

NOW WHAT?

A Straightforward Transition Manual for those Exiting the Military



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Now what?

A straightforward transition manual for those exiting the military

First, thank you for your service! Seriously. Life in the military can be difficult and only the country's best are allowed to join. Remember that you are one of America's finest: brave, strong, and hard working. The skills and strength you gained from your service will be useful for the rest of your life—beginning immediately with the transition back to the civilian world. Navigating the systems and steps of transition can be difficult and confusing. This guidebook will help you.

Along with the reunions and sometimes awkward conversations, initial transition is hard! If out-processing left you with a lot of questions, you are not alone. Some areas with which you may need transition assistance include: adjustment with loved ones, post-traumatic stress (PTS) and other mental health issues, employment, finances, medical benefits, and school. It is okay to be angry and frustrated and to not know where to begin. The Veterans Administration (VA) and other agencies love to print and hand out volumes of materials for you to answer all your questions, but **this booklet tells you the bottom line of what you need to know and how to make it happen.**

There are many resources and benefits out there for veterans and you deserve to know what they are. And since you earned those benefits, you should apply for them! You may feel like you don't need them right now or that others are more deserving. We understand that sentiment, but want you to know that it's your right to get these benefits and services. We strongly encourage you to use what you've earned!

The VA publishes a guide for families. You can download the PDF at:

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/reintegration/guide-pdf/FamilyGuide.pdf>.

It's not too long and very well done!

Sometimes civilians just don't understand

Your time in the military has been very different from what other people have been doing. Sometimes they just don't understand what you've been through. Most people are trying to be nice and they don't understand that they are being insensitive or offensive. We understand.

Here's a typical scenario:

A girl walks into a party. She joins a group of people talking and overhears that one of the guys is a veteran. The first words out of her mouth are, "Was it awful over there, I mean did a lot of people die?" Everybody gets a little quiet and the veteran says, "Yeah, it got pretty bad, but you know." From there, the girl keeps asking questions until the veteran excuses himself and goes out for a smoke.

Throughout the rest of the manual, other veterans will share some of their personal thoughts alongside the advice of the experts. I guarantee something in this manual will help with your transition. Now, let's get you set up, registered, and plugged in.



Sometimes civilians just don't understand

Here are some friendly suggestions for friends, family, and partners on what to say:

"Thank you for serving."

"Welcome back. Thank you. How's it going? How are you transitioning?"

"People need to be aware of the context of the question and answer. If you wouldn't ask it at your family dinner table, don't ask it at a social function to a complete stranger. Judge the level of comfort. General questions like, 'What was Iraq like?' will only get you an hour-long discussion that might make you feel uncomfortable. Building rapport: Asking questions that can get factual answers i.e.: 'When did you get back?' 'What unit were you with?' 'What branch?' Good!"

Have situations like this happened to you before? It can get awkward and uncomfortable. Maybe you can identify with some of the conversation starters below.

So, did you kill anyone?

What do you think of the war?

Are you okay (mentally)?

My mom told me not to date a veteran.

Does it suck?

Did you see any action?

That must have been hard...

Was it cool?

Did you see a lot of dead people?

Can we trust you?

Myths and things I wish I knew before I got out (...tell your buddies)

Here's a short list of things we've found most veterans don't know when they first get out:

- ▶ The Department of Defense (DoD) and the Veteran Administration (VA) are separate agencies of the federal government. The DoD and VA do not share information. You will be responsible for providing copies of documents (such as medical records) for the DoD and the VA. The DoD and/or the VA will not do this for you.
- ▶ Be honest. Answer your post-deployment questions accurately. This may help you obtain appropriate medical care and/or compensation in the future.
- ▶ Retain copies of your DoD medical records and present them to the VA as necessary for medical care and compensation.
- ▶ OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans may be eligible for one-time dental care—but you must apply with 180 days of your separation date from active duty.
- ▶ You must file a separate application for benefits through the Veteran Benefits Administration (VBA). Receiving treatment from the Veteran Health Administration (VHA) does not mean that you have applied for disability compensation. More on this later.
- ▶ File for unemployment before enrolling for school or applying for any work, otherwise you may not be eligible for unemployment compensation based on your military pay. File the day after you get out!
- ▶ General under honorable discharges do not automatically upgrade to honorable—*ever*.
- ▶ You must have an honorable discharge to use the GI Bill benefit. If you don't, contact us to see what we may be able to do for you.
- ▶ If you are a reservist, the new GI Bill only works for you if you were activated, and you need at least 36 months of activation after Sept 11, 2001 to receive the full benefit. Otherwise, you get a percentage of it.

