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2.2 Transition Into Civilian Life

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Challenges Faced During Transition into Civilian Life

What triggers the exit from military service?

People who join the military do it voluntarily, but not all exits from service will be voluntary. Different triggering events may initiate leaving the military. Whether planned long in advance or unanticipated due to a permanent disability or disciplinary actions, it will shape how the transition is experienced (Kleykamp et al., 2021).

Leaving the military is one of the most challenging life changes anyone can experience. There are practical considerations, such as where to live and the type of education or work to pursue. However, there are also emotional challenges for service members and their families. The following are a few concerns service members and/or their families face upon reentering civilian life (Poeter, n.d.).

Understanding the loss of military identity



Military identity delineates how service members see themselves concerning the civilian world, and the forthcoming exit from the military community and culture creates a powerful identity shift and, for some, an identity crisis. In some cases, this shapes how they approach the upcoming separation (Kleykamp et al., 2021).

Planning to leave the military involves gathering information about schools, career paths, skills, and cities, attending classes, networking, job fairs, conducting informational interviews, and more. Planning represents a critical part of a successful transition. However, the lack of this planning has been associated with less successful transitions and greater difficulty adjusting to their new role in the civilian world (Kleykamp et al., 2021).

Military Structure

- Military life is predictable
- Define chain of command
- High ethics standards (right vs wrong)
- Doctrines- principles by which military forces guide their actions in support of national objectives
- Regulations and doctrines engrosses entire life on and off duty

Feeling lost when the structure goes away



The military culture is highly structured, with numerous regulations and rules controlling almost all aspects of service members' lives. The newfound lack of structure or regulations can be overwhelming for some and freeing for others. In general, retirement and discharge can mean a loss of prestige, a loss of military identity, a loss of rank, and a loss of status. If the service member's identity was tied to their self-worth, there could be an emotional fallout because of retirement (Craig et al., 2022).

Finding a job and financial support

For many Veterans, there is often a need to continue to work for both financial and emotional reasons.

Finding a job that fits Veterans' experiences and interests is vital. However, Veterans might experience challenges they did not expect while looking for jobs.

Experiences such as supervising troops in the military might not translate equally as supervising an entire office team. Service members' training skills and specialization are not always what employers seek. Veterans must learn how to describe their skills to make them more attractive for civilian jobs. Qualities such as leadership, problem-solving and time management are common skill sets that a services member might have. Veteran needs to learn how to show those qualities to their employers (Law For Veterans, 2023).



Some employers might not consider military experience as work experience, so they would consider their service as a gap in a resume. Employers may also worry that the Veteran may struggle to readjust, which could negatively impact their job performance. They might also be reluctant to hire Veterans because of ongoing health problems that would make them miss a day of work (Law For Veterans, 2023).

Before leaving the military, the service member's branch will verify their military experience and training. A Verification of Military Experiences and Training (VMET) form that includes the service member's knowledge, experience and skills gained in the military will be issued. The VMET includes:

- ◆ Military experience and training,
- ◆ Recommended college credit information and
- ◆ Civilian-equivalent job titles.

The [VMET](#) helps service members prepare resumes and job applications (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).

Military life can intensify financial problems. Frequent moves, address changes, and deployment often result in bank fees or non-compliance with bank account terms. Compounded with the problem of missed communications with their banks about account changes, these fees continue to increase over time. Due to frequent moves, military spouses have difficulty obtaining employment, limiting their savings opportunities (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, n.d.).

Financial problems can lead to stress, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and trouble- sleeping. For Veterans, there is an association between financial problems and post-deployment adjustment issues such as homelessness, incarceration, drug and/or alcohol use, physical aggression, and suicidal thoughts (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, n.d.).



Family life



Returning to civilian life is an enormous adjustment for Veterans and their family members. It can be challenging to come home after living in a war zone. Many things may have changed during deployment for both Veterans and their families. However, it is essential to note that certain things will not return to how they were before. Returning home will require a period of readjustment while relationships are re-established.

