

# ROVER/WISER Handbook

Welcome to the program! ROVER and WISER are both innovative intensive inpatient programs. ROVER (Returning OIF/OEF Veterans Environment of Recovery) is designed for OIF/OEF combat veterans. WISER (Women's Inpatient Specialty Environment of Recovery) is for women from all combat eras. Both programs offer comprehensive and integrated treatment. This means that we strive to help you improve the quality of your physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social functioning and to enhance your ability to cope effectively with your problems.

As the programs are housed on an acute inpatient unit, we have various rules and procedures that we have to follow. If there are times when you have questions about the rules of the unit, please speak up and ask the staff for clarification. Some of the rules are for safety reasons and some are for therapeutic reasons. You are also encouraged to refer to this handbook as it contains large amounts of information.

## YOUR TEAM

- Psychiatrist
- Physician assistant
- 24 hour nursing staff
- Trainees: As we are an educational training facility, we have trainees from various disciplines who will be working with you.
- Psychologist
- Occupational therapist
- Chaplain
- Social worker
- Recreational therapist
- Dietician

As a staff, we will assist you in developing new skills and ways of thinking so that you will be able to make changes in your life. The team strives to make treatment decisions as a team. This requires open and frequent communication between you and your team. We have Treatment Team Rounds twice a week (see schedule for exact timing). During this 10-15 minute meeting with your entire treatment team, it is your chance to check-in with the team about your treatment, ask about medications, discuss medical issues, and request advances in LOR etc. It also allows the entire team to stay on the same page.

## TREATMENT MODALITIES/ GROUP THERAPY

Group therapy is the cornerstone of your treatment. In order to get the most out of your time here, it is important that you come to groups prepared. If you do not actively participate or do not complete group assignments, you may not fully benefit from treatment. Thus, it is important that you be on time for group. The group leaders always attempt to start and end on time but if the groups do run over, then we will adjust the schedule as needed. The weekly group schedule is posted in the nurses' station. Changes to the daily schedule may be necessary at times and the community will be notified as soon as possible.

**None of the scheduled unit groups are considered 'optional.'** If you are physically ill or you are unable to attend a group for any reason, it is your responsibility to discuss the situation with the group leader or appropriate staff member *prior* to the group to request to be excused. However, if you decide to not attend a group (i.e. an unexcused absence), your status will be immediately dropped and you cannot apply for advancement back to solo status until the next treatment team rounds.

The ROVER and WISER teams feel that all of the groups are beneficial for all of the veterans in the programs. The groups are potential learning experiences for you and your team. Our group programming includes anger management, substance use and seeking safety, Cognitive Processing Therapy or CPT (primary trauma related group), occupational therapy, recreational therapy, wellness, unit outings, finding meaning, process groups, relaxation groups, sleep hygiene, Dialectical behavior Therapy (DBT) and nursing groups. Throughout your first few days in treatment, you will learn more specifics about each of these groups.

Updated 10/19/2015

Of note, there are a few activities that are considered optional although they are highly recommended.

- AA meetings: occur throughout the week in the evening. All veterans are eligible to attend. Coed groups.
- Weekend activities organized by recreational therapy

The groups in our program differ not only in topic but also in emotional intensity. We try to balance challenging you to do things differently with reducing your distress level. As every individual has a different distress tolerance level, **if you are getting overwhelmed, speak up!** If you are feeling like you might need to leave group to manage your emotions, you must discuss this with the group leader. It is expected that all veterans stay in the room for the entire group. It is not acceptable to leave group to get a glass of water, go to the bathroom, make a phone call etc. **If you are unable to tolerate groups or fail to attend groups, your privilege status will be reduced.** Leaving groups early or not attending groups alerts the team that you would benefit from additional assistance and support.

## INDIVIDUAL SESSIONS

In addition to group therapy, you will have various individual sessions with your clinicians. These meetings mostly occur during the time blocked on your schedule as “meet with provider.” These times are designed to give you additional time to process aspects of your treatment, discuss medical concerns, or review medications. If you do not have a meeting during this time, then this is free time for you to work on assignments, socialize, etc.

