

Description of the Merritt Center's Vet Retreat Process

The veterans from combat come with several needs: To recognize and understand the trauma they experienced and the resulting reactive behavior patterns created and to know there are skills to adjust, release and transform the patterns that disrupt their civilian life functions. To address any of the above they need: safety, trust and comradeship.

When they arrive at The Merritt Lodge for The Merritt Center Program they are somewhat open, but perhaps wary about what they are going to experience. The facility, grounds, staff provide a real sense of safety so that they are willing to begin participation. A talking circle is introduced in the first session and used throughout the program to provide the foundation for creating trust. With others in the circle acknowledging their traumatic experiences the vet is willing to explore his/her own and before the circle ends or definitely before the first weekend ends, the vet is willing to share a piece of the experienced trauma. The process of creating comradeship with mentors who have walked through their own process provides the natural openness to experience and experiment with the skills demonstrated and used in each session.

The therapist introduces several types of behavioral and cognitive therapies. One type: RET: Rational, Experiential, Transformative. The client looks at the event in a rational way, then determines how he/she experienced the event (usually in a negative sense.) Then a process is used to transform the experience of the event into a positive.

Another type of process used is to walk a client from family of origin to discover normalized behavioral responses to trauma and determine which are continuing to be used and which are helpful and not helpful. A release process is created to let go or change the unhelpful behaviors.

The fear and anger work experienced in this program use guided visualization to determine the source and power of the emotion in the event and to transform it. It also helps to create an appropriate reaction to a trigger event.

The sweatlodge provides a chance for comradeship and release of the trauma event. Creating walking sticks and talking sticks helps to objectify the comradeship and the talking circle trustship. Thus the lesson is to walk the talk. Both sticks accompany the vet home to give a touchstone of remembrance and reminder.

The family in the last talking circle provides a chance to honor the service of the vet and to have the family witness the commitment of the vet to a transformed journey and acknowledge the support available for the journey.