Understanding the Veterans Administration and other organizations



The very first thing you need to know is this:

You are your best advocate.

What we mean by this is that sometimes you will need to push and shove to make things happen. Obviously, that's not the way it's supposed to be. But, with this in mind, don't be afraid to ask questions and, in essence, make people do their jobs.

I struggled... speaking up for myself and being my own advocate. The care that I received, however, was very good and I would not be where I am today if I hadn't...

One big thing that you need to understand is what the Veterans Administration (VA) is. So, what is the VA?

The VA is split into three parts: the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

- ▶ The VHA is all the hospitals and clinics.
- ▶ The VBA manages *all* the benefits, including your health benefits.
- ▶ The NCA manages the national cemeteries and veteran burial services.

Here's why you need to understand the differences between the VHA and the VBA: they don't talk to each other unless you make them.

For example, you can be enrolled in the VHA and receive medical services regularly, but not be *service-connected* (we'll talk about this later) through the VBA. Conversely, you can be *service-connected* with a disability sustained in the military and not enrolled in the VHA.

Why and how is this possible? Because the two agencies pretty much operate independently. There are reasons for this, but what you need to know is that **it is two separate processes to enroll in VA healthcare and apply for VA service-connected disability benefits**. Just because you do one, it does not mean that the other one is started or completed. It is our advice to do both and we'll show you how.

In addition to the VA, “The government’s answer to helping veterans”...

...there are many **community-based, private organizations** that help veterans. We advise that you be a little cautious on where to go for help. Some organizations may charge you money to help you, but most non-profit organizations won't.

There are **several websites and agencies** that have tried to catalogue and list all the agencies out there to help you. Here are a few good sites:

- ▶ **coalitionforveterans.org** *The Coalition for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans (CIAV) is a national non-partisan partnership of organizations committed to working with and on behalf of all military, veterans, families, survivors and providers to strengthen the existing system of care and support for all those affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.*
- ▶ **nationalresourcedirectory.gov** *The National Resource Directory provides access to services and resources at the national, state and local levels that support recovery, rehabilitation and community reintegration.*
- ▶ **militaryonesource.com** *Available by phone or online, Military One Source is provided by the Department of Defense for active duty, Guard, and Reserve service members and their families. The service is completely private and confidential, with few exceptions.*

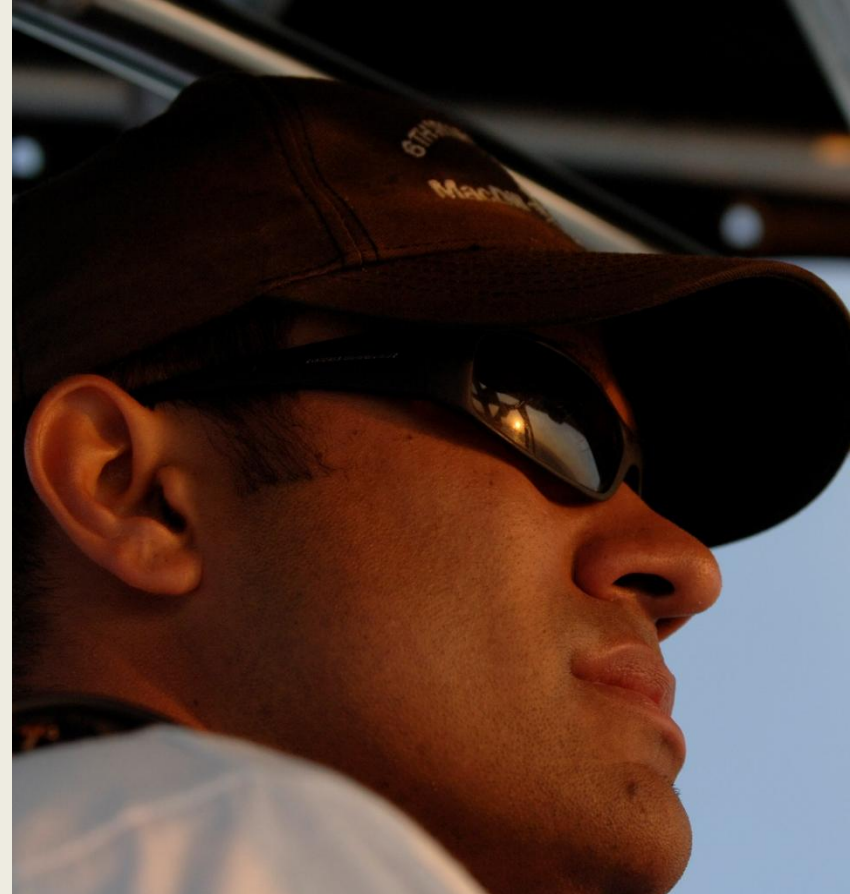
Apart from registries, there are **direct services providers** that we think are valuable resources for you. Here are some:

