

# Using the Labyrinth in Working with Veterans

By Anne Richardson

I had the honor of doing two years of chaplain training at the Portland VA Medical Center. My second year was a fellowship focusing on veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or substance abuse issues. During my fellowship year I offered three labyrinth walks, two on our Vancouver campus and one on the Portland campus, using an eight-circuit Chartres labyrinth. It was open to veterans, employees, family members, and whoever happened to be on campus that day. I also used my finger labyrinths in individual sessions and handed out photocopies of the classic design when I led group sessions. Veterans shared with me a variety of experiences. Some found it helpful in looking at their experience from different "perspectives." Others found it a way to grieve for lost comrades as they "walked" in with them and left them in the center. Others felt unsettled and didn't finish the walk. Some cried. Some struggled with or learned from walking the path with others. Some walked briskly. Others with heavy steps and heavy hearts. Some felt a sense of calm--this was fairly common response using the finger labyrinth.

One veteran who has struggled for years with guilt, carried in three rocks, each one representing a friend lost in Vietnam. He left the rocks at various points on the path as he worked on releasing his guilt at returning from the war when they did not. He took his time on the labyrinth and I sensed each step was heavy with intention. We processed his walk afterward and he shared that it had been a moving experience but he was still struggling.

Family members and staff walked too. Staff found it particularly meditative and a way to reduce stress from the demands of working with veterans.

PTSD is such a complex issue. After a year of working with veterans with this as my focus, I still feel there is much to learn and I believe the labyrinth can be used as one tool, an important one, to help those with PTSD unpack their experience and find peace.

Here is a sampling of comments written in the journal I had available at the walks:

*"What a perfect way to start my week! Thank you. I gained such clarity and letting go of outcomes."*

*“As I’m walking, it seems that questions that I didn’t have time for suddenly became present, and as I’m walking, I took the time to finally answer them. And I’ve answered my questions quite contently, and without worries. Thanks.”*

*“My first labyrinth walk. I realized I don’t do “slow” well! It’s difficult for me to just enjoy the journey without analyzing and worrying over every step along the way—even in here. I also realized I’ve come to find it difficult to share my journey and walk alongside, ahead, or behind anyone without worrying about them.”*

*“I cried for all the vets, for love, joy, happiness, the sadness, and the pain. Both for the one you see and the one you cannot.” (This was written by an older woman who set her walker aside to walk the labyrinth.)*

*“Great symbolism for life’s journey. People ahead of you, behind you, passing. You don’t know where they are on their journey or if you’ll walk together for long. If you take a wrong turn, you still won’t be lost, just at a different part of the path. Predestination?”*

*“Nice to have this experience right after our AA meeting. Thanks.”*

*“A metaphor for loneliness and connection, life and death. A lovely and emotional experience.”*

*“What a nice moment to recharge and receive and refocus my day. My patients thank you too, I’m sure.”*

The energy from the labyrinth continues to be at work in the VA, and I found out from current VA chaplains that they invested in a canvas (I borrowed the one I used—thanks Carol Joy!) and, this is very exciting, have received the go ahead to install a permanent outdoor labyrinth on the Vancouver campus.

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