

## The Just Me Project for Families

**Issue Justification** Recently published longitudinal assessments of returning Iraq war veterans highlight significant mental health issues and challenges to the existing resources for intervention. One of the most critical points identified (JAMA) is that there is a four-fold increase in concerns about interpersonal conflicts in the months following return from combat, which highlights the need to recognize the potential impact of deployment and combat-related stress on the families and family relationships. The younger the combat veteran, the more likely mental health problems are to develop, similarly, the more deployments, the more likely stress-related mental health become evident. (Ame J. Prev. Med) Researchers report that the depersonalization and objectification necessary in combat exaggerate the issues of transition to civilian life, and are related to outbursts of rage, violence, and recourse to substance abuse. (APH, VA)

The stigma around issues of care plus the lack of access to care for the spouse, family-members, or reservists lead some analysts to predict that the long-term costs of care and consequences will be greater than the costs of the combat itself. Many of the combat stress-related conditions like Traumatic Brain Injury may not become evident for some months, and may change the behavior of the individual in major ways. A child, a spouse and a parent may develop stress-related issues in trying to deal with this stranger who is their family-member.

An effective and proven approach to stress-related illness is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or talking through the problems in a non-threatening environment. Whether with sick children and their families, returning veterans, or those who have undergone sudden loss and trauma, we know that if people under stress can talk about it, they do better. Sometimes the most difficult hurdle, especially given the stigma around mental health care, is finding a way to start the conversation. Cognitive-Behavioral therapy is most effective when the family is included together. (Psychiatric Times)

The Just Me Project opens the dialogue, starting with a child's book about a three-legged cat whose story normalizes the conditions of disability and prejudice, while inspiring readers to transcend limitations and appreciate connection to others. There is a structured program to build on coping skills and engage participants in reframing their experience. Henry the cat establishes a vocabulary of feelings and engages wounded adults through the perspective of innocence so that healing and understanding can begin. The cat describes himself as a handy cat not a handicapped cat, and invites humans to step outside of their prejudicial and limiting labels. Workbooks are designed to address specific issues for the wounded individual, the child, the caregiver, etc. and to help each one deal with the attitudes and adjustments necessary to their changed reality while still seeing themselves as capable and vital. (ACE study) Investing in children who are under stress is an investment in their adult years and in their ability to handle stress, as well as to become resilient. Investing in the family as a whole while it is under stress, or to prevent long-term adverse consequences of stress, is an investment in their ability to function and their health as citizens. The Just Me Project offers a way to do this before a crisis occurs, and in ways to which anyone, of any affiliation or community, can relate.

Supplemental to the written program, are CD's of music and 'stress hardiness and healing' which were developed by Bellruth Naparstek for the first responders following the 9/11 attacks and have been shown to be more effective in the long term than most other interventions. In addition a puppet of a three-legged cat is being made and it will help children and adults talk about these hard issues of injury, war and recovery. As yet to be constructed is the web link to archive the stories told, create an online community sharing resources, and provide future generations with a legacy of lessons learned through the recovery process.

**Discussion** In the first two years after distribution of the first email story of the cat was sent, over 31,000 letters with stories of adversity, healing and hope were received. As the demand exploded it became apparent that military families were in particular need, and that the story of the three-legged cat could be used by parents and teachers to overcome stigma, barriers to conversation, and the social taboos around discussions of disability. Through the Whiteman Foundation in Arizona, three external evaluations were given, with discussions of the ways the Just Me Materials would be used:

1. **Richard Fabes, Ph.D.**, Founding Director, School of Social and family Dynamics, Family and Human Dynamics Institute, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ. "The story of the 3-legged cat is touching and it is not only a psychologically meaningful story, but it is a beautiful book. It is written a bit above the level of a preschooler, but the themes it conveys are important for children of all ages—acceptance, caring stereotypes, predispositions, and the difficulties and strengths that reflect being different. These are issues that are vital to how we get along with one another."
2. **Darlene Johnson**, Principal, Holmes Elementary School, Mesa, AZ. "I really enjoyed the book. I asked my new counselor to read it, and said loved the book. Here is what she wrote to me 'Yes, a class setting would be perfect. They would read it together, out loud and discuss. The homework for humans is wonderful. She would use it in Grade 5 to recognize bias and respect diversity, and in grade 6—resolving conflicts, and setting and achieving goals.'"
3. **Gretchen McAllister**, Director, Martin-Springer Institute, Flagstaff, AZ "Your book supports several of our initiatives related to diversity, moral courage and altruism. We will be using your book in a large diversity project with K-12 schools in Flagstaff."