- ▶ **swords-to-plowshares.org** *is a community-based, not-for-profit organization that provides counseling and case management, employment and training, housing and legal assistance to veterans in the San Francisco Bay Area.*
- ▶ **cominghomeproject.net** *is a non-profit organization devoted to providing compassionate expert care, support, education, and stress management tools for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, service members, their families, and their service providers.*

"The hardest part was getting answers for the questions we didn't know to ask. Our debrief was about two minutes long. No one in my whole unit knew any of the services out there."

"I feel that the out-processing and job service program wasn't emphasized enough. I feel that veterans' benefits were not made available to all exiting service members..."

"I would have liked contact information to actual people in my hometown area for the VA, Vet Centers, etc. My separation class should have been done at least six months before I got out instead of two weeks."



Getting plugged in

Do these actual quotes from veterans strike a chord with you? If so, you're not alone. Check out these sites to get connected with veterans like you in your area. Often, there are retreats and gatherings just for recently-separated veterans (those who have served after September 11, 2001). Take advantage of the networks that are out there. They are powerful and can help you greatly with the things you need.

vets4vets.us is a non-partisan organization dedicated to helping Iraq and Afghanistan-era veterans to heal from the psychological injuries of war through the use of peer support.

iava.org Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America is the nation's first and largest group dedicated to the troops and veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the civilian supporters of those troops and veterans.

Go get your VA card. Now!

"My out-processing was much shorter and briefer than the usual classes so I lost a lot of information. One thing I remember they didn't say was to check in at the VA hospital at once. Location of Vet Centers would have been useful since they have all the info we needed."

As we mentioned, the process of applying for benefits and enrolling in VA healthcare are completely separate. One thing you should do as soon as you get out is to enroll in VA healthcare. You can do this at any VA hospital or clinic.

5 years of free healthcare.

OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans can receive free medical care for any condition related to their service in the Iraq/Afghanistan theater for five years after the date of their discharge or release. In order to take advantage of these benefits, OEF/OIF/OND veterans need to enroll in the VA's healthcare system. *If you are a Reservist or are activated from the IRR, then the five years starts again from the date of your most recent deactivation.*

VA healthcare is your right.

You earned it.

Each VA health facility has a special OIF/OEF/OND coordinator, whose job is to make sure your enrollment process is as easy as can be.

Find your nearest VA health facility at:

oefoif.va.gov/index.asp

If you are in Central and Northern California, Northern Nevada, Hawaii, the Philippines, and several Pacific Islands including Guam and American Samoa and want to know who your OIF/OEF/OND coordinator is, go here:

visn21.va.gov/oifcoordinators.asp



Service-connected disability

When asked about difficult adjustments in getting out of the military and back to the states, some interviewed veterans responded:

"Lack of guidance on filing a claim and help available through VSOs (veteran service officers), I only recently became aware of the whole appeal process and who to contact for help."

"Always being on edge. Not being in charge of what happens next. Having to wait on services such as the VA. Not having that close-knit group of people around to help out in the tougher situations."

The truth is that if you were injured in the military, you deserve a service-connected disability rating. This is for both physical and psychological injuries. You might feel strong and healthy, but you never know how an injury can affect you six months or 20 years from now.

Service-connected ratings come in increments of ten, from 0 to 100 percent. You will be rated for each condition that you identify and apply for, which should be every injury and ailment you suffered while in the military.

A service-connected rating comes with several advantages. The primary advantage is that for each condition that is rated, you can go to the VA for health treatment for those conditions.

