May is Mental Health Month. Mental Health Month has been observed across the country during the month of May since 1949. The observation reaches millions through media, education, local events, outreach, and screenings. The theme for 2020 is **Tools 2 Thrive**. Many service agencies, including VA, will provide practical tools that everyone can use to improve their mental health and increase resiliency regardless of the situations they are dealing with.

Information will be available throughout the month on the following topics:

- Owning Your Feelings
- Finding the Positive
- Connecting with Others
- Eliminating Toxic Influences
- Creating Healthy Routines
- Supporting Others

Mental Health Awareness Month serves to inform Veterans on conditions that surround mental health and how to seek help if they are at risk, while providing information and resources to assist them, their families and staff providing care. Particularly helpful are the partnerships, nationwide that VA utilizes to enhance Veteran mental health care and the tools, services and resources available to them in their community and for their families to use for support as well.

Continued on Page 4
I'm a baby boomer born in 1949 in Washington D.C., but later moved and grew up in Rockford, IL. Most of my family are still there. I have a blended family with three sisters and three brothers, and we are all real close. My parents were great. They had gotten divorced, but I had a loving family and a good childhood.

After I graduated high school in May of 1967, a friend and I decided to take a road trip, I was only 17. My parents really didn’t want me to go, but they didn’t stop me and off we went. My buddy and I worked our way out to the west stopping at farms for jobs. It took us a couple of months to get to the coast and I got to see a lot of the country. Sometimes we slept in the car and sometimes we slept in motels. We spent a day in San Francisco at Haight-Ashbury, where all the hippies were. We then went farther down to L.A. I had been following the Joey Bishop Show and we knew that he and Regis took a walk every day on Vine Street. We went there and were able to speak to them. They ended up inviting us to be on the show that night. We called our parents back in Illinois to tell them to watch it and they did see us. It was a big accomplishment to have that happen to us. From there we worked our way back home and of course had other adventures. That road trip was a success and was a spring board in my life.

I turned 18 while I was on this road trip. I had 30 days to register for the draft in ’67, which I did. When I got home, my friends were getting drafted. My dad had been in the Navy and with his advice, I joined. I went to boot camp in San Diego in July 1968. It was tough and it was a learning curve. I survived boot camp and graduated. I wanted to become an Electronics Technician, but it was discovered that I had defective color vision. Because I couldn’t be an Electronics Tech, I was given three different options of schooling: Boilermaker, Storekeeper or Postal Clerk. I chose Storekeeper and was sent to Newport, Rhode Island for schooling. After I graduated, I went home for a 30 day leave and then I went to Vietnam in 1969.

Vietnam was a big thing in our lives, and it had been going on for a couple of years. I knew I would have onshore duty over there and I knew I’d have a bunk, food and not be out in the bush. For me, the hardest and biggest hurdle was that I heard about it for years and now I was flying over there, and I would get to see it for myself. I wasn’t sure what to expect. Would they be shooting at me when I got off the plane? I wasn’t sure how bad it was or what was going to happen. But when the plane landed, no one was shooting at me. We were put on a truck and taken to Camp Tien Sha. There were no explosions, no combat or anything like that initially. I blended into my unit and was assigned to work at the Deepwater Piers in Da Nang as a tally checker. I had to track everything as the ships were unloading. I worked 12 hours on and 12 hours off, with one month on day shift and one month on night shift. I made some friends and hadn’t known anyone prior to getting there. We did have red alerts in Da Nang. We did have rocket fire there where they would launch ground rockets from about a mile or two away, but it was more of a harassment than anything else. We’d have to run into a bunker and stay there until we got the all clear. That was my taste of combat while I was there. You get into a routine of going to the PX or the enlisted men’s club to drink beer. We did that a lot to unwind.

