

Screening for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Behavioral Health

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## Abstract

**Background:** Non-Veteran Affairs (VA) mental health care facilities are admitting increased numbers of military affiliated members due to recent changes, allowing veterans to outsource healthcare at civilian treatment centers. The VA reports less than 9 million veterans enrolled in VA services, leaving over 50% seeking treatment from civilian providers. Given the high prevalence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the military population, it is imperative to implement a valid and reliable screening tool at primary care facilities to ensure timely and accurate diagnosis and treatment.

**Method:** This project aimed to provide an evidence-based education for intake nurses to understand prevalence of PTSD and to use a screening tool Primary Care PTSD for *DSM-5* (PC-PTSD-5) in a non-VA behavioral health facility.

**Setting:** The project site was a civilian behavioral health facility located in West Phoenix Metropolitan area. The behavioral health facility serves mental health and substance abuse needs. Project implementation focused on the intake department.

**Measures:** Sociodemographic data, PTSD diagnosis criteria, prevalence and PC-PTSD-5 screening tool knowledge collected from pre and posttest evaluation. Patients' charts for those admitted 6-week before and 6-week after the education to calculate numbers of screening tools completed by nurses at intake assessment.

**Data analysis:** Descriptive statistics was used to describe the sample and key measures; the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was used to examine differences between pre-test and post-test scores. Cohen's effect size was used to estimate clinical significance.

**Results:** A total of 23 intake nurses (87.0% female, 65.2% 20-39 years old, 52.2% Caucasian, 95.6% reported having 0-10 years of experience, 56.5% completed Associate's degree) received

the education. For PTSD-related knowledge, the pre-test score ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ) was significantly lower than the post-test score ( $Mdn = 10.00$ ;  $Z = -4.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting an increase of PTSD knowledge among nurses after the education. Regarding the diagnosis, the percentage of patients who were diagnosed with PTSD increased from (0.02% to 20% after the education).

**Discussion:** An evidence-based education aimed at enhancing intake nurses' knowledge, confidence and skills implementing a brief and no-cost PTSD screening tool showed positive results, including an increase of PTSD diagnosis. The implementation of this screening tool in a civilian primary mental health care facility was feasible and helped patients connect to PTSD treatment in a timely fashion. Continued use of paper version of screening tool will be maintained at facility as an intermediary solution until final approval through parent company is received to implement into electronic medical records.

*Keyword:* PTSD, screening tools, mental health, military, primary care