

Televēda Veteran Talking Circle Intervention – the “Hero’s Story” Program

Evaluation of the “Hero’s Story” program, an attempt to connect indigenous talking circles with peer group support techniques.

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Abstract:

The “Hero’s Story” program combines indigenous storytelling traditions with peer group support techniques to address the mental health challenges faced by military veterans, including depression, PTSD, and the impact of trauma. Veterans, particularly those in marginalized groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals and American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) veterans, often face systemic inequities, stigma, and barriers to accessing care. The program aims to foster resilience and healing by creating a safe, inclusive environment for participants to share their narratives and connect with peers.

Initially structured as an eight-week closed group, the program evolved to accommodate open-group formats, emphasizing flexibility and inclusivity. While rooted in indigenous traditions, the themes of resilience, identity, and belonging resonate across cultural boundaries. Modifications to the curriculum have ensured relevance for non-AIAN populations, with facilitators incorporating broad themes and universal prompts to enhance inclusivity. Key components include mindfulness practices, group storytelling, and guided reflection, which promote emotional safety and mutual support.

Participants reported high levels of satisfaction, with 100% positive feedback across 53 sessions. A total of 52 participants completed surveys indicating that the sessions were helpful, highlighting the program's effectiveness in fostering community, reducing isolation, and addressing systemic challenges. Across the evaluation period in 2024, facilitated by trauma-informed clinicians, the program included 59 sessions involving a total of 97 participants. The program’s adaptability for virtual and drop-in formats further expands its reach, making it a valuable tool for diverse veteran populations.

Recommendations for continued development include enhancing facilitator training, tailoring topics to participant needs, and integrating the program into broader veteran support networks. Through its culturally responsive approach, the Hero’s Story program provides a pathway to hope and healing for veterans navigating complex mental health challenges.

Problem Statement:

Military veterans face significant mental health challenges, with depression and suicide rates disproportionately higher than those of the general population. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, an estimated 17 veterans die by suicide daily, reflecting a critical need for targeted mental health interventions (VA, 2024). Contributing to this crisis are experiences of sexual abuse and harassment within the military, which exacerbate psychological distress. In 2021 alone, approximately 35,900 sexual assaults occurred in the military, yet only 25% were reported, highlighting systemic barriers to seeking help and justice (Myers, 2022; DoD, 2024). Sexual abuse survivors in the military often experience long-term repercussions, including depression, PTSD, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (RAINN, 2024).

Certain groups within the military face heightened risks. LGBTQIA+ service members, who represent 12% of the active-duty force, accounted for 43% of reported sexual assaults in 2018 (Abrams, 2024). Similarly, 12.2% of active-duty females and 2.0% of males under 21 reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact in 2023 (DoD, 2024). These statistics underscore a troubling intersection of trauma and systemic inequities, creating a pervasive sense of isolation, shame, and mistrust. Additionally, 44% of female victims and 35% of male victims reported being assaulted by someone within their chain of command, compounding the difficulty of seeking support (DoD, 2024).

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) veterans face unique challenges within this broader context of military mental health struggles. AIAN individuals have a long tradition of military service, participating at rates higher than many other ethnic groups and with the highest per-capita involvement of any population in the U.S. military (NICOA, 2019; HHS, n.d.). Despite this distinguished record, AIAN veterans face significant obstacles, including higher rates of service-connected disabilities and health disparities (VA, 2020). They are more likely to live in rural or underserved areas, which can limit access to healthcare and mental health services. Recent studies show a 51.8% increase in unadjusted suicide rates among AIAN veterans, underscoring the urgency of addressing their needs (VA, 2023). Additionally, systemic inequities compound the challenges faced by these veterans, with cultural and geographic barriers exacerbating feelings of isolation and limiting access to essential resources.