I had a really good circle of friends over there and were all pretty much 19-year-old men. The draft was on and we weren’t all volunteers. It was different then where a lot of people might have been against the war and didn’t want to be in the service. Like myself, if it hadn’t been for the draft, I probably wouldn’t have gone in. It’s important to recognize that. A lot of us, more or less, weren’t gung-ho military. I really felt, when I look back on it now, that I really fit in there. I felt that I belonged there so well with that group of people and the job, even more so than other jobs I’ve had since or even in high school. I just fit in. I had friends, could say what I wanted, had my job and was serving my country. It was exciting, dangerous and I was doing my duty. I gained a lot of patriotism by being in the Navy.

The year in Vietnam was a real defining time in my life. I didn’t know what to expect and I’m lucky I survived it. I’m glad of the path that I took. I look back at my generation with all the hippies and the Vietnam War and I’m proud of that time and I’m glad I’m part of that generation. I’m glad I was over there so I can talk about it now because if I hadn’t gone over there, I wouldn’t know more than anyone else. It’s so valuable that I can have an opinion and share about it. It was important that I was there. I didn’t see combat, didn’t see anyone get injured and luckily, I didn’t see anyone get killed. I didn’t lose any friends and I’ve contacted 11 of them when I retired a few years ago. I talked to
And that enjoying my retirement. I met a lot of Vets while coming here and was even invited for Thanksgiving. He immunizations. When I moved here, I started coming more. Now that I really using the VA more at my age now and didn’t integrating therapies such as mindfulness, acupuncture, healing touch, aromatherapy, music therapy and yoga. In 2016, I retired at 67 years old and am enjoying it. I live in Tomah and come to the VA quite often to use the veterans center. I work for the VA for years for little things such as physicals and getting out. The VA allows you to put in a request of where you would like to serve. I requested the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, which is close to where I lived, and I got it. I worked there for the last year or so before I got out of the Navy. I got out in 1972, serving almost four years to the day; July 22, 1968 to July 23, 1972 and was also in Inactive Reserve for two years.

Getting out of the Navy and becoming a civilian was difficult. While in the military, everyone dresses a certain way, shines their shoes, cuts their hair a certain way, etc. But civilians had the freedom to do what they wanted. I had lived for four years following orders and had certain expectations. When I got out into the real world, it wasn’t like that at all. People don’t dress the way you want or act the way you want them to act. There was some frustration with friends and close relationships. It was a big adjustment.

I realized I was having some issues with alcohol. I found my way into Alcoholics Anonymous and got sober. I found sobriety and embraced the program in 1982 and am fortunate for it. When I walked into my first meeting, I didn’t know what to expect but right away I felt it was going to work for me. I worked the program, followed the steps and did that for 10 years; going to meetings continuously. It is a big part of my life, which helped me to become and stay sober. I’m glad I found it when I did because I was going down the wrong path with alcohol. Sobriety is very important to me. I don’t actively attend anymore, but I still know the program and work it my own way.

Once I got sober, I pursued the GI Bill benefits and went to college. It took me awhile, but I eventually I got my bachelors in 1986 from Northern Illinois University in Operations Management. I then started my career and stopped making mistakes. I searched for jobs and was willing to relocated and leave Rockford. I thought I would shake things up and try something different. I worked for a photo finishing lab in Rockford and then transferred to the Twin Cities. I started my career in purchasing and planning with the operations degree that I had. It was similar to what I did in the Navy. I also had a certification from Apex, a professional organization that helped me get that job. For 25-30 years, I had a career working for manufacturing companies in Wisconsin, Ohio, North Carolina, and eventually with Boeing in Seattle and Philadelphia as a Procurement Agent. I was laid off from Boeing in 2014 but wasn’t quite ready to retire. I completed CNC Operator training while on unemployment because I wanted to try something more hands on. I got a job at Necedah Screw Machine, moved to Tomah and worked there for two years. It all came together and that is how I ended up here. I moved around quite a bit and in lieu of a family I had a career, a good career.

