

# WRIISC *Advantage*

WINTER 2025

Research Recognized by  
VA Office of Research &  
Development

Cognitive Difficulties in  
Gulf War Illness

Newsletter turns 20

## Veteran Yoga Classes

Health Benefits for All



This edition of the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) Advantage newsletter focuses on a variety of topics including recent WRIISC research studies, and our latest Veteran and provider education initiatives geared towards improving the health of Veterans.

## ▼ DIRECTORS' CORNER

The WRIISC Advantage newsletter celebrates the 20th anniversary of its first publication! We are thankful to all our readers for making this publication and news from our WRIISC program a huge success throughout the years!

As directors of the three WRIISC sites, we work together toward fulfilling the WRIISC mission of research, education, and clinical care, and continue to serve Veterans and their health care teams. In today's newsletter, we will be highlighting our various educational offerings for both health care clinicians and Veterans. Clinician education is at the core of Veterans' health care. WRIISC prioritizes building networks of clinicians who are able to better understand and address Veterans' health difficulties. Our hope is that sharing optimal ways to care for Veterans with unique health concerns will not only help the health of individuals in one-on-one clinical visits, but ultimately create a stronger VA health care system. We also offer WRIISC Veteran education classes and health practices that are beneficial to Veterans with chronic symptoms. Our efforts focus on changing health outcomes for Veterans in the long term and providing information about ways to improve functioning and life quality.

*Wes Ashford, MD, PhD*  
Director, CA WRIISC

*Helena Chandler, PhD*  
Director, NJ WRIISC

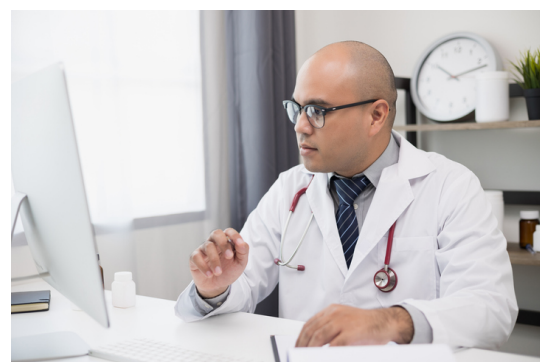
*Matt Reinhard, PsyD*  
Director, DC WRIISC

## WRIISC Educates Health Care Professionals on Exposures during a Virtual Day of Learning

The mission to equip providers with the knowledge and skills needed to improve the health of Veterans with exposure concerns is a high priority for WRIISC. The WRIISC continues to work diligently to educate health care professionals across VA on caring for the health outcomes of military environmental exposures.

In late March 2025, the EXPosure-Related Care Transformation (EXPERT) Center, located within the NJ WRIISC, provided a full day of training on exposure-informed care to VA healthcare professionals across the nation. Experts in the field of military environmental exposures presented on topics such as the definition of exposure-informed care, assessing and documenting military environmental exposure concerns, and implementing exposure-informed care into daily practice. Attendees said that the presentations relayed a wealth of valuable information and would recommend the training to others.

WRIISC remains enthusiastic that these annual days of learning will aide in the process of making a difference in the care of Veterans who report military exposures and further educate health care staff to ensure all clinicians are able to provide exposure-informed care.



# WRIISC Advantage Newsletter Turns 20

The first edition of this Newsletter, formerly called "What's New at the WRIISC?", was written and mailed 20 years ago (2005). It was mailed to just 45 Veterans who had been to the NJ WRIISC for a clinical evaluation. Shortly thereafter, the newsletter turned into a tri-WRIISC effort, covering happenings from all three WRIISC locations and the name was changed to the WRIISC Advantage. At present, over 11,000 Veterans receive the newsletter in the mail. Additionally, over 30,000 providers and community members receive it electronically via email. As the number of people we reach

Thank you to our readers  
for staying tuned in!

continues to grow, we continue to inform readers about the most important issues related to Veterans' health and keep them up to date about all WRIISC happenings.