## MEDICATION MANAGEMENT

Many veterans take medications to treat their physical or mental illnesses. The nursing staff is in charge of administering your medications and monitoring you on a daily basis. **You are not allowed to take any type of medication not prescribed to you by the physician assistant or attending physician.** Appropriately prescribed medications can be effective at reducing symptoms of PTSD, depression and anxiety. Some medications, however, which may be effective in the short run, can create greater disability in the long run. This may be due to them masking the underlying problem (using opiates to mask emotional pain) or because they are being used to cope with distressing emotions or situations in an unhealthy manner (ex: not being able to go to a restaurant without a couple of beers or Xanax because of your anxiety). Your medications will be reviewed and adjusted as needed during your stay. If problematic medications (ex: opiates or benzodiazepines) or maladaptive patterns of medication use are identified, we will work with you to find more appropriate long-term solutions.

For your medical problems, you will undergo a history and physical by the physician assistant at the time of admission. If other medical problems develop during your stay, the physician assistant will address these. Note that we do not routinely initiate work-ups of chronic and stable medical conditions (i.e. evaluation of chronic back pain) as we prefer this to be completed by your primary physician. However, we do work with you to minimize those problems that might interfere with your participation in the program.

## SELF DIRECTED STUDY/ FREE TIME:

In the evenings and on weekends, there are less scheduled activities. This is specifically designed to give you time to work on any group assignments and to relax. Completing self-directed study assignments are **not** considered ‘optional.’ You can read, play games or cards, do puzzles, watch TV (during specified times), or use the Wii (the unit has a few entertainment consoles that are shared between both the ROVER and WISER sides). You are welcome to bring games, DVDs (may bring up to one DVD and one Wii or X-box game), books, puzzles or crafts provided that they are appropriate for the unit and meet the required guidelines in terms of what you can have on the unit. The treatment team makes the final decision about the appropriateness of a DVD or game for the unit.

Off unit activities including group outings, solo breaks and off campus passes are part of your treatment. These are opportunities for you to practice new skills in a variety of situations. As with any new skill, the more you practice it the

better you will get at it. If one skill or situation is more difficult for you, the team can help you analyze it and develop alternate strategies.

## **THE INPATIENT ENVIRONMENT/ MILIEU THERAPY**

Milieu therapy is a form of therapy that involves creating a safe, healing environment in which you may work toward your recovery. Recovery is seen within the model as a personal journey. This involves developing a secure sense of self, supportive relationships, empowerment, social inclusion, coping skills, and finding hope and meaning.

People who are struggling with mental health issues can misperceive certain social cues or misunderstand other's intentions. This may manifest as difficulty trusting others, difficulty resolving conflicts, inability to tolerate situations or feeling as if you must always have complete control. In treatment, we are going to be looking at your thoughts, communication patterns and behaviors to see how these might be contributing to some of the problems you might be having with friends, family and coworkers. As a therapeutic environment, the program provides a unique opportunity for you and your team to look at these patterns. Often times, relationships that develop on the unit may echo patterns in relationships you have in your life. By understanding how certain situations or emotions may trigger ineffective responses or damage your relationships, we can help you identify better coping strategies. When these situations or triggers occur in the program, they create an opportunity for you to respond differently than you have in the past. By practicing these new ways of responding in a safe supportive environment allows you to try out different skills and see what works best for you.

Learning to do things differently is challenging, and this is a very challenging program. Success in the program will depend on your willingness to challenge yourself, try new skills, your ability to take responsibility for your actions, and your willingness to give and receive feedback.

It is critical for your success in the program that we maintain a safe environment.