The stigma associated with mental health and sexual trauma, coupled with inadequate reporting systems and low prosecution rates, creates barriers to recovery and healing (Protect Our Defenders, 2020). Addressing these interconnected issues requires innovative, trauma-informed approaches that prioritize emotional safety, foster community, and empower veterans to reclaim their narratives. Programs like the Hero's Story, which leverage storytelling and peer support, present an opportunity to mitigate the devastating impact of depression, suicide, and trauma among veterans, offering a pathway to resilience and hope.

Background Information:

The "Hero's Story program" is an innovative storytelling program, designed to combine traditional tools utilized within indigenous communities with mental health approaches to create a culturally aligned mental health tool that increased accessibility and effectiveness. The program was initially structured in an eight-week closed-group format, then altered to expand beyond eight weeks and include participants who attended sporadically. This program was developed to support individuals through shared, transformative experiences and centered on storytelling as a vehicle for connection and healing, especially for those navigating complex life challenges or trauma. Developed with a focus on fostering group cohesion, the program was intended for support group settings where participants shared common experiences, such as veterans, those grieving, individuals feeling isolated, those who had experienced sexual abuse, and those healing from trauma. By providing a safe space and guiding individuals through structured sessions, the program empowered participants to share and reflect on each other's journeys, finding common ground and support along the way.

Structure and Approach

The original format of the program included eight weekly sessions, each structured around a storytelling format. Each session provided an opportunity for group members to engage actively, fostering connection through shared reflection and insight. Rather than a conventional teaching or instructional model, the Hero's Story program focused on group participation, creating a collaborative environment where members had the opportunity to reflect on each other's narratives. This peer-based interaction encouraged group engagement and cultivated a non-hierarchical space where everyone's story holds value. In addition, the format emphasized emotional safety and mutual respect, encouraging participants to remain actively involved rather than passively receiving information.

Each session in the original program followed specific goals and activities. The initial sessions focused on creating a foundation of trust and modeling the storytelling process. The facilitator began by sharing traditional or culturally relevant stories, setting an example of vulnerability and openness. As the program progressed, participants were invited to share personal stories related to predefined themes, such as acceptance, cultural identity, and belonging. This method helped participants to ease into storytelling by first observing and then participating, fostering confidence in sharing their experiences.

Core Components of the Sessions

The Hero's Story program was built on several core elements to ensure consistency and structure, each session includes:

1. **Opening and Group Agreements:** Every session begins with a welcome and a reminder of the group's shared agreements. These agreements are collaboratively created to establish a safe, respectful, and supportive environment. Key aspects include confidentiality, active listening, non-judgment, and mutual respect. This step is vital for creating a foundation where participants feel safe sharing personal experiences.

2. Mindful Awareness Practice: A brief mindfulness exercise helps participants center themselves, encouraging a grounded, focused mindset. Mindfulness is a useful tool for easing anxiety and fostering presence, particularly for individuals who may be dealing with trauma or emotional sensitivity.

3. Storytelling and Reflection: The storytelling process is central to each session. During the first two weeks, the facilitator models storytelling using traditional stories relevant to the group's cultural background or life experience. This allows participants to observe the storytelling format and begin reflecting on how stories can convey complex emotions and experiences. From the third week onward, participants share personal stories on themes selected to promote self-exploration and reflection, such as belonging, resilience, and cultural identity. Each story-sharing segment is followed by a group reflection, with members invited to share insights or relate aspects of the story to their own lives.

4. Guided Reflection Prompts: Reflection questions are woven into each session to stimulate meaningful discussion and engagement. The prompts vary by session and are designed to encourage participants to explore the deeper meanings and personal connections within each story. Sample prompts might include, "What aspect of this story resonates with you?" or "How does this character's journey mirror your own experiences?" These questions are open-ended, allowing participants to interpret and engage based on their unique perspectives.

5. Closing Rituals and Social Interaction: Each session concludes with a closing reflection, reinforcing the value of each participant's contribution and addressing any issues that may have surfaced during the discussion. The group acknowledges each member's role in creating the shared experience, enhancing the sense of belonging and mutual respect. Sessions also include optional social time before and after the core storytelling activity, allowing participants to interact informally, fostering community and trust outside the structured dialogue.

