

Working with veterans with mental health difficulties

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 working with veterans who have mental health difficulties.

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.

Promote safety & trust

- Explain your role
- Give relevant information
- Do what you say you will do

Allow choice & control

- Provide choices for how to receive information
- Establish their preferences before offering advice

Focus on connections

- Promote social engagement
- Build on existing skills and supports

Encourage hope

- Provide information about recovery
- Focus on goals

Establish rapport

It is important to establish rapport with a veteran if you are to provide support and assistance to them. This may be difficult if the veteran has had past negative experiences with mental health and other service providers. The ADF transition data tells us that contemporary veterans are used to receiving mental health care, but they need their care providers to meet their expectations of support. For veterans with less recent service, such as Vietnam veterans, they may have had more negative experiences of care provision.

It is common for veterans to feel that service providers don't fully understand their experience. Because ESO staff have an understanding of military service, they are in a position to gain a veteran's trust, and to play an important role in encouraging a veteran to seek help.

TIP

Dedicate time to building a relationship with the veteran. Be non-judgemental and genuinely curious about their experience.

Develop trust

Anyone who has had mental health problems, negative experiences with health care providers, or a history of conflict, can have difficulty trusting others. This may include negative experiences in service or with authority. Understanding what is stopping a veteran seeking care, including a lack of trust in providers, can be very important for your work with them.

TIP

Try to identify and understand what factors are stopping the veteran from seeking support and help; this will allow you to work with the veteran to address these issues.

Collaborate with the veteran

For many veterans, positive skills learnt during service, such as self-management, become their preferred way of dealing with physical and psychological problems. While this can be a useful way of coping with mild conditions, where there is a more severe condition, such self-reliance can impact on the veteran's ability to ask for necessary help and follow the advice of others.

TIP

If a veteran has a preference to manage problems on their own, work with them and provide options, resources and information that they can use themselves, while encouraging them to commence or maintain contact with support services.

Manage difficult emotions

Depending on their role in the military, anger can be an easy emotion for a veteran to summon. Anger can also be a coping mechanism in a range of mental health problems, but it can be difficult to control. If a veteran has PTSD, memories of the traumatic event may trigger anger and other strong emotions. If a veteran feels threatened, they may assign blame to others.

TIP

It can be helpful for both you and the veteran to understand that their anger or blame is a coping response or a mental health symptom. Allow them to calm down when they are upset, and to re-engage with you when they are feeling more in control. This is a useful way to maintain your relationship with them.

Look after yourself

Supporting people with mental health difficulties can be meaningful and rewarding, but you need to ensure that you are able to set limits on how much you can do, and your organisation also needs to actively support your wellbeing.

If you don't feel equipped to help someone, or you feel that the veteran or your organisation is asking too much of you, it can lead to feeling burnt out. This may result in heightened stress levels, avoiding work, and negative or cynical thinking.

TIP

Be aware of the impact of working with veterans with mental health difficulties. Know the limits of your role, who you can refer veterans to, and find out what support your organisation provides to you. Take time to check-in on yourself and your colleagues.

If you need help in your work with veterans, or with a particular veteran, ESO staff can contact the Centenary of Anzac Centre for free expert guidance and support.



CALL US
1800 VET 777



EMAIL US
anzaccentre.org.au/enquiry



ONLINE RESOURCES
anzaccentre.org.au