## **OUR NURSING STAFF**

As we are an inpatient unit, we are fortunate to have our nursing staff for 24 hours a day. Here are some specifics about the nursing staff:

- The nursing staff consists of female and male staff
- Patient round checks are done every 30 minutes. The nurses must lay eyes on you every thirty minutes even throughout the night.
- Patients are reassessed by the registered nurse every shift (3 shifts of nursing staff per day) and can expect for the staff to ask several questions during their assessment
- Medications are administered according to how the Physician Assistant and Psychiatrist prescribe the medication
- Conduct random room searches during your stay. You are able to be present while they are conducting the room searches and the search will be performed by at least 2 staff members. If needed, Veterans may request either a male or female staff member to examine their personal belongings. Any contraband that is found will be confiscated and then discussed with your treatment team.
- The nursing staff conducts groups which are a part of the program. The groups are: Community Group, Nursing Recovery Group, Smoking Cessation Group and Health Awareness Patient Education Group

## **THREATS TO PHYSICAL SAFETY**

Learning how to solve conflicts without violence is an important part of recovery. Verbal or physical threats of violence are taken seriously as they create unsafe environment. **Violence or threats of violence toward peers or staff will not be**

Updated 10/19/2015

**tolerated, and will likely result in you being asked to leave the program and/or transferred to another psychiatric unit for stabilization.** This decision will be made by your treatment team. If you're threatened by another patient, please **walk away and let staff know immediately.**

Although not all threats to physical safety are obvious, there are some that are still significant and are unacceptable in this type of treatment setting. The following behaviors are also considered potential threats to physical safety and may result in you being asked to leave the program or reduction in your privileges:

- Inappropriate sexual behavior/ statements toward peers or staff
- Acts of physical aggression, threats (direct or indirect) of physical aggression
- Bring prohibited items onto the unit including tobacco, weapons, pills etc (*\*\*if these are found on room search, they will be confiscated and your status will be dropped until the treatment team can meet to discuss\*\**)
- Failure to follow staff instructions especially when off the unit
- Use of drugs, alcohol, or any non prescribed substances
- Misuse of prescribed substances

### **THREATS TO EMOTIONAL SAFETY:**

Disrespectful/inappropriate behavior threatens the emotional safety on the milieu. **You deserve to be treated in a respectful manner and are expected to be respectful to your peers and staff at all times.** We expect that you:

- Refrain from using profane or abusive language when speaking to peers and staff
- Refrain from being dishonest or embellishing past events or past/current symptoms
- Refrain from disrespectful or disruptive behavior in group (i.e. having side conversations, 'clowning,' not participating in group, or monopolizing group). You may not agree with everything said in groups and you are welcome to discuss different points of view. However, you are expected to be respectful to the group leaders and your peers. This includes not only what you say, but also how you say it.

As all of the staff is a part of the treatment team, there is open communication amongst the team members regarding an individual's care while in the program. Veterans are required to maintain the confidentiality of their peers at all times. (for example, not discussing with your family about what another veteran said in group). The ROVER/WISER teams will break confidentiality only in the case of knowledge of abuse of a child, abuse/neglect of an elderly person or certain communicable diseases. In these instances, the ROVER/WISER team members are required by law to report the events.

### **TREATMENT INTERFERING BEHAVIORS**

You are here to get help for your mental health. Focusing on things outside of this can be detrimental to your treatment and the treatment of your peers. As it is our job to keep you focused on your treatment, we will point out to you if you are doing things that are interfering with your recovery. Examples of treatment interfering behaviors include but not limited to:

- Daydreaming, doodling, or otherwise not participating in group.
- Avoiding painful emotions or topics during group.
- Focusing on compensation and pension claims
- "Shutting down" when feeling angry or refusing to use skills when upset
- Interfering with the treatment of peers by interrupting, giving advice, or minimizing others emotions
- Focusing on the structure of the unit (i.e. locked doors, food, bathrooms, plastic furniture)
- Refusing to work with a peer or staff member due to his/her trauma history, time in the service, gender, sexual orientation, age or other life experiences
- Disruptive talking- endorsing drugs/alcohol, aggressive responses, talking over peers, monopolizing group time

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

### What will I be doing during the day?

The group schedule is posted in the nurses' station and is updated weekly. When modifications are made to the schedule (due to staff absence, fire drills, inclement weather etc), those changes will be announced in the morning community meeting or as soon as we become aware of them. The groups are intended to start and end on time, but if a group runs long then the staff will make adjustments to the rest of the daily schedule as needed.