In 2016, I retired at 67 years old and am enjoying it. I live in Tomah and come to the VA quite often to use the integrative therapies such as mindfulness, acupuncture, healing touch, aromatherapy, music therapy and yoga. I’m really using the VA more at my age now and didn’t know I would take advantage of it so much and it’s been helpful with keeping me busy and occupied. I had gone to the VA for years for little things such as physicals and immunizations. When I moved here, I started coming more. Now that I’m retired, I come much more often. I’ve met a lot of Vets while coming here and was even invited for Thanksgiving. He’s been a real good friend. I go to the jam sessions one night a week and I play my banjo. There is a lot of great things with Whole Health.

I’ve been a bachelor all of my life, it’s just the way it turned out. I’m happy at this point in my life and am enjoying my retirement.

And that’s my story.
Mental Health Month Continued...

Mental health is essential to everyone’s overall health and wellbeing, and mental illnesses are common and treatable. While 1 in 5 people will experience a mental illness during their lifetime, everyone faces challenges in life that can impact their mental health. There are practical tools that everyone can use to improve their mental health and increase resiliency regardless of the situations they are dealing with. It’s important to recognize your emotions and own your feelings, work to find the positive even when facing adversity or loss, reach out and try to connect with others, remove those people in your life who are bringing you down, and create healthy routines to take care of yourself. There are ways that everyone can be supportive of friends, family, and co-workers who are struggling with life’s challenges or their mental health.

Especially now, in times of uncertainty, stress and crisis, support and self-care are vital to taking care of one’s mental health. Below you will find some helpful links that have a variety of resources, information and Tools 2 Thrive.

Resources for Mental Health:

⇒ Mental Health America: https://www.mhanational.org/; https://mhanational.org/covid19
⇒ This May MHA is aiming for 1 million mental health screens at www.MHAscreening.org to normalize preventative measures for mental health conditions and encourage people to seek help.
⇒ Make the Connection VA: https://maketheconnection.net/
⇒ VA Mobile Apps: https://mobile.va.gov/appstore/veterans
⇒ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): www.samhsa.gov
Allied Health offers several programs and classes to help Veterans help themselves with proactive lifestyle choices. Just ask Veteran William (Bill) Thomas. Five years ago, Bill’s typical day consisted of sitting in his electric wheelchair, dependent on supplemental oxygen, and mostly never leaving his home. Approximately 2 years ago Bill was admitted as an inpatient to the Tomah VAMC due to his failing health. This was a turning point in his life.

Bill’s journey began on the Inpatient Rehabilitation Services unit. Bill worked towards slowly regaining his functional strength in Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy. As an inpatient, Bill then added Seated Tai Chi classes. When Bill improved enough to be discharged from the hospital, he was determined to continue working towards his goal of getting stronger and becoming more functional at home. As an outpatient, Bill started attending the Courtyard Club, which is a low intensity movement-based group that teaches safe, progressive activity in a collaborative environment, along with peers. After a few months of consistent participation in these groups, Bill improved enough to progress to the rehabilitation based standing Tai Chi class, to help improve his balance and progressive ability to move better.

Although Bill was still dependent on his electric wheelchair for longer distances, he started to walk with a wheeled walker for shorter distances. Overtime, Bill continued to challenge himself with additional programs and classes. When asked about Allied Health services he states, “I’ve taken just about all of them.”

Hard work pays off. Since beginning his journey, with help from his primary care provider and health care professionals, he has weaned off all opioids. Bill now walks using only a wheeled walker and no longer needs supplemental oxygen. He has trimmed off many pounds and a great deal of excess body fat. You can also frequently run into Bill on the endurance equipment in the Veterans Fitness Gym.

When asked what keeps him motivated, Bill answered, “They’re helping me out, so I can get my legs and arms stronger; and the camaraderie in Courtyard Club - you meet new people and become friends. I get around a lot better and am starting to cook now again. I have a better outlook on life seeing other Veterans progressing with their abilities too. Other Veterans inspire me to keep working and get better.”

