

PRACTITIONERS

Supporting veteran mental health



Phoenix
AUSTRALIA

Tips for general practitioners: Supporting veteran mental health

A veteran's military experience can have a big impact on their life: relationships, social networks, core values, ways of coping, career and finances are all affected.

The experience of military service is unique for each individual. Understanding a veteran's service experience can help to understand them as a person.

Veterans can experience a wide range of mental health difficulties, just like the general Australian population. Common problems include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, anger, relationship problems, or substance use.

This information sheet is designed to provide you with a framework for how to effectively support veteran mental health.

A model for helping veterans

Ex-service organisations play a vital role in supporting the mental health of veterans, and encouraging them to seek help and maintain social connections.

Competence and Cultural Knowledge

- Be competent and up to date in your area of practice
- Cultural understanding of veteran issues
- Promote trust in the relationship by doing what you say you will do

Self Management and Choice

- Work collaboratively with the veteran to provide choice
- Set goals together and show them how to find information
- Support self management and set appropriate boundaries

Social Support during Transition

- Set social network development as a goal
- Focus on overcoming the impact of transition on social support
- Set social support goals as part of mental health treatment

Family Support and Advice

- Providing the family information on how to support the veteran
- Focus on support to the whole family
- Work to overcome barriers to care for veterans and their families



Considerations

Be military aware

Whilst it is not expected that you will have an understanding of every type of veteran and family experience, veterans do tend to demonstrate a preference for military-aware services. You can aim to be culturally competent by having a general understanding of broad military values. Act impartial in your work with veterans and avoid assumptions about the particular relationship between the veteran and the military. You can also help to establish rapport with the veteran by supporting and valuing their service.

TIP: Be aware of the mental health supports that are available through the Department of Veterans' Affairs, especially through the White and Gold Cards, and through Open Arms and Ex-Service Organisations.

Support choice

Work with the strengths of veterans and those who have a preference for self management, to allow them to do as much as they can first and to seek their own mental health care. Supporting self management does not mean encouraging a veteran to always 'go it alone'. Rather, it is a process of working collaboratively with the veteran to ensure they have as much choice in the process as possible.

Providing them with information on mental health conditions will allow them to make informed decisions. Veterans have a lot of choice in the help they can receive, but navigating the system to get that help is sometimes overwhelming. They may need your assistance to put a plan in place.

TIP: Talk to them about their coping skills to manage day to day stressors in a positive way. This might include focusing on their physical health, their social engagement and activity, and ways that they cope with stress.

Promote social connection

The initial transition to being a veteran is a high risk period. Help veterans prepare for this period by encouraging them to build social supports right from the start. Making friends and engaging in social activities when you are in the military is reasonably easy. Making friendships and building connections in employment, volunteer work, hobbies, sports, or other pursuits in civilian life takes a little more work and planning. When veterans are unprepared to do that planning for activities, it can be a shock to them.

Supporting veterans' social involvement does not mean that you have to find activities for them to participate in – although your organisation might helpfully provide these. It means working with the veteran to increase their awareness that social involvement is key to maintaining mental health.

TIP: Encourage veterans to open up to other significant people in their life or their GP about any mental health difficulties they have so that those people can be supportive and help monitor the veteran in times of distress.

Consider the whole family

We know that family is crucial to veteran mental health and it is important to maintain a focus on how the whole family is coping. This means ensuring that the family are connected to a support group, Department of Veterans' Affairs support, or other resources directly and not just through the veteran.

TIP: Check in with all the family about the impacts of the veteran's or their own mental health difficulties. Offer referrals if needed for family members.