For example, if you hurt your knee due to all the forced marches you conducted and are rated with a 10 percent for your knee, you can receive knee treatments from the VA forever.

Second, service-connected ratings of 10 percent and higher come with a cash disbursement every month. Third, if you are rated at 50 percent or higher, you can go to the VA for healthcare for the rest of your life for any issue. Fourth, in California, if you are rated at 0 percent or higher for any condition, then your child dependents can attend state college tuition-free!

Lastly, with a 20 percent rating you are entitled to vocational rehabilitation to prepare you for, and help you keep employment. That's a lot of good reasons to apply for a rating!

There are many reasons why you might think that you shouldn't apply for service-connected disability. You might think:

I am in my twenties, so how can I be disabled?

I can cope and hold a job, so I don't really need disability, right?

There were other people more seriously-injured than me, and they are the ones who deserve it.

I feel just fine...I'm young and strong and can deal with a little pain.

I joined the military...of course I was going to have a job that could hurt me.



Why to apply and how

Here's how to do it

1

Get copies of your medical records (military and post-military). If you can't, it's not a show-stopper, but you may need to do some additional work.

2

Get copies of your DD214 (or equivalent).

3

Fill out VA Form 21-526 or seek help filling out the form.

Get the form here: vba.va.gov/pubs/forms/vba-21-526-are.pdf.

Get help filling it out from your county veteran service officer at: nacvso.org.

4

Or better yet, seek help from an agency that specializes in helping you file a claim, such as Swords to Plowshare: swords-to-plowshares.org.

Apply through your county veteran service officer or the agency that helped you fill out the form.

What will happen next is that the VA will send you a letter giving you an appointment with a VA doctor to screen you. This appointment is not for treatment, it is for you to tell the doctor all your service-related health issues. Be sure to tell the doctor about all service-related health issues you have ever had, regardless if it is in your medical record! The doctor will schedule appointments for you with specialists for further screening.

The information the doctor and specialists provide will be sent to the VBA, along with your medical records. This information is used to decide your rating.

The rating may not make sense, but there is a formula.

For example, you might be rated 10 percent for your knee, 10 percent for your back, and 10 percent for your hearing, but only get a 20 percent rating overall. Also, the VA's rating may be completely different from the one you got from the military if you were medically discharged. Don't ask us how that's possible...we don't really understand it ourselves.

If you feel that the decision is wrong in any way, you can appeal. You can appeal on your own or use third-party services, like Swords to Plowshares.

School and the GI Bill

A lot of veterans get started with school right when they get out. It is great to stay motivated, but we highly recommend that you get connected with other veterans and get your VA card first. Registering with the VA is just one less headache.

Some veterans choose to wait a year or so before starting to use the GI bill. You may need to get your feet under yourself financially and then add school to the mix.

With the new, post-9/11 GI Bill though, it may be possible for you to get right to work on your education without working.

Note: Be careful with loans! Do some research before you sign on the dotted line because you may sign up for more than you thought.

Here's the bottom line of what you need to know about the post-9/11 GI Bill (chapter 33):

- ▶ It pays the school at the highest rate of *in-state* tuition, regardless if you attend a state school or a private school. You must pay the difference, but ask if your school participates in the Yellow Ribbon Program (the institution voluntarily enters into an agreement with the VA to fund tuition expenses that exceed the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition rate).
- ▶ It pays you via direct deposit a living allowance equivalent to Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) with two dependents based on the zip code of the school.
- ▶ You must take at least one class on a physical campus to receive *some of the GI Bill* based on the zip code of the school.
- ▶ You have 15 years to use the GI Bill from the date of your discharge.
- ▶ You get \$1,000 per year to spend on books for school and \$1,000 over the course of your entire academic career for tutoring assistance.
- ▶ Once you use the post-9/11 GI Bill, you cannot use the Montgomery GI Bill (Chapter 31) ever again.
- ▶ The benefit is for 36 months of school and you must be enrolled at some point in the month to receive the benefit. It is 36 months because that is how long a typical 4-year degree takes (4 years x 9 months of school per year). You can stop and re-start your benefit throughout the entire 15 years you have to use it.

"No information on educational options. I only recently found out that if I had returned to my home state, I could have obtained a 1-4 year degree free of charge."



