

NMSU professor uses storytelling research to help veterans

From his own military service in Vietnam, David Boje knows that it can be difficult — sometimes impossible — for veterans and their families to return to life as they knew it before a combat deployment. The consequences of combat service can include strained relationships with family, divorce, stress disorders, inability to get and keep a job, homelessness — even suicide.

A management professor in New Mexico State University's College of Business, Boje is a specialist in storytelling as it applies to organizations, leadership and ethics. He holds the college's Wells Fargo Professorship and is a distinguished achievement professor and a fellow of the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative.



Two of Boje's current projects are focused on using his research on storytelling — specifically an approach called embodied restorying process — to help veterans and their families begin to find empowerment, reflect on their lives and focus on the future.

Boje, along with a team that includes his wife, Grace Ann Rosile, an associate professor in management; Jeanne Flora, an associate professor of interpersonal communication; Kenneth Hacker, department head for communication studies; Elizabeth England Kennedy, a college assistant professor in public health studies; and Jim Kroger, an associate professor of psychology, is working with veterans who are transitioning out of homelessness at the Community of Hope in Las Cruces.

The storytelling healing class involves "sand play" — the veterans are given a bin with play sand and an assortment of toys and figurines. These figures include toy soldiers, people, animals, cars, dinosaurs and other items. The veterans are encouraged to pick out some figures that represent their deployment and put them into the sand box. These might reflect their time before, during or after their deployment.

"We worked out this process using the sand play to help them gently 'story' their situation without going into a lot of detail," Boje explained. "They just put the images out there, and then we talk about them. I might ask, 'What does this roadrunner represent?' and hear 'That represents me running away from my relationships.'"

In one example Boje described, he worked with a man who, on his first pass at his story, had no sense of a future. The man saw that some of the others in the group talked about wanting to have a relationship or find a wife. Seeing that, he pulled out some characters that represent possibilities for his own family someday. The participants are encouraged to "restory" their bins several times, each time with a different focus — perhaps emphasizing people who have been helpful to them, or things that they want in their lives.

"What you're doing is, you're looking at future possibilities instead of a path that stalls at their trauma or stalls in the present," Boje said. "We want to show that it's possible to help people deal with stress through storytelling, without getting into their traumatic events."

In another application of the restorying technique, Boje and Rosile are working with NMSU student veterans and their families. The families spend time working with the couple's horses before a session of the sand play restorying.

"We teach them to do simple things with the horse — petting the horse, currying the

horse — and then to sense the horse's reaction," Boje said. "We find that if we have them do that kind of work with the horses first, and then come in and do this storytelling with me and my colleagues, what will happen is they're a lot more relaxed, they're a lot more willing to sit back and reflect on their life."

Jacobo Varela, director of Military and Veterans Programs at NMSU, said he and his staff have walked through the program to get a sense of what it can provide.

"It's almost like a meditation, because you're focusing on the horses, and they help open up communication," Varela said. "The sand play can be especially helpful for families because it opens doors of communication that family members might not be expressing verbally."

He said this type of exercise can be very beneficial, especially to those veterans and their families who are reluctant to seek help adjusting to life after deployment.

Equine-assisted therapy has long been used to promote well-being, particularly in people with anxiety, depression, autism, mental or behavioral health problems and developmental delays. Horses are extremely sensitive to the body language of humans and respond with consistent feedback, which can be useful in a therapeutic setting.

Boje prefers to avoid terms like "therapy," "stress disorder" or "homelessness" in dealing with any of these veterans and their families. Labels, and the stigma that often accompanies them, are counterproductive when trying to change their attitudes about themselves and their futures, he said.

"They get to let down their guard and just focus on the skill of storytelling or the skill of working with horses," Boje said. "They can re-enter their life with a little more empowered story. You can't give someone empowerment — empowerment comes from the self — but you can facilitate a process where they can undertake

empowerment themselves and they have agency for their own life course, without a label."

For veterans who avoid seeking help because they don't want to be stigmatized, this is a way to open lines of communication softly, Varela said.

"The people who need it the most are the least likely to ask for help," he said. "The better the support system a veteran has on the home front, the more successful they can be in school and life."

Boje said those men and women who are reluctant to seek help are his main targets with these projects.

"It's not how they characterize themselves as a warrior, as a soldier, as a hero — so they're not going to seek therapy," he said. "They're going to tough it out, suck it up and move on with their life. There are risks in that — risks of destroying their family life, losing the careers they're trying to protect, or messing up their education."

For more information about the restorying projects, or to learn more about participating in the research project, contact Boje at dboje@nmsu.edu or visit his website, peaceaware.com.

"Eye on Research" is provided by New Mexico State University. This week's feature was written by Amanda Bradford of University Communications.