### What is treatment team rounds?

Twice a week, the enter team will meet individually with each veteran for approximately 10-15 minutes. This is your time to request an increase in privileges, check in with the team as a whole about your treatment, discuss medications or medical issues, and received feedback from the team.

### Can I go to the gym?

The Houston VAMC has a gym that is open to veterans until 4 pm Monday-Friday. Per hospital policy, a staff member must accompany you in order to use the gym. Gym times are indicated on your schedule. You CANNOT go to the gym during your solo pass breaks.

### What is Level of Responsibility (LOR)?

There are 2 primary Levels of Responsibility: Supportive Status and Solo status. At admission all patients start on Supportive status and remain on it for at least the first week.

- **Supportive Status:** escorted by staff whenever you are off of the unit. There are "fresh air breaks" during which staff will take you off of the unit and you and your peers can decide what you would like to do during this time. (ex: take a walk, go to canteen, buy food etc) There is **no smoking** on fresh air breaks. The breaks are indicated on your schedule.
- **Solo Status:** can go off the unit unescorted during designated times called 'solo breaks.' Also, eligible for various weekend privileges.
  - You will fill out a 'Change of LOR' request form and present it to the team during treatment teams rounds during your second week of treatment. There are various clinical reasons (safety issues, rule infractions) for which your status may not be raised. In order to be eligible to advance to solo pass, you must attend all groups (unless excused by the team for illness or to attend an appointment).
  - Sign out and in at the nurses' station \*you may only sign YOURSELF in and out\*
  - You must come back to the unit between any solo pass and off unit groups
  - Even if you are on solo status you must be escorted to off unit groups (i.e. OT)
  - **MUST** remain on the VA grounds (i.e. within the fenced perimeter. The gym and the regional office are off limits during solo breaks).
  - You and your belongings will be briefly searched when you return to the unit. This ensures that the unit remains a safe place. Random drug screens will also be preformed.
  - If there are any rule infractions (ex: bringing in contraband to the unit or it found on room searches, or not attending groups) or unsafe/disruptive behavior, your status may be dropped back to supportive status until at least the next treatment team rounds.

## What about the weekends?

In addition to therapeutic groups on the weekends, there are often other activities. For example, the recreational therapist may have an outing to go bowling or to the movies. The outings off campus are optional although highly recommended. At times the outings are at no expense to you but this is not a guarantee. There might be times when the staff can offer an outing but cannot pay for the activity. Thus, if you wanted to attend, you would have to pay. The VA covers the majority of outings. You and your team will decide about eligibility for outings with recreational therapy on the weekends.

If you are on solo status, after the first weekend, you may have an **extended solo pass**. Extended solo pass means:

- Up to 2 hours off of the unit between the hours of 1-5 pm on both Saturday and Sunday
- Cell phones cannot be taken off the unit during these times and you forfeit some of your on unit cell phone time
- Can break up the 2 hours into whatever time intervals that you would like (2 one hour passes or 4 thirty minute passes or 1 two hour pass). If you decide to stay off the unit for the entire 2 hours, you must check in quickly with nursing staff after one hour.
- **MUST STAY** on VA grounds. If you are caught going off of campus, you will immediately be placed on solo status

In treatment team rounds before the last weekend, eligible patients may apply for an **off campus therapeutic pass**:

- Up to 4 hours (1-5 pm) on EITHER Saturday OR Sunday of last weekend in the program
- Present pass request form in treatment team rounds. Treatment team must approve of your pass. Not following the approved plan for the pass may result in dismissal from the program.
- Need to articulate a therapeutic value to taking a pass off the unit prior to approval (i.e. work on family relationships, work on socialization, exposure therapy)
- CANNOT ride in another veteran's car or the car of a family or friend of another veteran. You may ride in only your own car or the car of your family member/friend. There are various public transportation options as well.
- You may take your cell phone with you

## What about phone calls?

The unit has a communal **patient phone** that is located in the day area. This phone may be used Monday through Friday from 7-8am; 12pm to 1pm; and 4:30 pm to 1030pm. On holidays and weekends, it may be used from 7am-1030 pm except during group time. The main VA phone number is (713)791-1414. The main unit extension is 26700. This phone makes only local calls. If you want to make a long distance call, you will need to have a calling card or call collect. Family and friends can call into this number.