Weekly Session Themes and Goals

The Hero's Story program is structured to move through progressively deeper themes over the eight weeks, beginning with establishing comfort and trust, and gradually guiding participants toward self-reflection and potential transformation.

- Weeks 1-2: Building a Foundation: The first two sessions focus on setting up a safe environment and modeling the storytelling process. The facilitator begins by sharing culturally relevant or traditional stories, such as creation myths or community-based tales. This initial phase helps to build comfort, establish rapport, and model the vulnerability necessary for sharing personal stories. Participants are encouraged to observe the storytelling process and reflect on its relevance to their own experiences.

- Weeks 3-6: Personal Storytelling on Key Themes: During these sessions, participants begin sharing personal stories on specific themes such as acceptance, belonging, cultural identity, and the experience of straddling multiple worlds. These themes are selected to encourage introspection and to help individuals explore how their experiences fit into broader cultural and societal contexts. For example, a session on belonging may prompt participants to recall times

when they felt truly accepted or, conversely, experiences of exclusion. These discussions facilitate a rich exploration of identity and resilience, deepening the group's connections.

- Week 7: Reflection and Transformation: This session shifts toward synthesizing the insights gained over the past weeks. Participants are encouraged to consider what they have learned about themselves through storytelling and group reflection. Facilitators may prompt them to think about how these insights could lead to changes in their lives, guiding them toward potential transformations. Although the term “transformation” isn’t explicitly introduced, the focus is on recognizing change and growth through reflection.

- Week 8: Closure and Future Direction: The final session is designed to bring closure to the experience and help participants envision their next steps. The group reflects on the journey they’ve taken together and discusses ways to continue their healing process beyond the structured sessions. Participants are introduced to additional resources and support networks, reinforcing that their journey of healing and growth can continue beyond the program.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment

A key aspect of the Hero's Story program is the emphasis on safety and support. Facilitators are provided with guidelines on creating a respectful and secure environment, particularly important for groups that may include trauma survivors. Each session begins with a review of community agreements and boundaries to reinforce the space as a safe container for sharing. Special care is taken to avoid triggers and to provide protocols for managing distressing moments. If a participant feels triggered, facilitators are prepared to guide them to appropriate resources or offer support from clinical staff.

Flexibility and Adaptability

The program is designed to be flexible, allowing facilitators to tailor sessions to the group's specific needs and cultural context. Story prompts and themes can be adapted to suit different populations, whether veterans, caregivers, or other groups. Facilitators are encouraged to incorporate culturally relevant stories that resonate with participants, deepening engagement and ensuring that each story holds significance for the group. Additionally, optional activities, such as journaling between sessions or completing post-session surveys, are suggested to help participants continue processing their experiences outside the group setting.

Benefits and Potential Outcomes

The Hero's Story program aims to foster connection, healing, and self-awareness among participants. By sharing personal stories within a structured and supportive environment, individuals can gain new insights into their experiences and build resilience through mutual support. The storytelling format offers participants a means of processing their experiences and reclaiming their narratives, which can be especially empowering for those who feel disconnected or marginalized. Over time, participants may experience a heightened sense of belonging, greater self-acceptance, and an increased ability to navigate challenges in their lives.

In summary, the Hero's Story program offers a powerful approach to group support, grounded in storytelling and cultural relevance. Through structured sessions that balance guidance with open participation, the program fosters a sense of community, resilience, and healing, making it an impactful tool for individuals facing difficult life transitions or seeking deeper connections. By honoring each participant's story and promoting active reflection, the program creates a pathway for shared growth, helping individuals reconnect with themselves and others in meaningful ways.

Implemented Solution: Adapting the Hero's Story Program: Recommendations for Flexibility, Safety, and Inclusivity in Support Group Settings

This section outlines the changes made to adapt the Hero's Story Program to enhance accessibility for open or drop-in support groups, while ensuring participant safety and facilitating a sense of community among diverse attendees. These adaptations focus on optimizing the role of the facilitator, modifying the storytelling process, and integrating technical adjustments to better support virtual implementations. Implementing these recommendations can broaden the program's reach and impact, enabling its successful application across various group settings.

