



Association of VA Psychologist Leaders

Essential Healthcare for Veterans: Psychologists Improve Lives

AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS (a.k.a. LOU GEHRIG'S DISEASE) THE MOST FREQUENT FORM OF MOTOR SYSTEM DISEASE¹

- ◆ ALS affects approximately 20,000 to 30,000 Americans, with over 5000 cases occurring in the United States each year.
- ◆ Veterans of the Persian Gulf War are twice as likely than other military personnel to develop ALS, according to the Department of Veteran's Affairs.
 - ALS causes muscle weakness, wasting away of muscles, involuntary movements, and hyperactive reflexes. The cause is unknown.
 - Many patients display inappropriate crying or laughing, which is caused by nerve cell damage, and is not due to depression.²
 - ALS is more common in men than women.¹
 - About 10% of cases are associated with dementia.²

The emphasis of psychological care has been to support the patients and family members and to maintain the caregivers' involvement throughout the patient's illness. Research has concluded that close relatives need someone in whom to confide, and caregivers have specific needs for support and information.³

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IS CONSIDERED VITALLY IMPORTANT IN THE MANAGEMENT OF ALS.² PSYCHOLOGISTS ARE TRAINED IN PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUES TO PROVIDE SUCH SUPPORT TO PATIENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS.

¹ Adams, R.D., Victor, M., Ropper, A.H. (eds.) (1997) *Principles of Neurology* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill

² Rowland, L. P. (ed.) (1995). *Merritt's Textbook of Neurology*. (9th ed.). Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins

³ Bolmsjoe, I., Hermeren, G. (2001). Interviews with patients, family, and caregivers in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis: Comparing needs. *Journal of Palliative Care*, 17(4), 236-240.