Applying for the GI Bill can be broken down into these simple steps:

1

Choose your school (i.e. community college, university, state, private, apprenticeship, etc.) and make sure they accept the GI Bill.

2

Fill out the application, which is VA Form 22-1990. You can apply online at www.gibill.va.gov/apply-for-benefits/application. It typically takes a few weeks to receive your certificate of eligibility after you apply.

3

Work with your school's VA certifying official to make sure that all the paperwork was filed correctly, that the VA approved your eligibility, and that the school filed their end of the paperwork. Most schools have a VA certifying official that assists you with obtaining your GI Bill benefits. *Be proactive. The quality of veteran services varies greatly among educational institutions. Most certifying officials take on the administration of the GI Bill as an additional duty of their job.*

4

If you are receiving the Montgomery GI Bill, you will need to certify your attendance each month you are enrolled in school.

The entire host of details about the post-9/11 GI Bill can be found at: www.gibill.va.gov

Legislation, rules, and other technicalities are changing all the time, so you may find more current info than what is published in this manual.

Most secondary institutions have VA certifying officials. Utilize their office as they can be a great help with your paperwork. A good website to check on news about the GI Bill is www.newgibill.org. This site allows you to calculate your benefits and answers a lot of common questions.

The VA has also established a hotline that you can call to ask questions about the new GI Bill, whether you are applying, waiting for the benefit to start, or currently receiving the benefit. The phone number is: (888) 442-4551.

Vocational rehabilitation



"Members of the military are often put in positions of tremendous responsibility at a much younger age than their civilian peers. Due to high turnover rates, a service member may find himself in charge of anywhere from 15 - 45 people, whom he is responsible for bringing home alive. Many service members feel deep frustration and longing for a sense of purpose when they return home and civilian jobs available to them do not offer the same level of responsibility. Some feel offended and at odds with civilians whom they feel do not trust them with the same responsibility or autonomy in their job duties."

The VA's website for vocational rehab is very wordy and a little confusing. However, it does have useful information, so check it out at www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/index.htm.

It explains that to be eligible for these benefits, you must have a discharge that is other than dishonorable and have a service-connected disability. The folks that work for the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program can help you get job counseling, apprenticeships, and enrollment in colleges or technical schools. Depending on your disability, you can also get assistance with independent living services.

The basic gist of vocational rehab is that the VA will pay for job training if you are service-connected disabled at 20 percent or higher, apply, and are approved.

In order to be admitted into the program, you do have to go through an eligibility and evaluation process. We know this is frustrating because you've already "earned it," but unfortunately you are sometimes going to have to jump through hoops to get your benefits.

The period of eligibility for the program is 12 years from the date your active duty service ends, or from the date the government notified you of your disability status.

If you apply for and are denied vocational rehab, don't be discouraged! There are lots of veteran service organizations out there that will help you get training and/or help you find a job.

Women veterans

Currently, women comprise approximately 15 percent of the active duty military force and 10 percent of the veteran population. We understand that women serve in a variety of roles in the military and are subject to the same events, culture, and stigmas as their male counterparts. Over the past few years, special programs and services have been established by the VA and community-based non-profit organizations that support female veterans.

To find out more about what is out there for women, please visit:

www.1.va.gov/womenvet

The Center for Women Veterans was established by Congress in November 1994 by P.L. 103-446 to oversee the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) programs for women veterans.

www.cdva.ca.gov/Resources/Women.aspx

The California Department of Veterans Affairs includes a special department dedicated to serving women veterans. Check your state's VA homepage to find the women's department home site.



A physical and mental health overview



The following pages will touch lightly on health issues you or others you know may be facing.

Learning some basic definitions and symptoms of common injuries may help you recognize something you or a friend is currently facing. Included in these sections are helpful resources to find out more information or to get help. The physical and mental health subjects that will be covered are traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and military sexual trauma (MST).

“Those of us who get back from the war zone are different people. People need to give us time to get acclimated to being home. We might be very quiet or socially awkward. Civilians should be very careful when telling us about their problems; we might react very angrily because of the severity of things we have gone through. Most of us aren’t looking for a pity party or an excessive amount of praise. We just want to be respected.”

Traumatic brain injury (TBI)

"We can save you. But you might not be what you were."