## WRIISC Research Recognized by VA Office of Research and Development

WRIISC research is often proudly recognized nationally by the VA Office of Research and Development (ORD). The ORD tracks VA-funded research and newly published findings, covering the news in their weekly Research News Briefs on their website to enhance Veterans' understanding of research that takes place at the VA to improve overall patient care. Dr. Charity Breneman, Staff Scientist at DC WRIISC, published a paper titled, "Mental Health and Cognition in Women Veterans Enrolled in the Health of Vietnam Era Veteran Women's Study (HealthViEWS)," in the *Journal of Women's Health* in November 2024. This research was subsequently highlighted in ORD's News Briefs in December 2024. The study finds an associated increased risk of possible cognitive impairment in older women Veterans suffering from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although further examination remains necessary, results suggest that Vietnam-era women Veterans with self-reported PTSD and depression symptoms or a probable diagnosis of depression may benefit from cognitive function screening to inform clinical care.

This research and resulting publication are a testament to DC WRIISC's inclination to foster collaboration among its research, education, and clinical teams and the Center's ability to train strong clinicians and researchers. Data for

### Depression, PTSD may increase risk of cognitive impairment in Women

VA's Health of Vietnam Era Veteran Women's Study suggests older Women Veterans with PTSD or depression are at greater risk for cognitive impairment. The study interviewed more than 4,000 Women Veterans over the age of 59 by phone, finding 7% had possible cognitive impairment. Of those, higher self-reported severity of PTSD or depression symptoms corresponded to higher odds of cognitive impairment. In particular, Veterans with a probable depression diagnosis based on clinical assessment had 61% greater odds of cognitive impairment than those without depression. The researchers advise Vietnam-era Women Veterans with depression or PTSD be prioritized for cognitive screening, which could allow for enrollment in one of VA's evidence-based cognitive rehabilitation programs, such as Brain Boosters or Cognitive Symptom Management and Rehabilitation Therapy. (*Journal of Women's Health*, Nov. 4, 2024)



Photo for illustrative purposes only.  
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this publication was obtained from a cooperative research study between DC WRIISC, VA Health Outcomes Military Exposures, the Massachusetts Veterans Epidemiology Research and Information Center, the National Center for PTSD and VA Health Service Research and Development Center for Innovation to Implementation at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, the Medical University of South Carolina, and the VA Quality Enhancement Research Initiative.

Two former DC WRIISC VA Advanced Fellows specializing in neuropsychology provided important insight into the cognitive data analyzed for the study. Dr. Breneman, an epidemiologist and physiologist by training, analyzed the cognitive data, translating study results and interpreting its implications for future clinical care of women Veterans suffering from depression or PTSD. Of note, upon completing their 2-year fellowships, both neuropsychologists were immediately hired into staff positions at the Washington, DC VA Medical Center where they continue to provide care to Veterans. To read more about impactful research at the VA, visit [https://www.research.va.gov/in\\_brief.cfm](https://www.research.va.gov/in_brief.cfm).

# Yoga Classes for All Veterans

Yoga is accessible to anyone – regardless of age, flexibility, or physical limitations. Yoga is a set of mind/body tools that incorporate movement, breath, and meditation to restore health and balance to the body and peace to the mind.

WRIISC offers yoga classes to Veterans of all fitness levels. These classes include virtual yoga classes currently offered through VA Video Connect and phone-based yoga nidra meditation classes. Yoga classes can help provide relief of symptoms from chronic pain, fatigue, stress and anxiety, enhance balance, and improve general health and sense of well-being. Yoga can help improve flexibility too, but you do not have to be flexible to begin taking these yoga classes.

Below are WRIISC yoga class offerings and schedules. VA-enrolled Veterans nationwide are invited to participate and experience the benefits of yoga firsthand.

**FREE YOGA FOR VETERANS**  
**ONLINE LIVE GROUP YOGA**

Open to all VA-enrolled Veterans with a referral (WRIISC YOGA WELLNESS)  
 For more information please contact:  
 Jennifer.nelson-criss@va.gov

**Monday 3 PM**  
Chair Yoga

**Tuesday 3:15 PM**  
Yoga Qi Gong Meditation

**Tuesday 5 PM**  
Yoga for Women Veterans

**Wednesday 11 AM**  
Mat Yoga

**Wednesday 6 PM**  
Yoga for Pain and Chronic Pain

**Thursday 10 AM**  
Trauma Sensitive Chair Yoga


**Friday 10 AM**  
Chair Yoga

(All times listed are PST)