**Cell phones** may only be used Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 7:30-8:30pm; and Saturday/Sunday 1-5 pm and 730-830 pm. Cell phones may not be used during *supervised* group outings. Cell phones cannot be taken off of the unit during solo passes. If you choose to go on RT outings during posted cell phone times, then you choose to forfeit some cell phone time.

## Is there a computer?

There is NO computer access during the week. You may have supervised computer access during the day on Saturday and Sunday (*\*all times depend on staff availability and if the computers are working\**) The computers are VA computers, so some sites may be blocked. Please do not go to any sites that contain explicit or otherwise inappropriate content.

## When can I watch TV?

TV viewing times are Monday through Friday from 7am-8 am and after 4:30 pm, and all day on Saturdays and Sundays unless in groups. During the treatment day it is important that you remain focused on the work you are here to do and therefore **we do not allow TV viewing during lunch**.

## Can I buy my own food?

For health and therapeutic reasons, we have many guidelines regarding food on the unit:

- No eating or drinking during groups (except water)
- **Unopened individual plastic bottles** of water, soda, or energy drinks may be brought back onto the unit. Only unopened sodas may be stored in the refrigerator. No open containers (ex: coffee from the coffee stand or cups of soda from the canteen) can be brought onto unit. **All liquids will be discarded at midnight** regardless whether opened or not.
- Unopened bags of food (ex: cookies, chips...) may be brought back onto the unit but must be consumed by midnight of that day. All food brought onto the unit **will be discarded at midnight each night**. No exceptions will be made.
- Food bought in the cafeteria (hamburgers, pizza etc) may be brought back onto the unit but must be consumed at that time. This food CANNOT be stored in the nutrition room for any amount of time.
- You may order take-out but you must be accompanied by staff to pick it up from the delivery person. No take-out food can be stored on the unit.
- No care packages containing food or drinks from friends or family are allowed.
- No food in your room

You will meet with the dietician during your first week in the program to submit a list of your food preferences. We ask that you have an understanding that our nutrition services provide meals for the entire hospital (>500 patients), and thus we have little ability to change the hospital menu.

## Where can I keep valuables?

Credit cards, wallets, and other valuables should be signed in and stored at the nurses' station. If needed, you can request and sign out your valuables for off unit breaks. We recommend you bring a credit or debit card with you rather than large amounts of cash. We are not responsible for valuables, which you keep in your possession if lost.

## How do I wash my clothes?

There are laundry facilities on the unit. Nursing staff will assist you with your laundry and will advise you when times are available.

## Will I have a roommate?

Most Veterans do have a roommate as the majority of the rooms are double occupancy. Only those veterans who have medical conditions which warrant a private room are guaranteed one. The nursing staff handles the assignment of rooms.

On occasion, the unit will provide housing for veterans who are not in ROVER/WISER programs, often referred to as boarders. This is only done on an emergency basis when bed space is unavailable on the other psychiatric units. If this happens, the veterans who are housed on our unit are asked to respect the ROVER/WISER rules (ex: not to watch t.v during lunch).

## What can I have on the unit?

There is a distinction between items that you can have in your room, those that have to be checked out from nursing staff (and potentially used under staff supervision) and those that are prohibited. Periodic room searches are done to ensure the safety of the unit. If contraband is found in your room, it will be confiscated and you will meet with the treatment team about it.

### Items that you may keep in your room:

- Clothing (*Remember no drawstrings. No belts*)
- Slip-on or Velcro shoes
- Toiletries: soap, shampoo, deodorant etc. (*all products must be alcohol free*)

Updated 10/19/2015

- Books, playing cards, magazines pictures of family or friends
- Calling Card for Long Distance Calls (to use on communal phone)

**Personal Items that will be stored in the nurses' station.** (\*\* These items may need to be used under staff supervision.)