Some sources of stress can complicate how quickly they can get through this process, such as being away, being in a war zone and being in highly intense situations (Figure 2.2a). Understanding where and how these problems originate can provide a starting point for change.

Challenges Faced By Veterans Transitioning to Civilian Life

1 Being Away

Even if a Veteran has been away for a short period, things have changed

- Things like taking out the trash, paying bills, balancing the checkbook, socializing, making decisions, and disciplining children will change during the deployment and will have to change again upon return
- Dealing with this may cause stress, but most families usually solve this problem themselves

2 Being in a war zone

Veterans may acquire skill sets that have become very powerful and helped them survive

- Veterans lived in a different world and established many routines and behaviors that served them well in the war zone
- However, these skills may get in the way of good relationships and communication at home

3 Being in Extremely Intense Situations

Some events can affect Veterans' beliefs about the nature of the world and humanity

- Those experiences can severely affect the ability to readjust and require professional help
- Cannot be dealt with alone



Figure 2.2a
Sources of Stress that can Affect Transitioning to Civilian Life
Source
Munroe, 2006

Veterans may have developed certain skills that it is important for families and friends to understand, which can explain why Veterans act or react in a specific manner. Those skill areas are mentioned in Figure 2.2b.

Veterans developed specific skills in the military that were essential for survival. These sets of skills explain why Veterans today act in the way they do. Family members and friends need to learn about them:

- Safeness
- Trust
- Anger
- Mission Oriented
- Loss
- Authority
- Emotions



Figure 2.2a

Veterans' Skills That Explain the Reason Veterans Act in Certain Manners.

Source

Munroe, 2006

Safeness

Once Veterans are confronted with the chances of injury or death, their sense of safety in the world may never be the same. They reorient themselves to look for danger and never become too relaxed. Loud noises may trigger a strong response that causes them to jump for cover. This is a

helpful response in a war zone, but it may be embarrassing at home and impede their ability to relax and enjoy life at home (Munroe, 2006).

Trust

Veterans quickly learn not to trust people because, in a war zone, trusting the wrong people could get a Veteran killed. Trust is given only to well-known people who prove themselves under extreme conditions. However, Veterans may test people and require that they earn their trust. The test may reassure the Veteran but might push other people away (Munroe, 2006).

Anger

Anger could be an instrumental emotion in a war zone. Survival often depends on an aggressive response. Training experiences often generate anger, and service members will channel that anger into combat responses. However, it is difficult to contain the anger at home because it is a practical survival skill in a war zone. Anger will tend to push people away and leave the Veteran feeling isolated, which can lead to fights, compounding the problem of adaptation to civilian life (Munroe, 2006).

Mission Oriented

The main task in the military is to complete the mission assigned, which requires service members to focus, concentrate, and use resources; nothing can interfere. Once completed, they can rest and prepare for the next mission.

However, the same level of concentration and resources can be problematic in everyday life. There are many competing goals and tasks, but no one has a clear mission. Veterans may ignore getting things done daily because they seem unnecessary. They may wait until those things reach the level of an emergency. Once the emergency is resolved, they will be exhausted, withdraw, and avoid another task to conserve energy. To get things done on a daily basis, the Veteran may have to make it a mission. They will only be able to stop until it is completed. They may also get angry with anybody who gets in the way. This way of acting may feel normal for the Veteran, but it may be confusing and frustrating for others.

Loss

Loss is inevitable in war. Witnessing death is part of service members' experience. Veterans learned to cope by becoming numb to death. Because military culture encourages "moving on,"

Veterans were not allowed to go back home and participate in the family grieving process. When they return home, they may experience the loss of camaraderie and closeness with their “buddies” in the unit or platoon who understood and would “watch their back” in times of trouble.

Authority

The structure of military authority leaves little or no room for choice. Veterans learned to obey orders even when they disagreed with them or put them in danger. Veterans may trust leaders at home or be highly mistrustful or resentful of an authority. There are two possible responses to authority. Veterans may challenge anyone who tells them what to do or question the competency of anyone in authority. These can lead to unnecessary confrontations. In other cases, the Veteran may avoid being burdened with any authority and let others make decisions (Munroe, 2006).