The Hero's Story Program was created to promote healing through storytelling and reflection within a supportive group environment. Designed for a closed, eight-week structure, the program has proven effective in encouraging shared experiences, introspection, and resilience among participants. However, to meet the needs of more flexible, open-group formats and online settings, modifications were made. This section outlines the adaptations incorporated to accommodate both closed and drop-in support groups, prioritize safety, and maintain continuity and engagement across diverse participant experiences.

1. Flexibility for Drop-In Group Format

For groups with dynamic attendance, such as weekly drop-in support sessions, an adaptable structure was established to accommodate both new and returning members. Each session began with brief participant introductions, where members shared their name, location, and a personal detail. This simple icebreaker promoted familiarity and connection, which were vital for open groups with varied attendance. To set clear expectations and maintain a safe environment, facilitators reviewed confidentiality guidelines, such as "Vegas Rules," at the start of each session, emphasizing the group's focus on support rather than therapy. This reinforced boundaries and clarified the group's role for all participants. Additionally, structured sharing time was allocated for members to discuss recent experiences or challenges, with facilitators ensuring equitable time distribution. This approach fostered group cohesion and ensured that everyone had an opportunity to participate meaningfully.

2. Enhanced Facilitator Role and Training

Facilitators played a critical role in maintaining a safe and supportive environment, especially for groups addressing sensitive topics. All facilitators received trauma-informed training and had access to ongoing supervision. Trauma-informed peer leader training was particularly important for those leading groups, equipping them with the skills needed to support participants sharing

vulnerable experiences. This training included guidance on emotional regulation, setting boundaries, and distinguishing between providing support and therapeutic intervention. Additionally, regular consultation sessions were held for facilitators and peer leaders. These sessions provided a space to address questions, navigate challenges, and process emotional responses to group dynamics. By fostering facilitator preparedness and providing ongoing support, supervision strengthened the safety and effectiveness of the program for all participants.

3. Adjustments to Storytelling Approach

The storytelling process, a core element of the Hero's Story Program, was tailored for open group formats to ensure greater flexibility and inclusivity in shared experiences. Universal and adaptable story themes, such as resilience, belonging, and identity, were selected. These themes were broad enough to resonate with a diverse range of participants, allowing them to share relevant experiences without adhering to a fixed narrative. Additionally, immediate reflection prompts were incorporated after each story to engage all group members and foster meaningful connections. Questions like, "What resonated with you about this story?" or "How have you navigated similar experiences?" invited participants to reflect on and connect with the shared story, even if they lacked direct familiarity with the topic. This approach ensured that storytelling remained inclusive, dynamic, and impactful for everyone involved.

4. Integration of Safety and Emotional Support Mechanisms

Given the sensitive nature of topics discussed, emotional support mechanisms and safety protocols were essential to ensure participant well-being. Brief grounding or mindfulness exercises were incorporated at the start of each session to help participants center themselves and reduce stress, particularly for those processing traumatic experiences. Facilitators were trained to recognize signs of emotional distress and followed specific protocols for managing triggering moments. They were prepared to connect participants with additional resources or offer a safe, non-judgmental way for individuals to step out if needed. These practices ensured that the sessions provided a supportive and secure environment for all participants.

5. Building Long-Term Community and Engagement

For groups that continued beyond a single session, additional components were introduced to foster a sense of community and belonging, which was critical for participant retention and support. Optional unstructured social time was provided before and after the core session activities, allowing participants to build relationships informally. This strengthened group cohesion and facilitated a supportive and trusting environment. As the groups progressed, extended themes were introduced to encourage exploration of complex issues, such as family dynamics, cultural identity, or the impact of trauma. These themes allowed participants to build on their storytelling experiences, deepening their connections within the group. Additionally, participants were encouraged to journal or write reflections between sessions. Journaling promoted self-reflection and enhanced the impact of the group experience by helping participants integrate insights outside of session time.