PAO ID 751 - Last Updated 11-29-2023

**Guided iRest™ Yoga Nidra Meditation**  
**Phone-based Class from Home**



**For All Veterans**


WRIISC guided meditation classes are available to **all** Veterans

Meditation can be practiced seated, lying down, or standing. *For safety, Veterans must not drive or operate machinery during class.*

**Questions?**  
 DC WRIISC Yoga Staff  
 202-550-4248  
 rebecca.mccullers@va.gov

**CA WRIISC Yoga Staff**  
 650-815-9463  
 louise.mahoney2@va.gov

**For more info on VA's War Related Injury & Illness Study Center**  
[www.warrelatedillness.va.gov](http://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov)




Integrative Restoration™ is an evidence-based, mind-body approach that offers tools to help you relax deeply, release stress, increase resiliency, improve your interpersonal relationships and empower you to practice self-regulation and self-care to support your health & wellness.

For more info, go to  
[CA WRIISC Integrative Health and Wellness Program](http://CA WRIISC Integrative Health and Wellness Program)

**Coast to Coast offerings-- call in to join us each week-- no class limit!**

- **Tuesdays: 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time**  
 1-404-397-1596 USA or Toll Free 1-833-558-0712  
 Access code: 433 794 55
- **Thursdays: 8:00 p.m. Eastern Time**  
 1-404-397-1596 USA or Toll Free 1-833-558-0712  
 Access code: 199 731 6363

**\* Note: Class observes daylight savings time. Start times may vary according to your local time zone.\***



PAO ID 701 - Last Updated 7-12-22

# Mindfulness Meditation Classes for All Veterans

**DURING EACH CLASS, A TOPIC RELATED TO MINDFULNESS IS INTRODUCED, FOLLOWED BY A GUIDED MEDITATION PRACTICE. TAKE ANY OR ALL CLASSES!**

**TIME:** 11am – 12 noon, Eastern Time (ET)  
**LOCATION:** This class will be offered via telephone: 1-404-397-1596 or 1-833-558-0712 (Toll Free)  
 Participant Access code: 433 794 55

- ✓ [May 2](#)
- ✓ [June 6](#)
- ✓ [August 1](#)
- ✓ [September 5](#)
- ✓ [October 3](#)
- ✓ [November 7](#)
- ✓ [December 5](#)



# Research Matters

**WRIISC continues to research topics essential to improving Veterans' health. The results of a recent study conducted by researchers at the Palo Alto WRIISC were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Neuroscience Society to be held at Boston, Massachusetts in March 2025.**

**PUBLICATION TITLE:** Neural Correlates of Cognitive Functions in Veterans with Gulf War Illness

**QUESTION:** How is volume loss in the brain related to the cognitive and mood difficulties found in Veterans with Gulf War Illness?

**FINDINGS:** We observed that Veterans with symptoms of GWI had reduced volumes in several brain regions including the brainstem, nucleus accumbens, and hippocampus, when compared to Veterans who did not report symptoms of GWI. Reduced volume in the brainstem was primarily associated with impaired memory scores; volume loss in the nucleus accumbens was primarily associated with depression; and a smaller hippocampus was associated with increasing age.

**MEANING:** Cognitive difficulties are a major health complaint of Veterans with GWI. Our previous study suggested that the brainstem is vulnerable in Veterans with GWI compared to Veterans who do not have GWI.



This new study provides further understanding of the relationship between the two and suggests that brainstem volume loss might be partly responsible for the cognitive difficulties found in Veterans with GWI. The volume of nucleus accumbens might be related to mood changes such as depression, which is common in GWI. It is well-known that the hippocampus gradually loses volume with age even in healthy middle-aged adults. Our results suggest this process may begin earlier in Veterans with GWI. These new findings will help WRIISC researchers to understand and treat GWI.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** Researchers from the CA WRIISC include: Yu Zhang, G. Marina Veltkamp, Maxine Kregel, Peter Bayley, and Ansgar Furst.

## HIGHLIGHTING WRIISC'S COLLABORATING PARTNERS

Partnering with individuals and teams across VA, Department of Defense, and other federal agencies, as well as universities and research foundations, is critical to advancement in the field of Veterans health.