In October 2007, **veteran Dawn Halfaker**, whose arm was blown off by an IED in Iraq wrote:

"This book is adorable and inspiring to anyone and I can definitely see how it would be an incredibly effective therapy tool for children coping with injury or limb loss themselves or by a loved one. I think the most powerful part of the story is that Henry is still loved and accepted despite the fact that he is different, and also, that he is so capable of doing everything he wants to do. People, and especially children, relate to animals naturally and this feline boasts a remarkably inspiring story. I think it is great that you are advocating that it be used by the military as a therapy tool."

Another donor requested an external evaluation from **Graham Emslie, MD**, Professor of Psychiatry, Charles E and Sarah M Seay Chair of Child Psychiatry, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. It reads:

“I enjoyed reading *What’s the Matter with Henry?* It is an attractive book with a compelling story, and delivers a wonderful message at an appropriate level for children. The workbook is an excellent tool for stimulating discussion. It is particularly good in that it encourages active coping.”

I asked **Dr. Sunita Stewart**, a faculty member, child psychologist and cognitive behavioral therapist for children to review the book as well. Her thoughts are as follows: “I liked this book. The story acknowledges that loss is painful and puzzling. But communicates the message that loss does not take everything you had away from you and does not alter who you are. The workbook exercises encourage the child’s expression of their own feelings, which frequently are neglected in grieving families. But most important, the exercises promote coping skills. They point to connecting and sharing with others, and positive activities as strategies for feeling better. They encourage a focus on the child’s strength and so build self-esteem. They promote optimism and empower the child by encouraging the development of goals for the future and definition of steps to reach those goals. The “Kibble for Thought” summary is very nice. It highlights the central messages which are useful for child and parent alike.”

**Projected Benefits:** The tangible benefits of a preventive intervention are the savings related to long-term predictable consequences due to non-intervention. A former Surgeon-General of the Navy describes the consequences in families of keeping secrets, or not discussing, adversity as “In families that had kept secrets from each other there were a lot of mental health problems, alcohol and drug abuse, spousal abuse, emotional neglect of other children, family separations, divorce and family members slid further into the vortex of failure and despair. In families that were open, these problems were a lot less....Just as we learned over three decades ago that having children and their families talk about their illness, we have learned that for people with a variety of stress induced illnesses, talking about them is the best way to get through the process—over the speed bumps.”

There is extensive research documentation verifying that the adverse consequences of stress-induced problems have defining impacts on children. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study sponsored by the CDC finds that these stressors in childhood predict the development of alcoholism and substance abuse; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; depression, fetal death, health related quality of life; ischemic heart disease; liver disease; risk for intimate partner violence; sexually transmitted disease; smoking; suicide attempts; unintended pregnancy. Despite these findings, minimal attention is paid to the experience of a child living in the home of combat veteran with disabling wounds, stress-induced problems, or long-term recovery. To date over 3000 copies of the book have been given to Fisher Houses and Family Advocacy groups and to various transition support offices dealing with families and returning veterans. The staff at the Naval Hospital at Camp Pendleton felt the materials are so effective at opening the conversation around resilience and recovery that they should be distributed freely “like the Gideon Bible” to everyone.

The advantage of The Just Me Project is that by using a children's book about a cat, and a workbook based on the reality that we all speak to our pets in a different voice; the project is able to reach past assumptions and barriers to initiate a dialogue about vulnerability and pain. At the same time, through its emphasis on the development of coping skills and the normalization of diversity and disability, the project helps participant reframe attitudes toward injury, loss, and stigma within the family. The cost of the basic materials of this project per family at less than \$30 is considerably less than the cost of clinical interventions. Further, because the project is so readily available, including the planned web-based components, access is universal, which is not the case with hospital-based or installation-based interventions.

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