

Giving their pain a face

To help heal war's deeper wounds, novel Walter Reed program encourages troops to paint emotions on masks

By Michael Alison Chandler



Rusty Noesner works on his mask at the National Intrepid Center for Excellence at Walter Reed in Bethesda. Many others, as at top, are intricate.

Chris Stowe worked on a bomb squad during six deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Between tours, he sought help for the headaches, anxiety, memory loss and other symptoms of trauma and brain injuries he suffered while being exposed to hundreds of blasts. He tried talk therapy, medication and a self-prescribed regimen of yoga and meditation before finding some relief in an unexpected form: a white papier-mâché mask.

During an art-therapy session at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, he picked up a brush and painted something he had never been able to satisfactorily describe: how he felt.

His mask showed two sides of himself, the calm exterior side-by-side with a monster beneath, filled with rage, his eyes and mouth brimming with bees.

“If you imagine what a bees nest sounds like, the buzzing, almost surround sound,” he said. “This is how my head feels.”

Nearly 350,000 U.S. service members have been diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries since 2001, according to the Defense Department. Thanks to modern body armor and military vehicles, many service members survive roadside bombs and improvised explosive devices, only to come home struggling to function.

The invisible wounds of war can be difficult to diagnose and treat. But the military is finding that art, and mask-making in particular, can spur the healing process.

Art therapy, along with music and creative writing, are integral parts of treatment at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence at Walter Reed in Bethesda, which opened in 2010 to study and treat traumatic brain injury and the psychological conditions that often accompany it.

The therapeutic arts program has shown promising results and is expected to expand to 12 military sites around the country by 2017 through a partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts. Congress appropriated \$1.9 million this year to fund this military “healing arts” network.

Two dozen active service members come through each month for an intensive, four-week outpatient treatment program.

During the first week, art therapist Melissa Walker gives each service member a blank mask. She invites them to explore their identities or emotions surrounding their injuries or treatment as they decorate it.

“There is something powerful in the mask,” Walker said. “It literally and figuratively encompasses the areas we are focused on here, both the physical and psychological.”

Creating a ‘safe space’

What starts as a two-hour activity often extends beyond the first session, as service members return to the studio to keep working on their masks.

Brain injuries and trauma can actually impair verbal communication, research shows, but making art can help, particularly when it comes to processing traumatic memories.

Brain scans show that when someone attempts to recall a traumatic event, the left frontal cortex of the brain — the area responsible for speech and language — stays dark, while the parts of the brain that control emotion and the senses light up.

Art-making activates these same emotional and sensory areas of the brain. The job of the art therapist is to create a safe space for a service member to tap into those difficult memories, and then to help them describe what they have created, opening a neural pathway that had previously been shut off.

Walker was inspired to work with veterans because her grandfather, a Korean War veteran, spent his life struggling with trauma. Shrapnel pierced his neck during one of the final battles of the war, and he fell facedown in the mud. Unable to call out, he was initially left for dead. But he was eventually discovered and sent to a military hospital in Japan.

He recovered physically, but the trauma followed him. Walker remembers her grandfather as short-fused and easily startled. He never spoke about his war experiences, even to his wife, whom he met in the hospital during his initial recovery. But sometimes he had nightmares. Walker a summer visit to her grandparents’ house when she was a little girl, waking to hear him shouting obscenities in the middle of the night.

Her grandfather died while she was in graduate school. Since then, she has built a career trying to help other soldiers process their experiences so they aren’t trapped by them.

Many messages

In the six years since the center opened, Walker has indexed more than 1,000 masks that soldiers have created and she has begun analyzing their themes.

Many masks depict physical pain (bloodshot eyes or a knife stabbing the forehead); some show literal injuries (shards of shrapnel in the face and a piece of skull surgically removed to relieve pressure in the brain). Others are metaphorical — one mask depicts a soldier’s confused thoughts as a swarm of flies coupled with a pair of chopsticks trying to capture them.

Some explore their military and national identities. Patriotism is a point of pride and an instrument of suffering, as seen in a mask that shows two small flags propped up next to the eyes as blinders.

Some show hope and healing: A Navy nurse decorated half of her mask with sand and a large eye, representing an injury that impaired her vision, while the other side is a globe that represents a future career path in inter nation recalls al health.

One of Walker’s patients was a senior-level service member who had been haunted by the image of a bloody face for seven years after a particularly difficult deployment, in which he suffered a concussion in mortar fire and he lost a close friend in a convoy to an improvised explosive device. He was supposed to be on the convoy; his friend had gone in his place.

For years, he tried to avoid the feelings of guilt and hopelessness, but the image of the bloody face continued to haunt him. In Walker’s studio, instead of ignoring it, he made a

likeness of the face. His mask was blood red with bulging eyes. In the process of making it, he began talking about it. When he was done with the mask, he put it in a box and put a lid on it. He left it for Walker to take care of.

Walker keeps it on a shelf in her studio. A year later, the soldier reported that the ghoulis visits had almost completely stopped.

Many soldiers leave their masks and memories behind. Walker's studio is now filled with them. They adorn the entrance to her studio, and the front lobby of the center.

Navigating life after war

Some patients leave and take their masks home, a new outlet for their stress or pain.

Rusty Noesner, a former Navy SEAL, came to the center four years ago after he suffered brain injuries after falling out of a helicopter and during a blast in Kandahar.

He immediately gravitated to the art studio, he said. He created a mask that showed two sides of his personality, with a combat scene and a nature scene.

"No one wants to accept you have these emotions, this vulnerable side. . . . You don't want to have those things in combat," he said. "But when you get home you have to reconnect so you can move on with your life."

Noesner, 32, is out of the military and running a nonprofit group called War Paints, based in Harrisonburg, Va., that encourages veterans and service members to pursue art and tap into the part of the brain they abandoned while at war. They can sell their artwork on his website.

For the 41-year-old Stowe, years of talk therapy had not been very helpful. It was hard to sit down again and again. But with art, he did not worry about judgment, he said, and felt more in control of his emotions. Retired from the Marines after 23 years, Stowe lives in Tampa and has a civilian job at U.S. Central Command. He has good days and bad days, he said. Some days he still hears the bees buzzing in his head.

"Those are the days that I paint," he said. He makes oil paintings at an in-home studio or goes out to the porch with his ukulele. Sometimes he escapes to a glass blowing studio for a few hours.

"It's really cathartic," he said. "Whatever I was battling, it slowly fades away." More at washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life

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