The collaboration between Dr. Zulkayda Mamat (a postdoctoral researcher at the CA WRIISC, working with mentor Dr. Peter Bayley) and Dr. Khalid Elzamzamy (Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine) represents a significant step forward in addressing the complex psychological issues faced by Veterans. Dreams are an important field of study, especially for those dealing with grief or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Their proposed investigation will examine dream content, emotional significance, communication patterns, and potential mechanisms such as memory processing. This work promises a nuanced understanding of how Veterans experience and interpret dreams. The project has the potential to open a discussion about how dreams may impact Veterans, who often experience significant loss. Dr. Elzamzamy's background in psychiatry, with focused training on culturally and religiously sensitive approaches to psychology and ethics, brings a unique perspective to this collaboration. His expertise in cultural and spiritual aspects of mental health provide valuable insights into how Veteran populations experience and cope with service-related illnesses.

Combining Dr. Mamat's work with Veterans at the WRIISC with Dr. Elzamzamy's specialized knowledge, such an investigation into dreams, may bring insights into their potential therapeutic value in bereavement and trauma recovery. Such findings could lead to more tailored and effective treatments for Veterans, ultimately improving their quality of life and long-term health outcomes. This collaboration exemplifies the WRIISC's commitment to innovative, holistic approaches to address the complex health needs of Veterans.



**DR. KHALID ELZAMZAMY,**  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF  
PSYCHIATRY AT THE JOHNS  
HOPKINS UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

**A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO DR. ELZAMZAMY FOR HIS WORK ON THIS PROJECT!**

# Around the WRIISC News

## NJ WRIISC

### Beloved WRIISC Employee Retires

After over 20 years of service at the NJ WRIISC, Ms. Deborah Jewell, NJ WRIISC's Clinical Program Manager, retired at the end of February. Over the years, Ms. Jewell led the evolution of the clinical administrative core. Ms. Jewell performed several important functions during her days spent at the WRIISC. In her efforts to tailor each visit individually for Veterans, she spent an extensive amount of time with Veterans on the phone and in person before their visits. Veterans who have come to the Center from all over the country have commented that the thought, preparation, and care Ms. Jewell put into making their visits possible was so much appreciated.



*"I'm grateful for my entire WRIISC experience and any minute of time I spent serving Veterans was truly a greatest moment of my life." -Ms. Deborah Jewell*

If you visited the NJ WRIISC, it is likely that you remember her friendly face, always there to help coordinate the several clinical evaluation components. Ms. Jewell always went the extra mile for each Veteran. Ms. Jewell's emphasis on "above and beyond actions" created a culture of customer service excellence

in the WRIISC administrative core and set the tone for Veterans' positive experience of care. Her time with WRIISC and the extraordinary service she provided for our WRIISC Veterans is unforgettable. Ms. Jewell, you are irreplaceable and will be missed!

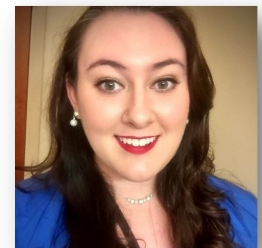
## DC WRIISC

### WRIISC Staff Spotlight

**Kyle F. Pietro, M.A., Ph.D.** is a psychophysiological who joins the DC WRIISC as an Advanced Health Research Fellow. Dr. Pietro received his B.S. in Exercise Science with a concentration in Human Performance from Southern Connecticut State University, and an M.A. in Applied Exercise Physiology from Teachers College, Columbia University. He completed his Ph.D. in Kinesiology with a concentration in Cognitive-Motor Neuroscience as a member of the Human Performance Biopsychology Laboratory at the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Pietro's research focuses on human performance and the brain dynamics related to successful motor performance under conditions of high-demand, stress, and challenge.



**Erin Parrish, Psy.D., M.S.** is an Advanced Postdoctoral Fellow in Neuropsychology at the DC WRIISC. Dr. Parrish earned her undergraduate degree at the University of Central Florida, followed by an MS and PsyD in Clinical Psychology with a concentration in Neuropsychology at Mercer University. She completed her clinical internship in Rehabilitation Neuropsychology at Jackson Health System/ University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, specializing in the assessment and treatment of patients with acute conditions such as spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injury, strokes, brain tumors/cancer, and neurological disorders. Her research focuses on mild traumatic brain injury in military populations and the factors that impact recovery outcomes, including post-traumatic stress disorder, cognitive functioning, post-concussive syndrome, chronic pain, and sleep disorders. Clinically, Dr. Parrish is dedicated to identifying and addressing biopsychosociocultural factors affecting brain and emotional health, aiming to improve desired functional outcomes and enhance the quality of life for her patients.