- Cell phone/ charger
- Razor\*\*
- Blow dryer or curing iron \*\*
- Car keys\*\* (must be turned in at admission and **cannot** go to your car for any reason during admission)
- Makeup
- Cash (for items from the store on VA grounds and outings with recreational therapy)
- May bring up to 1 movie on DVD and 1 game for Wii or X-box (\*\*team must approve the games and DVDs before can be used\*\*)
- Tennis shoes or shoes with laces
- fingernail files, nail clippers\*\*
- Q-tips \*\*

**Prohibited items:**

- Electronics: computers of any kind, portable DVD or TV, ipods/nanos/PDAs, video game devices, headphones, radios
- Inappropriate clothing: belts, suspenders, drawstrings, items with vulgar words, too revealing clothes
- Jewelry: only wedding rings and minimal jewelry is permitted. Watches with plastic bands are permitted but not those with metal bands.
- Weapons of any kind including pocket knives
- Medications: The VA will provide all of your medications. The only exception is that women should bring their oral contraceptives and turn into pharmacy at admission.
- Cigarette lighters, matches, any tobacco products
- Glass products
- Clothes hangers
- Perfume or cologne
- Scissors
- Pornographic material
- Pens or pencils (we will provide these for you)
- Plastic bag

Periodic room searches will be conducted during your stay and all contraband confiscated. If you are found in possession of contraband, your status will be reduced and the team will determine if further action is warranted. **If you are found in possession of drugs or weapons the VA police will be notified as this is illegal.** As per unit protocol, two staff members will be present during all room searches as well as the veteran. A veteran has a right to request for either a male or female staff member to conduct the search. If you have a preference, please notify the nursing staff prior to the start of the room search.

**Can I smoke?**

The Michael E. DeBakey VAMC is a **non smoking** facility. There is no smoking inside the hospital nor within 35 feet of any entrance. Under no circumstance will cigarettes or other tobacco products be stored on the unit. **When you are on supervised off unit outings either on campus or off campus you may not smoke.** If you are a smoker and would like assistance in quitting and/or require nicotine replacement to reduce your discomfort, the staff will readily provide this.

**Can I have visitors?**

Normal visiting hours for friends and family are from 1-5 pm on Saturday and Sunday. There are no visiting hours during the week except if there is a prearranged family meeting with clinical staff. For the first weekend that you are in the program, visitors must meet with you on the unit in the dayroom. Due to hospital policy, children under the age of 14 are not allowed on the nursing unit. Once you have extended solo pass privileges on the weekend, you can visit with friends and family off of the unit BUT on VA grounds.

### **What about travel pay?**

If you qualify for travel pay (check with your local VA or social worker), the VA that referred you to the program is responsible for covering/reimbursing for your travel to the Houston VAMC. If you have paid for your transportation from the airport, bus station or train station to the Houston VA, you must have a receipt and staff will escort you to the patient travel pay window to see if you qualify for reimbursement. If you need assistance with returning to your home, the Social Worker will provide assistance. Travel will only be arranged back to the city from which you came. For example, if you flew in from Tulsa, OK, we will arrange travel for you to return to Tulsa, OK. The Houston VA can only reimburse for checked bag fees (up to 1 bag per veteran) for the flight to Houston VAMC—must have a receipt. The Houston VA cannot advance you any money for checked bag fees for the flight home.

### **Is there research?**

Veterans who attend our program have the opportunity to participate in a number of different research projects. All participation is 100% voluntary. If you choose not to participate in some or all research, there will be no negative effects on you or your treatment.

### **What if I want to leave the program?**

For whatever reason, if you decide that you would like to be discharged, please alert your treatment team or nursing staff. All veterans who request early discharge have to be evaluated by a psychiatrist within four hours of their request. You will be discharged provided that the psychiatrist does not feel that you are at imminent risk of harm to yourself or others. We ask, however, that if possible that you allow us the opportunity to get you safely discharged by arranging follow-up appointments, travel, and fill the required medications. We also hope that we can discuss as a team your reasons for discharge and see if there is something that can be done so that you can continue in treatment.

***WELCOME TO THE PROGRAM! WE LOOK FORWARD TO  
WORKING WITH YOU.***