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**From Combat to College: Research on the Mental Health of Returning Veterans**

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AHEAD National Conference, 2009

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**Learning Outcomes**

- Learn how to identify the mental health needs of returning combat veterans.
- Understand a new research study that surveyed both mental health professionals and returning service members.
- Identify useful strategies that Disability Service providers can utilize to meet the academic and mental health needs of service members.



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**Operation Enduring Freedom & Operation Iraqi Freedom**

- More than 1.6 million US military personnel have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan since 2001 (Hoge, et al)
- 92 % of Marines and soldiers returning from Iraq reported being attacked or ambushed while 80% said they knew someone who was seriously wounded or killed (Gerardi, et al)
- An estimated 25-40 percent of returning combat veterans suffer from psychological and neurological illnesses (National Council on Disability)

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**Two Common Mental Health Concerns**

<p><b>PTSD</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Disorder resulting from exposure to a traumatic event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury</li><li>• Features of PTSD are re-experiencing, avoidance, and hypervigilance</li><li>• Symptoms can appear while they are deployed or not until months later</li></ul>	<p><b>TBI</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Occurs when a sudden trauma (such as a blast or car crash) causes injury to the brain</li><li>• Can impact memory, attention, mood and can cause headaches</li><li>• More prone to PTSD</li></ul>
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**How might this appear in your students?**

<p><b>PTSD</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May cause strain on their relationships</li><li>• Difficulty concentrating/handling stress</li><li>• Tend to avoid large group gatherings</li><li>• May become withdrawn</li></ul>	<p><b>TBI</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Complaining of headaches often</li><li>• Difficulty remembering instructions or directions</li><li>• Mood swings that seem more extreme than other students</li><li>• Often fatigued</li></ul>
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High comorbidity rates amongst service members  
Other mental health concerns (depression, bipolar)  
Drug/ alcohol abuse

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**Screening**

- The VA implemented TBI screening tools in their VA facilities in April of 2007
  - Policy requires all OEF/OIF veterans who visit a VA facility to be screened
- To screen for PTSD and other metal health concerns returning service members are given 3 assessments:
  - Pre-Deployment Health Assessment (PHA) before they leave
  - Post-Deployment Health Assessment (PDHA) either in theater or shortly after returning home
  - Post-Deployment Health Re-Assessment (PDHRA) six months after return home

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**Joining Forces America**

The Joining Forces America study, sponsored by Capella University, examined mental health issues of returning service members.

**The study addressed two essential questions:**

- What mental health and day-to-day challenges do service members face when they return from combat?
- How prepared is the mental health professional community, as well as the community at large, to help with these issues?

**This was done by surveying combat veterans and their families as well as mental health professionals.**

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**Life Impact**

**Life impact of serving in a combat zone**

17% My most life-changing experience so far  
 42% Among my top 3 life-changing experiences  
 30% Had an impact, but not life-changing  
 11% Had little or no impact on my life



- Nearly half of the survey group returned with a mental health condition
- Service members with mental health conditions find many post-combat adjustments more difficult, compared to those who reported no mental health conditions on returning.

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**Will they seek help?**

Perceived likelihood that most service members will seek help if needed for depression, post-combat stress, family adjustment, or other post-combat problems.

3% Very Likely  
 12% Somewhat likely  
 33% Somewhat unlikely  
 32% Very unlikely  
 20% Varies too much by individual/don't know



- Almost two-thirds believe peers are very or somewhat **unlikely** to ask for professional help
- Top reason for not seeking assistance was fear that it would have a negative impact on their career

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What can you do? (continued)

**BE UNDERSTANDING**

- While it's **crucial** to hold your student veterans to the same standards as your other students, it's also important to understand that a college environment is about as different from the battlefield as you can get. Rather than giving the student 5 different referrals to various campus offices, do as much of the work as possible yourself, or make a phone call on behalf of the student to see if you can make the processes any easier.

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Rights for Disability Accommodations- ADA/AA

- Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA)
- An individual with a disability is defined as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a *major life activity*
- Other big change is *mitigating measures*

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Rights for Disability Accommodations- New GI Bill

- Benefits will be offered to veterans at levels not seen since WWII
- Increase likelihood of veterans on campus
- Additional considerations
  - Language
  - Disclosure
  - Documentation



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**Top 5 Tips**

Top 5 ways to help a service member – from the service member

- 1) Offer support and encouragement (sometimes it helps just to listen)
- 2) Respect my privacy (don't push me to share my time or information until I'm ready)
- 3) Just say thanks
- 4) Help me reconnect with my family and community (offer invitations, help with chores)
- 5) Act normally (don't treat me any differently)

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**Conclusion**

- Combat veterans are returning from war and having to readjust to their families, communities, and institutions
- They need our assistance with their reintegration
  - Be empathetic, offer support, recognize warning signs
  - Know their rights
  - Understand how to refer appropriately
  - Streamline your processes and remove barriers
  - Get involved and partner with campus and community organizations

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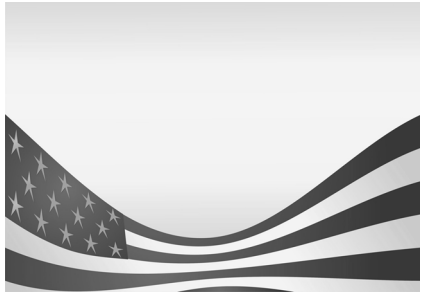
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**Questions?**



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**Supplemental Reading**

- Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability (2009). *Special Issue: Veterans with Disabilities*.
  - [http://www.ahead.org/publications/jped\\_veterans](http://www.ahead.org/publications/jped_veterans)
- National Council on Disability (2009). *Invisible Wounds: Serving Service Members and Veterans with PTSD and TBI*.
  - <http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2009/veterans.doc>
- American Council on Education (2008). *Serving Those Who Serve: Higher Education and America's Veterans*.
  - [http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/MilitaryPrograms/serving/Veterans\\_Issue\\_Brief\\_1108.pdf](http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/MilitaryPrograms/serving/Veterans_Issue_Brief_1108.pdf)

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**References**

Gerardi, M., Rothbaum, B.O., Ressler, K., Heekin, M., & Rizzo, A. (2008). Virtual reality exposure therapy using a virtual Iraq: Case report. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 21*(2), 209-213.

Hoge, C.W., McGurk, D., Thomas, J.L., Cox, A.L., Engel, C.C., & Castro, C.A (2008). Mild traumatic brain injury in U.S. soldiers returning from Iraq. *The New England Journal of Medicine, 358*(5), 453-463.

National Council on Disability (2009). *Invisible Wounds: Serving Service Members and Veterans with PTSD and TBI*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2009/veterans.doc>

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