6. Technical and Logistical Modifications for Virtual Groups

For groups conducted online through the Televēda platform, logistical and technical adjustments were made to enhance the virtual group experience. An automatic speaking queue or rotation system was implemented, which reduced the need for manual “talking circle” cues. This adjustment minimized interruptions and maintained the flow of the sessions. Privacy measures were also introduced for emergency support, with participants asked to provide their location when joining a session. This information was visible only to facilitators and was used exclusively for emergency purposes. In the event of an immediate need, facilitators were able to direct emergency services to the participant’s location while preserving privacy during routine group interactions. These measures ensured a smoother and safer virtual experience for all participants.

Conclusion

The Hero’s Story Program was a powerful tool for group support and personal reflection, fostering community through storytelling and mutual engagement. Adapting the program to accommodate diverse group formats—such as open or drop-in groups and online sessions—expanded its reach and applicability, allowing more individuals to benefit from its healing framework. Through these adjustments, the program maintained its integrity while addressing the specific needs of flexible and virtual support settings. Implementing these strategies created a safe, inclusive, and impactful experience for participants, enhancing their connection to both their own stories and to the group. These adaptations provided a framework for extending the Hero’s Story Program to varied settings and formats, optimizing its adaptability and ensuring a meaningful, supportive environment for all participants.

Supporting Evidence: Summary of Interviews

Over the past year, the MST (Military Sexual Trauma) and Female Veteran Groups have engaged 46 participants in total, with a consistent weekly attendance from 7 individuals (2 from MST and 5 from the Female Veteran Group). The remaining attendees are categorized as “drop-in,” participating less regularly. Of the 21 individuals who requested Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) resources, 10 were successfully connected to the assistance they sought, while 11 ultimately chose not to proceed with the resources offered. This highlights the program's ability to provide tangible support to those who were ready to engage while respecting the autonomy and preferences of participants who opted not to pursue assistance. Commonly requested supports include financial assistance (7), mental health needs (5), transportation (4), and food insecurity (4), with additional needs spanning housing, exposure to violence, and veteran or tribal benefits.

One hundred percent of individuals in both the Female Veteran and MST groups responded "yes" to the question, "Was this session helpful?" in participant surveys following group attendance. This unanimous positive response underscores the value of these groups in addressing both immediate and systemic challenges. Additionally, the consistent participation and high

satisfaction rates reflect the effectiveness of these initiatives in fostering support, connection, and resource accessibility for veterans navigating complex life circumstances.

Seven attendees completed in depth interviews. Information from those interviews is summarized below.

Positive Aspects of the Program

Participants across the interviews consistently highlighted the value of the Talking Circles for their inclusivity, flexibility, and ability to foster emotional safety. Many participants, like J and K, appreciated the neutral, nonjudgmental environment where they could share at their own pace or simply listen. Others, such as D and C, found the specific MST group particularly impactful for managing anxiety and processing trauma.

The virtual format was widely appreciated, especially by A and K, as it eliminated barriers like travel and allowed for anonymity. J emphasized how the sessions provided a therapeutic outlet for creativity and self-expression, while C found empowerment in seeing the progress of other female veterans in the group.

The MST group, in particular, was praised by multiple participants for its focus and supportive dynamics, helping participants like D and C feel less isolated and more self-aware.

Impact on Isolation and Connection

The Talking Circles significantly reduced feelings of isolation for many participants. J described how the group provided a sense of belonging and a vital connection absent in their daily life. Similarly, K felt less alone and appreciated the safe space to engage at their comfort level.

D and C highlighted the importance of peer support, sharing that the ability to connect with others who had similar experiences fostered healing and solidarity. Participants valued the diversity in the group, with C specifically noting the benefits of including veterans from other states. However, A expressed feeling excluded in sessions that focused on parenting-related topics, which underscored the need for broader inclusivity.

