

Stories of Dancing with Veterans with PTSD or TBI

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All participants wear a red ribbon on their right hand as a memory aid: Red for Right hand. As the dance series at Fort Knox, KY progressed, soldiers, their partners and children began to cherish their red ribbons, some refusing to remove them between sessions. They became our uniform, our Red Badge of Courage, uniting us in our courageous actions toward wellness. (Photo courtesy Deborah Denenfeld)

Great News from Dancing Well: The Soldier Project! Critical pieces are coming together to bring the healing power of traditional dance and music to veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) and to their families. The VA Medical Center system is assisting with logistics, planning, and recruitment of families to participate in the first dance series, and CDSS is supporting the project by acting as fiscal sponsor, lending nonprofit status so that donations are tax deductible.

If you're wondering whether dance with this population really helps, I'd like to share the stories of two people I danced with recently when I participated in a retreat for veterans and their spouses sponsored by the local VA.

At the retreat, veterans and their partners learned relationship skills through a unique program offered by the PAIRS Foundation. Between each relationship session, I led dancing with the veteran couples and VA staff. While the adults were busy with their training, I was dancing with their children. In the evening, following a gala banquet, I led a family dance for everyone together, complete with live music.

Many of the veterans had been recently discharged and were newly home from action overseas. Several had wounds that were apparent: they walked with a cane, were in a wheelchair, or mentioned feeling dizzy quickly. Others had wounds that weren't so obvious, but they were present, too – I could see it in their serious faces and hesitant interactions.

One veteran held back. He didn't want to participate in the dancing even though his wife dove right in. Eventually, though, seeing the fun others were having, he joined in for several dances. I was told later he had only been back from deployment for two weeks, and in that time he hadn't smiled once. It took the dancing to return him to smiling again and joyfully interacting with his partner. His wife later remarked that she couldn't remember the last time she'd had so much fun.

A second veteran also watched the dancing for a while before deciding to join in. He could only dance a couple dances, though, before his physical pain became too intense and he had to sit down. But then he started calling out the dance moves right along with me! I talked with him later and asked if he was a dance caller. He said he wasn't but he remembered attending similar dances as a boy in Arkansas. Even though his injuries kept him from dancing as much as he would have liked, he took great pleasure in watching, remembering, and participating in his own way.

That Saturday I was only able to reach a tiny number of our returning veterans. PTSD and TBI are so widespread. My hope is that Dancing Well: The Soldier Project can help those of us who care so deeply about traditional music and dance to bring its benefits to those in our communities who need it most.

Please consider making a donation to Dancing Well: The Soldier Project this holiday season. Your gift will help fund three ten-session dance workshops with veterans battling PTSD and TBI and their families. It will also fund development

and implementation of a comprehensive curriculum to train dance callers, VA activities directors, social workers, dance therapists, and others to facilitate traditional dance with afflicted veterans and their families.

Please visit [Dancing Well](#) and click the “Donate” button to make your contribution.

Dancing Well is an ambitious and enormously rewarding project. In an upcoming blog, I'll share other ways you can get involved. In the meantime, feel free to contact me at any time at DancinDeborah@gmail.com or 502-889-6584 to talk more about Dancing Well.

Our veterans have done so much for us – help us dance them home!