



Written communication with vulnerable veterans

A veteran's experiences can impact their life in many ways, and need to be recognised and supported wherever possible. A veteran's mental health in particular can affect how they interpret and interact with written material that they receive.

When communicating through written materials with a veteran, it is important to prioritise their wellbeing by responding sensitively and respectfully to their needs.

Research tells us almost half of transitioned personnel will have mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety-related conditions and/or trauma-related disorders. Clients with medical discharge or non-voluntary administrative discharge are likely to be highly vulnerable to mental health issues.

Stressors such as being involved with the compensation process can also exacerbate mental ill-health. This information sheet is designed to provide you with a framework for how to take a sensitive and trauma-informed approach to written materials for veterans.

A model for sensitive writing

Letter writing teams play an important role in supporting the needs of veterans and encouraging them to take action in line with their goals.

Create trust and safety

- Have a clear reason for the communication
- Match information to the veteran's capacity
- Do what you promise to do

Provide choice and control

- Provide choice in mode of communication
- Be goal-focussed in your requests

Be clear and direct

- Use clear and direct sentence structure
- Use respectful language
- Write in the active voice

Use trauma-informed language

- Don't use labels, judgement or jargon
- Consider the emotional impact of words or points



Increase trust and sense of safety

Build trust and support the client's sense of security by having established procedures in place around confidentiality. Be transparent about where their information goes and to whom. Ensure that you clarify your role, especially its limits. If the veteran needs to be referred elsewhere, inform them of an appropriate contact. Aim to remove unnecessary detail from documents that is potentially difficult for the veteran to read -remember that they will avoid the entire document if there is something in one part of it that they find distressing or triggering..

Tip

Be precise in requesting information. Explain what detail is needed, but also what detail is NOT needed.

Increase veteran's sense of control

Help the veteran to have a sense of control in the process. Let them know that they can refuse to give information and what the potential impacts of that are. Provide options for how they communicate with you and how they receive information. Some veterans may prefer a support person to manage their paperwork on their behalf. Match the veteran's capacity with their goals. Summarise the information you already have and clearly state what actions are needed from them. Aim to link those actions with their goals. For example, "When we receive your form, we will be able to process your claim". If there are other non-essential actions that the veteran can take, explain the potential benefits and costs of those actions so that they can make an informed decision.

Tip

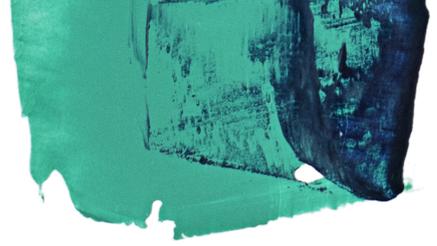
Include directions to the National Relay service to accommodate for clients with hearing or speech impairments.

Use clear and direct writing

Letters to veterans should be written in a clear and readable format. Avoid jargon and complicated and bureaucratic language, including references to internal processes or legislation. Instead, try to use familiar language that you would use at home. Use short sentences and remove unnecessary formalities. Clear headings are important for orientation and in making the content easier to understand, as layout helps to guide the reader. Use an active voice (I/we) as opposed to a passive voice, for example, "I am writing to tell you" rather than, "This letter is to advise you".

Tip

When referring to people, use 'who' rather than 'that' (which references objects), for example, "working with people WHO serve".



Use trauma-informed language

Providing supportive and sensitive communication to veterans involves being mindful of emotional words and points. Remove or replace words that may lead to unnecessary distress or cause offence. In reference to traumatising situations, use the term 'activate' not 'trigger'. Discuss 'focus' or 'priority' group rather than 'target' groups.

In relation to suicidality, use the descriptions 'died by', 'attempt' or 'non-fatal attempt' as opposed to 'failed', 'successful' or 'completed', which can infer that suicide is a goal to be achieved.

When describing compliance, focus on the veteran's strengths and take a problem-solving approach. Instead of labels such as 'non-compliant', you can frame it positively by acknowledging the veteran's efforts and any helpful steps they've taken. Then look for ways together to reduce barriers and improve engagement.

Tip

Using people-first language is more respectful when referring to a person with a disability or condition, for example, "a veteran living with depression" and not "a depressed veteran".

For more COVID-19 related resources visit
www.phoenixaustralia.org/covid-19

Adapted with permission from the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, Uniformed Services University.

Useful services and resources

Coronavirus Health Information Line
1800 020 080

Department of Health
www.health.gov.au

healthdirect hotline
1800 022 222