

STRONG STAR: A unified effort to defeat combat-related PTSD

The South Texas Research Organizational Network Guiding Studies on Trauma and Resilience, or STRONG STAR, is a multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research consortium funded by the U.S. Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) to develop and evaluate the most effective early interventions possible for the detection, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and related conditions in active duty military personnel and recently discharged veterans. Under the leadership of The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and based in South-Central Texas, the STRONG STAR Consortium brings together the expertise of a world-class team of military, civilian and VA institutions and investigators and one of the largest populations of active-duty and recently discharged Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation New Dawn combat veterans in the nation. With the critical mass of talent required to make major scientific advances in military PTSD research, STRONG STAR investigators hope to improve countless lives by preventing the development of chronic PTSD and related problems in a new generation of veterans. For more information, visit www.strongstar.org.

Background:

- Recent studies of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)/Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)/Operation New Dawn (OND) veterans suggest that approximately 14 percent of U.S. military personnel returning from deployments have symptoms of PTSD, and as many as 25 percent report some psychological problem. These numbers indicate that, among the nearly 2.5 million U.S. military personnel who have deployed in support of OIF/OEF/OND, about 350,000 are at significant risk for chronic PTSD, while as many as 500,000 to 600,000 may be affected by related problems such as depression, substance use disorders, sleep disorders, and other ailments.
- Two evidence-based treatments for PTSD have the most empirical support for their efficacy: Prolonged Exposure (PE) and Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT). Research with civilians with non-combat-related PTSD has shown that most individuals can be treated successfully with these therapies and that their symptoms rarely reoccur. However, experience treating military veterans from previous conflicts indicates that successful treatment of combat-related PTSD can be difficult when a significant amount of time has passed between when the trauma occurred and counseling is started.
- Although research findings from civilians and discharged veterans may assist in approaching care for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, many factors make the active-duty military population unique and pose additional challenges in the diagnosis and treatment of PTSD.
- Before STRONG STAR, no clinical trials of treatment for combat-related PTSD in active duty military personnel had ever been published, leaving myriad questions regarding how best to use the evidence-based therapies for the treatment of PTSD in military personnel.

STRONG STAR Response

- In 2008, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) granted \$35 million to establish the STRONG STAR PTSD Research Consortium, the largest research program ever undertaken to help armed forces personnel cope with combat-related traumatic stress. The DoD award is administered under the auspices of the Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injuries Program, part of the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs managed by the U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command.
- On August 10, 2013, President Obama announced the establishment of the STRONG STAR Consortium to Alleviate PTSD (STRONG STAR-CAP) with nearly \$45 million in funding from the Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) to develop the most effective diagnostic, prognostic, novel treatment, and rehabilitation strategies to treat acute PTSD and prevent chronic PTSD. The CAP award will allow STRONG STAR to build upon and expand its ongoing research efforts.
- STRONG STAR is a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional research consortium under the leadership of The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. Consortium Director Alan Peterson, Ph.D., professor in the UT Health Science Center's Department of Psychiatry, is a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Air Force and clinical psychologist with extensive leadership and research experience in both military and civilian settings. STRONG STAR-CAP Co-Director Terence Keane, PhD, of the National Center for PTSD, VA Boston Healthcare System, serves as the primary director for all of the CAP's VA research projects.
- With over 150 investigators at more than 40 partnering military, VA and civilian institutions, STRONG STAR has assembled an unprecedented collaboration of highly qualified researchers and clinicians with expertise in PTSD, neuroscience, genetics, comorbid conditions, traumatic brain injury, suicide, medical trauma, and research in military settings, as well as military clinicians with "boots on the ground" experience in assessing and treating combat-related PTSD. This collaboration unifies the critical mass of talent required to make significant scientific advances in PTSD research and to develop and deliver PTSD treatment programs that are relevant, effective and feasible in the military setting.
- STRONG STAR utilizes an array of randomized clinical trials, exploratory and preclinical studies, and research cores to explore the best methods of delivering the two evidence-based PTSD treatments to the active-duty military population (PE and CPT). Simultaneously, the consortium strives to learn more about biological influences on PTSD; the influence of comorbid physical and psychological ailments, such as traumatic brain injury, chronic pain, substance use disorders, sleep disorders, and suicide risk; and the interaction of cognitive-behavioral therapies and pharmacologic treatments.
- South-Central Texas, where STRONG STAR is based, is home to one of the largest populations of active-duty and recently discharged OIF/OEF/OND combat veterans, as well as the Defense Department's largest military medical complex and several state-of-the-art trauma research and treatment facilities. Not only does this pair researchers with the number of military personnel necessary for their large-scale studies, but it also means that STRONG STAR investigators' expertise and innovative treatment programs are helping where they are needed most.
- Through expected scientific advances in our understanding of the best methods to prevent and treat combat-related PTSD and co-occurring conditions, STRONG STAR investigators' ultimate aim is to reduce the suffering of our nation's warriors, helping them continue to live healthy and productive lives. This, in turn, should contribute to the resilience of our armed forces and could potentially save the federal government billions of dollars each year in direct healthcare expenses and disability payments.

For more information, visit www.strongstar.org, or call the STRONG STAR administrative office at 210-562-6700. Julie Collins, STRONG STAR Director of Communications, can be reached at 210-562-6706 or collinsjr@uthscsa.edu.



STRONG STAR

“Building Strong, Resilient Warriors”

The following is a partial listing of our collaborators:

San Antonio Collaborators

The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio
National Trauma Institute
San Antonio Military Medical Center
South Texas Veterans Health Care System
The University of Texas at San Antonio
Wilford Hall Ambulatory Surgical Center

State of Texas Collaborators

Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center, Fort Hood
Central Texas Veterans Health Care System
Texas A&M University Health Science Center
Texas National Guard
The University of Texas at Arlington
University of North Texas

National & International Collaborators

Atlanta VA Medical Center
Boston University
Duke University Medical Center
Emory University
Institute for Systems Biology
James A. Haley VA Hospital, Tampa, FL
Medical University of South Carolina
Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, Houston, TX
National Center for PTSD, VA Boston Healthcare System
Pennsylvania State University
Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, Charleston, VA
Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
University of Memphis
University of Michigan
University of Pennsylvania
Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences
University of Utah
University of Virginia
U.S. Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine
VA Connecticut Healthcare System
Wake Forest School of Medicine
Wright State University
Yale School of Medicine

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