Emotions

Emotional reactions can lead to people getting hurt in a war zone. The typical reaction of fear must be overcome so they can function and do their job. Showing emotions can be seen as weakness or vulnerability. However, at home, relationships depend on recognizing and expressing emotions. The numbing that Veterans have used to improve their performance may interfere with reading emotional signals at home. Numbing also limits the Veterans' ability to enjoy positive emotions such as happiness, caring, or love (Munroe, 2006). If any of these problems become extreme enough to negatively affect how Veterans and families interact, they must seek help. The sooner they will do it, the better. These problems do not go away by themselves.

Healthcare

Veterans may have trouble getting medical care for themselves or their families. The VA will cover Veterans for a while after they leave the military, but that coverage will end unless their medical conditions are service-connected. Having no insurance or insufficient insurance to cover medical expenses can cause problems for Veterans and their families. If the veteran does have medical conditions and/or disabilities related to their service, finding providers that will accept their VA insurance benefits may be difficult, especially for those living in rural areas.



Addictions: drug, alcohol use and gambling

Some service members, after they retire or are discharged, have trouble with alcohol and substance abuse or gambling addictions. Without the resources available to them while in service, many Veterans or those who have been discharged find themselves struggling with addiction and the issues thereof.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a National Helpline that is free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders: [1-800-662-HELP \(4357\)](https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline).

[Substance Abuse Treatments:
https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline.](https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline)

Disabilities

Individuals leaving military service may have disabilities that impact reentry into civilian life. In cases of disabilities, service members may be eligible for Veterans Affairs (VA) disability benefits or compensation (Figure 2.2b).

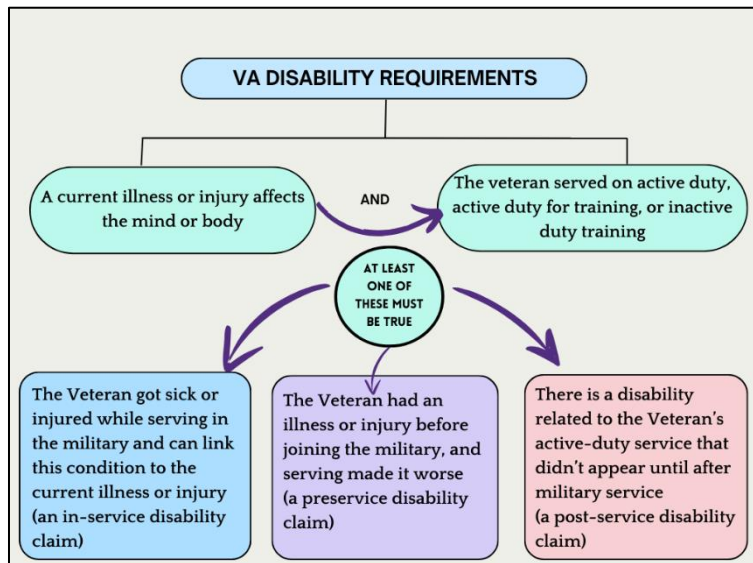


Figure 2.2b
Eligibility for VA Disability Benefits

Source:
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023

Disability benefits come in **percentages**, and the military assigns the service member a disability rating based on the severity of their service-connected condition. The military uses the service members' disability rating to determine how much disability compensation they will receive each month and their eligibility for other VA benefits. If the Veteran has multiple disability ratings, the military uses them to calculate the Veteran's combined VA disability rating. Calculating Veterans' combined disability rating involves more than adding up their individual ratings. In this sense, the Veterans' combined ratings may differ from the sum of their individual ratings.

It is essential to know that Veterans cannot always go to the VA for all disability needs. Sometimes, they need specialized care that the VA does not offer, or the VA may not cover their condition. If a service member is not covered in total or in part by the VA, they may have to go to the health insurance marketplace to obtain insurance (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021).

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