Bill has made some incredible accomplishments over the past 2 years, as well as built connections with Allied health staff and his Veteran peers. Bill’s journey does not and will not stop there. His next goal is “to be able to get rid of my walker!” Allied Health Services was and will be there for Bill and all Veterans, continuing to help them with their journey through rehabilitation, recovery, and wellness.

Allied Health consists of Occupational Therapy, Physical, Kinesiotherapy, Clinical Dieticians, Prosthetics, Recreation Therapy, Nutrition and Food Service, Voluntary Services and Speech Language Pathology.

If you are interest in what Allied Health has to offer for you, please contact your PACT Team.
The HUD-VASH Program holds 161 Housing Choice & 15 Project Based Vouchers through partnerships with area Housing Authorities to provide low-income, homeless Veterans and Veteran families safe, stable, permanent housing.

The program serves a 50-mile radius from both the city of Tomah and Wausau. The program provides community based, in-home case management to support housing retention and assistance with coordination of care through a team of Social Work and Registered Nursing staff, also promoting a strong community integrative effort in having multiple Peer Supports on staff, as well as Social Services Assistants.

Together the team assists homeless Veterans in completing the referral process for a voucher, locating housing, and obtaining household items. The team works closely with a multitude of community partners and agencies providing Veterans opportunities to attend stakeholders’ meetings, community-based WRAP groups, and participate in monthly outings and activities such as picnics, ice fishing, local volunteer opportunities, visiting local landmarks, and snowshoeing. Additionally, the program is integral in annual events such as the VA2K & Stand Down, Point in Time Counts, events with the Monroe County Housing Coalition, and 1-2 landlord education sessions per year as well as various other community-based outreach efforts.

Through opportunities provided by entities such as American Legions, Speed’s Bicycle Shop, AMVets, Ashley Furniture, and many more, HUD-VASH Veterans have been able to receive furniture, bicycles, security deposit assistance, Christmas gifts, and countless other donations which allow them to establish their household.

For More Information, contact:
HUDVASH Main Line at 608-372-7758
OR
Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Coordinator 608-372-3971, ext. 66452

HUD-VASH Team Members:
Front row left to right: Kevin Short, Madison Pitt, Holly Myers, Desiree Parker, Alicia Cartwright
Back row left to right: Mark Turner, Megan Jensen, Paige Gregar, Kelsey Thompson, Tori Hansen, Heidi Wopat, Moriah Smith, Christopher Walters, Ryan Jones
Veteran Signals or V-Signals is a customer experience tool used to analyze real-time feedback Veterans submit after receiving outpatient and other VA services.

The Tomah VAMC thanks Veterans for choosing the Tomah VA for their healthcare needs.

Any Veteran who has received outpatient services within the previous week is eligible to receive a survey. The survey remains open for two weeks after the invitation is sent. The feedback Veterans submit is to help with opportunities for service recovery and performance improvement.

What outpatient areas are survey?

⇒ Scheduling an Appointment
⇒ Healthcare visit
⇒ Pharmacy (In-person)
⇒ Pharmacy (Mail)
⇒ Labs/Imaging

The Tomah VAMC’s Patient Centered Care Coordinator reviews survey results daily. Veterans who choose to be contacted, will be regarding any concerns.

What are our Veterans saying:

The care from my coach in the whole health area has been outstanding.

I have never had a bad experience at any VA site I have gotten treatment at.

Love going to Tomah...they are the best and always provide the very best care.

The employees have a true attitude to care for the patient. They treat everyone in a professional manner and truly enjoy what they are doing. Much better service than the private sector. I am 110% satisfied with service and treatment.

In making my appointment I was given optional places to choose from. I appreciated that time and consideration was given to me.
Veterans Serving Veterans

I have always wanted to make my Mother proud of me. With my sister enlisting in the Navy, my brother in the National Guard, my uncles in the Army and Air Force, I knew the military was the right choice for such pride. In 2003, I enlisted into the US Army through the delayed entry program in Baraboo, WI. (My recruiter surprisingly lives two houses down where I currently reside now.) I completed Basic and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. I was thrilled to find out my first duty station was Heidelberg, Germany with V Corps! Coming from a small town, I was excited to be engulfed into European culture, which allowed to me to travel to over 10 surrounding countries. Memories I will never forget.

