The Veterans’ Transition Program
Therapeutic Enactment in Action

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I seek to bring about performative repair through therapeutic enactment by means of inviting people to enact critical events from their own life—enacting the narrative, going beyond language to express the self through action, movement, emotion, and reflection. This process, therapeutic enactment, is done in the context of a witnessing group of others who hold the space and create a safe container for re-mending parts of the self that have become broken, paralyzed, or separated from the person.
In therapeutic enactment, the group is brought together and a climate of safety and cohesion is first established. Participants are then invited to identify a key incident that has impacted on their lives such as a traumatic event, an unresolved experience or relationship from childhood, a major loss or other related psychological injury. With the help of facilitators, a plan for how to re-enact this scenario is created in order to discharge or release the trauma. A number of participants in the group are invited by the individual and/or facilitator to assume key roles in the person’s life related to the incident. The participant then relives the event with the opportunity to change the script, re-story their lived experience, and finally, reflect on what emerges from the experience. The enactment is completed with input from all the participants who were in role or who served as witnesses in the group. The group serves as a support for members helping members.

I have chosen to illustrate this approach through a brief introduction to the Veterans’ Transition Program in text followed by a video clip sharing the experiences of Canadian soldiers who were engaged in the program in order to “get themselves back” so that they could move forward to wholeness. I invite you to read the text first, then watch the video clip and listen closely to Bill, a Canadian veteran, as he, along with two therapeutic facilitators, speak to the psychological injuries that war imposes, and what he sees as having been restorative through participating in the Veterans’ Transition Program. Speaking to his experiences of performing repair with his fellow soldiers, he says,

“You see sadness. You see grief, anger, jubilation. You see people throwing up and grown men crying their eyes out. And at the end of that day [of therapeutic enactment] every person that I’ve seen go through those experiences is a better person.”

For soldiers returning to Canada, re-entry into civilian life begins a period of transition with associated difficulties related to personal and career re-adjustments. To live a productive and full life following a tour of duty, soldiers also need to integrate and heal invisible wounds as a result of their military experiences. For many veterans returning a
shattering of aspects of the self has occurred, and there is the need to repair or restore the integrity of the self. To aid in negotiating this transition, soldiers need to be in an environment in which they can receive the support and understanding from others “who have been there.”

The Veterans’ Transition Program provides: (a) critical information normalizing the experience of expected trauma stressors to help soldiers better understand their military experience and its impact on their lives, (b) skills/strategies of how to cope with the effects of the trauma related stress, and (c) finally enacting repair to help restore and reintegrate the parts of the self that have become fragmented thus facilitating their readjustment to civilian life. Soldiers refer to this process as “dropping baggage” so that they can get on with their lives more successfully and move forward. The group stresses the development of safety and community responsibility right from the beginning by adhering to the norms of confidentiality, timeliness, right to pass, equal air time and non-judgmental participation.

Developed at the University of British Columbia by Dr. Marvin Westwood and Dr. David Kuhl and Dr. Tim Black, University of Victoria, as a health promotion initiative, The Veterans Transition Program (VTP) is a group-based program designed to assist former members of the Canadian Military in their transition to life as a civilian. To date 170 veterans have participated and benefited from the program and the benefits have included, relief from trauma symptoms, such as nightmares and depression; the experience of healthier emotional responses when working with others (calmer, fewer angry outbursts); release from personal frustrations they did not realize they were carrying; the replacement of pride for previously held feelings of shame, fear and remorse; feelings of energy and motivation for career pursuits; healthier and more satisfying relationships; and increased hope for the future. The program is meant to serve as a complimentary program to existing transition assistance services offered by the Department of National Defense (DND) and Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) and is delivered via the Pacific/Yukon Command of the
Royal Canadian Legion, through the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria and is entirely free to participants.

The goals of the VTP are to provide an environment where soldiers can receive support and understanding from soldiers. Involvement in such a forum allows group members the chance to talk and receive support from their peers about events they had previously kept to themselves and this fosters identification with the experiences of others. Such an environment of trust and empathy helps soldiers better understand their experiences on tour, as well as their re-entry into civilian life. Sharing their experiences and challenges helps them resolve stress and trauma related issues, freeing them to getting on with other life goals such as rebuilding relationships with self, other and expanding career options.

The program utilizes a small-group format (six to eight participants) with groups meeting for approximately 80 hours over 7 (4 & 3) days in a residential setting. The groups are co-facilitated by professionally trained group leaders who have extensive experience and understanding working within a military context, and includes two peer support workers—former soldiers who have gone through the program and have received additional training. There are two scheduled spousal awareness evenings in this program, when a significant family member is invited into the group to learn more about the transition process, the effects of trauma, communication and the military environment. Couples work on key issues and their relationships, under the direction of the leading team. Involvement of spouses and/or partners has been a very important part of the program, one that supports the healing process.

In this supportive and confidential group environment, participants initially learn about the transition process—the psychological stressors of re-entry, the effects of trauma (its impacts on their physical body, their lives and their relationships with others). They are taught how to monitor their bodies so to better handle the effects of trauma, how to ground themselves and relax, and other coping skills for dealing with trauma. Participants also learn and practice effective communication skills, develop emotional awareness expertise to increase their personal competence in their personal and work lives.
They are next given the opportunity to review challenging aspects of returning to civilian life using the life review method, which has them engage in a three part process of reflection, writing and sharing with the group. Following the initial group sessions and the life review method, group participants may have identified unresolved issues to be explored further using therapeutic enactment as a means of resolving an event from their past that is impacting their current functioning, with the aim of coming to terms with and integrating those issues. The final group sessions in the program focus on consolidation of learning and forming new goals and objectives for the future. Care is taken to provide participants with referrals to other complementary services (i.e. DND, VAC, psychologists and medical) that may assist them in making a successful transition to civilian life. Follow up of participants continues post group communication.

Our research has shown that upon completion of the program, participants leave with a new understanding of how traumatic and other military events may have impacted their transition from military life. They have developed skills for self-regulation and learned how to access resources for coping with traumatic and other memories. Soldiers involved in the Veterans’ Transition Program have improved their relationships with spouses, partners, children, families and others.

Additionally, having developed a close working relationship with other soldiers within the group, a strong informal network between participants is established which provides ongoing support, connection, and a knowing and trusted “ear” when needed. Group members report that participation in these groups helps foster both pride and a reconnection to “the brotherhood,” which is, for them, the best part of ever being a soldier. As one participant noted, “soldiers, working with other soldiers, brings out the best in everyone.”

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Resources


About the Author

**Marv Westwood** is a Professor in the Counselling Psychology Program at the University of British Columbia and Associate Member of the University of British Columbia Faculty of Medicine. He taught previously at St. Francis University and McGill University prior to coming to the University of British Columbia. His teaching and research areas focus on group counselling and psychotherapy, trauma repair, and therapeutic applications of the guided autobiographical life review method to the counselling process. Dr. Westwood’s most recent work includes development and evaluation of a group-based approach to trauma repair—therapeutic enactment. He has established several personal development programs for professionals across a wide range of groups (counselors/psychologists, nurses,
physicians, soldiers, clergy, etc.) using Guided Autobiography and group-based therapeutic enactment methods. His research and teaching focus areas have been included in many invited presentations at numerous national and international conferences. His research has been supported by grants from a number of different sources including, HSS and SSHRCC.