMH SharePoint
- VA/DoD annual training event - mini residency/virtual training series/workshops
- WMH monthly newsletter
- WMH discussion forums

**WMH CHAMPIONS**
- WMH action plans
- Community of practice
- Infrastructure
- Facility-level point of contact

**VETERAN FACING MEDIA CAMPAIGNS**
- Public-facing web page
- Social media
- Start the Conversation flyers
- “Make the Connection” style video
WMH priorities

• **Research:**
  - gender differences, gender- and trauma-informed mental health care for women
  - facilitators and barriers to VA enrollment, treatment engagement and retention
  - complexity, intersectionality

• **Clinical practice:**
  - models of care (e.g., panel size, appointment length) – should be data driven

• **Professional community:**
  - foster a VA community interested in women – collegial and collaborative
  - make VA a place to start a career – how do we attract talent, train and retain people?
Food for thought

• Real world decisions do not always align with the pace of research
• Is there a role for “research-informed” approaches (e.g., expert consensus panels) to provide a road map and a common language (accessible to all stakeholders)?
WMH priorities: RMH

- Working toward all VA clinicians having basic RMH knowledge
- Expanding cadre of RMH subject matter experts
- Increasing clinician awareness of the RMH Consultation Program
- Screening for premenstrual and perimenopausal mental health conditions
- Advancing discussion of pregnancy intention and contraception with women of reproductive age before psychotropic prescribing
- Promoting informed, balanced decisions about perinatal psychotropic medication use
- Expanding access to evidence-based psychotherapies adapted for RMH – e.g.,
  - Interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT) for RMH
  - Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Menopause (CBT-Meno)
- Developing public-facing RMH materials
Women’s Mental Health, OMHSP

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Frequently Asked Questions and Pro Tips
Frequently Asked Question #1

So are you part of the Office of Women’s Health?
Frequently Asked Question #2

Can you write me a letter of support?
Frequently Asked Question #3

I have a great idea for a new study! Your input (about policy implications, about relevant outcomes, etc.) would be helpful. Can I run some things by you?
I just finished a study and am about to start writing up findings. Would you like to hear about it? Can I ask you a few questions?
Frequently Asked Question #5

My manuscript was just accepted for publication. The findings (…may reflect poorly on women Veterans or VA women’s mental health, etc.) may cause a media stir.

So, um, how do you feel about surprises?
WMH can help at every stage of the research process

• Early in the process
  • Brainstorm to align research proposals with key needs of women Veterans
  • Provide up-to-date information about VA women’s mental health care delivery systems and resources to inform health care services research proposals
  • Provide letters of support for proposals

• Later in the process
  • Read manuscript drafts to ensure accurate descriptions of VA WMH services
  • Help disseminate clinically relevant research findings

• When relevant for selected projects
  • Co-mentor early career researchers
  • Co-author manuscripts
Optimizing collaborations between researchers and WMH: dissemination opportunities

- Teleconferences
- Research Minutes in WMH Monthly Newsletter
- Tip Sheets
- Champion Quarterly Calls
- SharePoint Discussion Forums
Key Resources

**Women's Mental Health (sharepoint.com)**
- WMH programs and initiatives
- WMH education and training materials
- WMH discussion boards
- Relevant policies and guidance
- WMH “Research Minute” (summary of key findings and clinical implications of recent WMH-related research)
- Outreach materials
- Contact lists:
  - Champions, RMH Trained Clinicians, Eating Disorder Treatment Teams

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**National Women’s Mental Health Monthly Teleconference Series**
2nd Thursday of each month, 3pm EST