I was assigned to the Special Troops Battalion (STB) S1 shop from 2003 until I deployed with Multi-National Corps Iraq (MNCI) in 2005. My experiences have shaped the person I am today with a deeper appreciation for life due to unforgettable/scary moments experienced and for the freedom we fought for. We lost so many and I am deeply honored to have served alongside them.

Upon my return from the deployment, I was stationed in Ft. Wainwright, Alaska with the 539th Transportation Company. Once I became a Non-Commissioned Officer, I was hand selected by the 25th Infantry Brigade Sergeant Major (SGM) to assist with running the Rear Detachment (I was pregnant with my first child).

After receiving an honorable discharge in 2009, I knew I wanted to continue my service by working for the Department of Veterans Affairs. After a total of 15+ federal years serving, I’m living with the scars/memories of the past, but embrace my wonderful life with my husband, my four beautiful children (one in Heaven), and our new dog today with purest joy in my heart.

My Mother couldn’t be prouder of me.

Torgie Ziegler, Outpatient Pharmacy Secretary

I was born and raised in Florida. I spent the majority of my life in the sunshine state. Because my Dad, my Uncle and my Grandfather all served in the military I knew I wanted to as well. Unfortunately, I had a medical condition that did not allow me to join until I was 30 years old.

I signed up for the Army in May of 2001. I joined the Infantry and did my Basic training and AIT at Fort Benning, GA. I then attended Airborne School. My first duty assignment was Germany where I was privileged to be assigned to one of only two Long Range Surveillance (LRS) companies in the Army.

I got out of the Army in 2005 and met my wife. In 2007, I realized I missed the Army so I re-enlisted and was sent to Fort Sill, OK. While stationed at Fort Sill, my wife and I adopted four children bringing our family to eight. From Fort Sill, I was sent here to Fort McCoy. As I previously stated, I was born and raised in Florida, so the Wisconsin weather has been quite a shock. I medically retired from the Army in 2015 and began Nursing school at Viterbo University. My mental health clinical is what introduced to me to the Tomah VA. During my clinical, I realized that I wanted to work in mental health here at the Tomah VA.

It is an honor and privilege to serve our Veterans.

Roy Burkhalter, Registered Nurse/Mental Health Department
Who is at risk for experiencing intimate partner violence?
Everyone. However, there are certain groups who are at higher risk of violence than others, such as females between the ages of 18-35 and female Veterans (Veterans Health Administration, 2013).

I am worried about a friend. What are some of the warning signs of intimate partner violence?
Warning signs include: unexplained or repeated injuries, delay in seeking care, injuries during pregnancy, multiple ER visits, suicide attempts, substance use, fearful or evasive behavior, and lack of independence; among other signs.

What are some ways to prevent the use of violence?
Seek treatment for mental health and substance use issues, including PTSD. Receive support for managing chronic pain. Seek employment and financial support when needed. Learn how to handle conflict in healthy ways, by participating in therapy or conflict resolution programs. Have a support system and do not be afraid to ask for help.

Mission
Our mission is to implement a comprehensive person-centered, recovery oriented assistance program for Veterans, their families and Caregivers and VHA employees who use or experience intimate partner violence.