Challenges and Suggestions for Improvement

Participants identified several areas where Talking Circles could be enhanced to better meet the needs of attendees. Group dynamics emerged as a significant challenge, with J, D, and C suggesting strategies like structured turn-taking or creating specialized groups for more dominant participants to ensure balanced discussions. A and J highlighted the importance of aligning topics with participants' diverse experiences, proposing that weekly trauma-informed themes, such as PTSD or MST, be announced in advance to allow participants to select relevant sessions. Accessibility and outreach were also areas for improvement, with N recommending targeted marketing efforts and adjusting meeting times to accommodate more participants. D emphasized the value of trauma-informed training for facilitators, tailored to the unique needs of veterans, and underscored the importance of selecting trustworthy leaders, whether or not they are veterans themselves. Additionally, J noted technical challenges with the virtual format, suggesting improvements like a grid view to enhance engagement and interaction.

Personal Reflections and Next Steps

The Talking Circles had a transformative impact on participants, helping many take critical steps in their healing journeys. For J and D, the program provided a platform to reclaim their identity as veterans and process unresolved trauma. C credited the MST group with fostering self-awareness and personal growth, while K appreciated the circles as a safe and pressure-free starting point for addressing isolation and exploring support options. However, A and N expressed a desire for the program to become more inclusive, particularly in addressing the needs of veterans without children or those hesitant to share deeply personal experiences. D highlighted the broader potential of peer-led support in strengthening the veteran community, advocating for continued development of programs that build trust and foster connections.

Final Thoughts and Takeaways

Participants collectively emphasized the importance of Televēda's Talking Circles as a vital resource for veterans. They expressed gratitude for the program's role in their healing journeys, noting its ability to reduce isolation, foster connection, and provide a safe space for growth. Suggestions for future enhancements included expanding access to female veterans from diverse locations, as proposed by C, and integrating the program into VA initiatives like Whole Health, as recommended by D and C. Balancing group discussions to ensure all voices are heard was also highlighted as a critical area for improvement. Overall, participants underscored the need for continued investment in trauma-informed, veteran-specific support systems, which they believe have the potential to create inclusive, effective environments for connection and recovery.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The Hero's Story Program has demonstrated its value as a transformative tool for fostering community, healing, and self-awareness among participants, particularly veterans and individuals facing trauma or isolation. Through its storytelling-based approach, the program creates a safe, inclusive environment for participants to connect, reflect, and grow. By adapting the program to accommodate diverse group formats, including open and drop-in sessions as well as virtual settings, its reach and applicability have been significantly expanded. These adjustments have enabled participants from various backgrounds to engage meaningfully, addressing their unique needs while maintaining the program's integrity.

To further enhance the program's effectiveness, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Enhancing Accessibility:** Expand outreach efforts to include diverse populations, particularly veterans from underrepresented demographics such as those without children or from LGBTQIA+ communities. Use targeted marketing and adjust meeting times to improve participation.
2. **Tailoring Topics:** Introduce weekly trauma-informed themes to allow participants to engage with sessions that are most relevant to their experiences. Themes like PTSD, MST, cultural identity, and resilience can foster deeper connections and inclusivity.

3. Strengthening Facilitator Support: Continue providing trauma-informed training and regular supervision for facilitators, emphasizing skills in emotional regulation, boundary-setting, and managing sensitive group dynamics. This ensures the safety and well-being of both participants and facilitators.

4. Improving Virtual Platforms: Optimize the virtual experience by incorporating features such as a grid view for participant engagement and privacy-focused emergency support protocols. These technical adjustments will maintain session flow and enhance the sense of community.

5. Promoting Sustainability: Encourage journaling, reflection, and optional social time to deepen participants' engagement and create lasting connections within the group. Integrate the program into larger support networks like VA initiatives to provide ongoing resources for participants.

By implementing these recommendations, the Hero's Story Program can continue to evolve, offering a robust framework for healing and resilience. It will remain a vital resource for veterans and others seeking community and support as they navigate their unique challenges and journeys toward recovery.

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