MAY 22, 2025

GULF WAR EXPOSURES & HEALTH CONCERNS: A CLASS FOR VETERANS



## CA WRIISC

### Using Veteran Data to Improve Health

The WRIISC has collected clinical information from Veterans participating in the WRIISC clinical evaluations for almost 20 years, particularly using the WRIISC Health Questionnaire (aka: WRIISC Intake Packet), with the purpose to better understand the conditions afflicting post-deployment Veterans and to develop more efficient and robust approaches to clinical evaluation and develop more beneficial care plans. This Health Questionnaire asks Veterans over 800 questions about their lives, their military experiences and exposures, their health, and particular issues they may have subsequently developed including chronic pain, sleep difficulties, chronic fatigue, “brain fog”, and PTSD.



With over 3,000 Veterans having completed this questionnaire across all three WRIISC sites, programmatic analyses are being done to determine better means to serve Veterans. And when individual Veterans have given specific informed consent, their data is being further analyzed using new advanced techniques to better understand and diagnose the difficulties Veterans are experiencing, including Gulf War Illness. Such information is expected to lead to better understanding of the disabilities afflicting Veterans with the aim of developing clinical approaches to help Veterans and prevent these problems from developing in the future.

# WRIISC Advantage

WINTER 2025

Produced by the  
War Related Illness and Injury Study Center

Editor/Graphic Artist  
Christina Ramage-Miller, MSPH

Co-Editor:  
Nicole Sullivan, PhD

Contributors:  
Wes Ashford, MD, PhD  
Peter Bayley, PhD  
Ashley Chung, MPH

1-800-722-8340  
War Related Illness and Injury Study Center  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
Washington, DC VA Medical Center  
Suite 1028, Building 14, Mail Stop 151  
50 Irving St., NW  
Washington, DC 20422-0002

1-888-482-4376  
War Related Illness and Injury Study Center  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
Palo Alto Health Care System  
3801 Miranda Ave.  
Mail Code 151Y  
Palo Alto, CA 94304-1290

1-800-248-8005  
War Related Illness and Injury Study Center  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
New Jersey Health Care System  
385 Tremont Ave.  
Mail Stop 129, 1<sup>st</sup> floor  
East Orange, NJ 07018-1023

For comments or concerns regarding this  
newsletter, please contact us at:  
1-800-248-8005 or email:  
[wriiscexprtcenter@va.gov](mailto:wriiscexprtcenter@va.gov)



War Related Illness & Injury Study Center  
 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)  
 New Jersey Health Care System  
 385 Tremont Ave., Mail Stop 129  
 East Orange, NJ 07018  
 1-800-248-8005  
[www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov](http://www.WarRelatedIllness.va.gov)

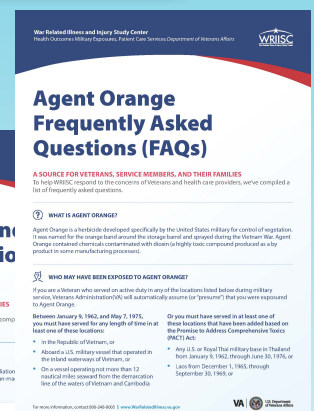
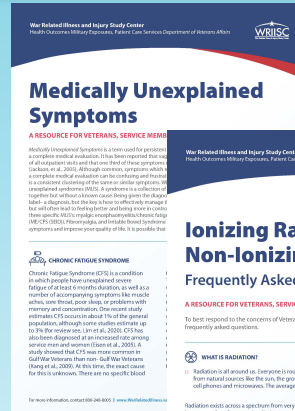


This newsletter contains a minimum of 30% post-consumer waste.

# VETERANS' HEALTH INFORMATION SHEETS

## The most up-to-date information on:

- **General Health** including medically unexplained symptoms and how to best communicate with doctors.
- **Deployment Exposures** such as agent orange, radiation and airborne hazards.



Education about health is a key to improvement!

Regularly updated content located at:

<https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/education/information sheets.asp>