Department of Veterans Affairs
Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

VA IPV Resources
- IPV Coordinators
- Link to community-based support groups
- Link to community-based advocacy and Legal services
- Referral to and coordination with other VA treatment providers
- Connection to domestic violence shelters
- Homeless services: HUD-VASH and GPD
- Interventions for Veterans who use violence, i.e., groups, individual therapy

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE
1-800-799-7233(SAFE)

National Center for PTSD
- Call 802-296-6300
- www.ptsd.va.gov

Mental Health
- Call 800-273-8255
- www.mentalhealth.va.gov

Women’s Health
- Call 855-VA-WOMEN
- www.womenshealth.va.gov

For more information, please contact
Cindi Groskreutz, LICSW
Phone: 608-374-8090
Building 408, Room 1854
Military Sexual Trauma, or “MST”, is a term used by VA for sexual assault or sexual harassment that occurred during military service. Each April, Tomah VAMC participates in a national campaign for Sexual Assault Awareness Month. This year’s chosen theme, “You’re Not Alone: VA is Here for MST Survivors,” is meant to convey hope, especially to those Veterans who may feel isolated in their experience of MST and its impacts. The message also reflects the strong commitment by VA to offer free and confidential care to Veterans for MST-related physical and mental health problems. This past year, the Tomah VAMC has offered that care to 615 Veterans who have experienced MST: 363 women and 252 men.

One offering for healing and recovery was Tomah VAMC’s first Clothesline Project. The Clothesline Project is a visual display to raise awareness about the impact of military sexual trauma, sexual assault, and sexual abuse. Survivors decorated t-shirts in a way that reflected their experience of sexual trauma and recovery. These shirts were hung side-by-side to ‘Break the Silence’ and to raise awareness of the impact of sexual trauma. Veterans of all genders were invited to decorate shirts for the Tomah VAMC’s Clothesline Project. These shirts continue to be a symbol of MST survivors taking the brave step to speak up, know that they are not alone, and find a healing path to recovery.

Every VA health care facility has an MST Coordinator who serves as a contact person for MST-related issues and who can assist Veterans in accessing care.

For more information, please contact:
Tomah VAMC MST Coordinator
Sarah Dahl, PhD, LP
608-372-1761
Patient Experience is the sum of all interactions, shaped by the organization’s culture, that influence the Veterans’ and their families’ perceptions along their health care journey.

The Tomah VA Medical Center gathers data from various sources such as surveys, comment cards, calls and even text messages to assist in improving the overall patient experience.

Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patients (SHEP)

Surveys are sent each month to measure patient experience at a facility level to identify and track longitudinal trends in patient experience performance. Surveys include: Inpatient, Patient Centered Medical Home (PCMH-Primary Care), Specialty Care (Primary Care) and Community Care (for Non-VA care received in the community.)

Share it with the Director is a tool used for Veterans to share their compliments, comments or concerns with Tomah VA Leadership we should know about. Comment card boxes are located throughout the Tomah VA Medical Center and also at all of our outpatient clinics. Veterans can also email, call or text.

72 cards were submitted from for Quarter 1. 69% of comments were complimentary and 31% were complaints. Among the 49 compliments, 20 were for clinical care provided, and 18 for courtesy of staff.

V-Signals is a customer experience tool used to analyze real-time feedback from Veterans who have a valid email address.

Through V-Signals, the Tomah VA Medical Center can see what we are doing well in and where we have opportunities for improvement. Surveys are sent for the following outpatient services:

⇒ Scheduling an Appointment
⇒ Healthcare Visit
⇒ Pharmacy (In-Person)
⇒ Pharmacy (Mail)
⇒ Labs/Imaging
The Tomah VA welcomes your feedback. If you have suggestions for future newsletter articles please send to:

Amanda Meinke
Patient Centered Care Coordinator

Amanda.meinke@va.gov
608-372-3971, ext. 64235

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**Tomah VA Medical Center Vision:**

Tomah VAMC will excel in patient-centered Primary, Mental Health, Rehabilitative and Long-term healthcare, partnering with other Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and community organizations providing a fully integrated continuum of care.

As a servant led institution we will develop a culture of excellence which is responsive to the changing needs of Veterans. Initiatives will be shaped by technology, research and evidenced based practices.

Care will be delivered by engaged collaborative teams in an integrated environment that supports learning, continuous and sustained improvement.