

Supporting military service members in the workplace

In honor of National Veterans and Military Families Month, we're focusing on the unique mental health needs of colleagues who have served in the armed forces.

Maintaining one's mental health is important for everyone, but it is especially imperative for veterans and service members, who can be at risk for developing mental health issues related to their experience in the military. According to the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), individuals who serve in the military may struggle with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, traumatic brain injury, and other issues upon returning to civilian life.

Even more concerning is the fact that many veterans do not seek treatment due to the stigma associated with mental health care. According to the [American Institutes for Research](#), more than 63 percent of returning service members said they would not seek the help of mental health professionals as they believed it might affect their military or civilian careers.

Based on data from 2020, [veterans represent about 6 percent of the workforce](#). Creating a healthy work environment and providing access to mental health care can benefit all employees, including those who served in the armed forces. This can be achieved by understanding the mental health challenges commonly experienced by veterans, learning how to recognize the signs of mental health issues like PTSD, and creating a trauma-informed workplace.



Hi! I'm Dr. Browne.

I'm a clinical psychologist at Lyra, your mental health benefit. I'm passionate about destigmatizing mental health care and helping you improve your mental health at work and at home.

Transitioning to civilian workspaces

Entering the workplace after serving in the armed forces is an adjustment for several reasons. Military life can involve being on high alert, following strict routines, and experiencing unsafe and violent events. Veterans returning to civilian settings may need time to get familiar with their new daily environment, reconnect with family and friends, and adapt to other elements of “regular” life, according to the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#).

How to recognize signs of PTSD

Not all former military personnel experience PTSD, but it remains an important issue among this demographic. PTSD can also affect anyone who has gone through a traumatic event, making it beneficial for managers and coworkers to recognize the symptoms of PTSD. The symptoms of PTSD fall into four categories:

Intrusive Memories

This includes recurring unwanted memories of the traumatic event, reliving of the distressing event (flashbacks), or nightmares about it.

Avoidance

The affected person may try to avoid talking or thinking about the traumatic event, and they might steer clear of people, places, and activities that remind them of the trauma. They may isolate themselves or withdraw from friends and family.

Increased Arousal

PTSD can cause physical and behavioral changes such as trouble sleeping, irritability, and feeling jumpy or hypervigilant. In some cases, the person may have physical symptoms of distress such as a racing heart, trouble breathing, or sweating after being alarmed by an intrusive memory or flashback.

Negative Thoughts and Feelings

This can include persistent negative beliefs about themselves or feeling as if the world is always dangerous and that others cannot be trusted. Also in this category are negative expectations for the future and consistently experiencing anger, grief, guilt, or shame.

These symptoms may not look the same for everyone as each individual will experience symptoms in their own way. Anyone showing signs of PTSD should seek treatment with a licensed mental health care provider.

Veteran mental health, by the numbers

Mental health issues like depression and PTSD are not unique to members of the military. However, research has shown that veterans may be at risk for experiencing these conditions upon returning to civilian life.



The percentage of military personnel who serve in Iraq or Afghanistan and experience PTSD each year.



The rate of PTSD is nearly 15 times higher among veterans than that of their civilian counterparts.



An average of 17 veterans die by suicide each day.

Sources

Kessler, Ronald C., et al. [Thirty-day prevalence of DSM-IV Mental Disorders Among Nondeployed Soldiers in the US Army](#), May 2014. Accessed August 22, 2022. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2014.28

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. [How Common Is PTSD in Veterans?](#). Accessed August 22, 2022. www.ptsd.va.gov

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. [2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#) (PDF, 1.9 MB), September 2019. Accessed August 22, 2022. www.mentalhealth.va.gov

The role of trauma-informed workplaces

Trauma-informed workplaces are settings in which all people, both leaders and employees, seek to:

- Understand the impact of trauma on the mind and body.
- Cultivate an environment of safety, agency, and respect for team members.
- Incorporate knowledge about trauma into workplace policies and procedures.
- Prevent unnecessary reminders of trauma.

By acknowledging trauma and supporting the mental and emotional health of employees, organizations can establish a sense of [psychological safety](#), which allows individuals to feel comfortable asking for help without fear of retaliation.

How to encourage a trauma-informed approach at work



Educate yourself about the effects of trauma. Organizations that provide evidence-based resources include:

- [The National Institute of Mental Health](#)
- [The American Psychological Association](#)
- [The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#)



Actively prioritize the power, agency, and safety of everyone around you.

- Acknowledge when coworkers share their thoughts, ideas, or feelings.
- Empower colleagues to seek help via established support systems, including family members, the VA, or the mental health offerings provided by Lyra.



Incorporate trauma-sensitive language as a norm in communications.

- Be sensitive to potentially upsetting language.
- Avoid casual, unexpected, or explicit discussions about trauma.
- Use content warnings when necessary.

Get access to the right kind of care

While not all service members will experience mental health issues, it's important for those who do to know that they are not alone. Managers and colleagues can play an important role in normalizing discussions about mental health and reduce the stigma often associated with getting help. Facilitating these critical conversations can ensure the welfare of all employees—veterans and civilians alike.

Working with a Lyra mental health provider can be a great way to access the support you need and to take control of your mental health.

[Get started with Lyra today.](#)

Service members experiencing immediate distress can contact the veteran crisis line: 1-800-273-8255.