Neurosurgeon, Combat Support Hospital, Balad, Iraq

A TBI has occurred when an external force has significantly disrupted brain function as indicated by any of the following: a period of loss of consciousness or alteration in consciousness (e.g., confusion, disorientation); loss of memory (amnesia) for events immediately before or after the injury; neurological deficits (e.g., weakness, loss of balance, change in vision); or intracranial lesion. The presence/absence or duration of each of these defines the severity level. TBI results in a broad range of physical, cognitive, behavioral, emotional and social challenges. Diagnosis can be difficult because injuries are not always obvious, the skull does not need to be penetrated, and the symptoms often are similar to those of PTSD. It is possible to have both PTSD and mild to moderate TBI because along with the injury, the experience is traumatic. For example: witnessing an IED explosion which killed and injured friends and peers. You or a fellow service member may look like you did before being injured, but still have difficulty with your memory, concentration, peer and family relations, and have symptoms that affect your job—both in the military and out.

Treatment is available and is designed around the patient on a case-by-case basis. Rehabilitation can include: occupational, physical, and speech therapy, counseling, and social services. Spouses and family are also a vital part of the healing process. To learn more about TBI go to the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center at www.dvbic.org. We also recommend you check out TIRR Foundation's Project Victory at www.tirrfoundation.org.



Blast waves causing TBIs can leave a 19-year-old private who could easily run a six-minute mile unable to stand or even to think... Military physicians have learned that significant neurological injuries should be suspected in any troops exposed to a blast, even if they were far from the explosion. Indeed, soldiers walking away from IED blasts have discovered that they often suffer from memory loss, short attention spans, muddled reasoning, headaches, confusion, anxiety, depression and irritability. (Glasser, 2007)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

"Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) scared the living hell out of me. I started experiencing PTSD symptoms while I was still on active duty and stationed stateside. I started having flashbacks, loss of sleep, and hyper-vigilance that made no sense to me and was very scary. The biggest challenge for me was having to explain to people what I was going through. I felt like I was crazy. I was not comfortable talking to my family and friends about it."

What we want you to understand is that PTSD is normal. Yes, that's right, it's normal. When people go through a traumatic event, the brain and body take steps to protect themselves. Some of those things manifest in the ways that are listed above. In fact, *most people show some or all of the symptoms of PTSD after a traumatic event*. For most people, the signs and symptoms disappear after a while. But for others, they may need a little help and that's okay. The good news is that over the past few years, our understanding of PTSD and treatments for it have gotten a lot better.

In fact, the VA has a whole department dedicated to understanding PTSD and improving treatment for it. They are called the National Center for PTSD and have set up a website to make it easy for you to find your closest VA PTSD support. It is: www2.va.gov/directory/guide/ptsd_flsh.asp.

The VA has decided to make it easier to file for a disability claim for PTSD. If your case was pending as of July 12, 2010, or you file a claim after that date, you are now able to apply for disability for PTSD without having to provide evidence of the specific "stressor," or event(s) which caused the trauma, as long as the stressor is consistent with the places, types, and circumstances of your military service. The rule has no geographic requirement and is not limited to military service in a combat zone.

As the name implies, PTSD occurs only after an extremely stressful event trauma. The more severe the trauma and the longer the person is exposed to it, the greater the likelihood of developing PTSD.

Three or more of the following characteristics are usually present:

- ▶ numbing, detachment or absence of emotional response
- ▶ reduced awareness of surroundings (being dazed)
- ▶ sensation that surroundings are distorted or unreal
- ▶ the feeling that you are different, strange or unreal
- ▶ an inability to remember parts of the trauma.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Another great resource for combat veterans *and their families* are the Vet Centers. Vet Centers provide you and your family with readjustment counseling, individual and group counseling, marital and family counseling, bereavement counseling, and more. The Vet Centers are technically part of the VA, but have made efforts to be as friendly and warm as possible. They are typically small offices located away from VA hospitals. Vet Centers can also see active duty personnel—they do not share information with the DoD! Find your nearest one at: www2.va.gov/directory/guide/vetcenter_flsh.asp.

Another site that provides useful information is PTSD Support Services (www.ptsdsupport.net). They have a checklist/survey, because it is sometimes difficult to talk about your experiences or symptoms. By filling out the form before going for treatment at the VA or elsewhere, it may be easier for you to express what you need. This checklist has been included at the end of this manual as Appendix B.

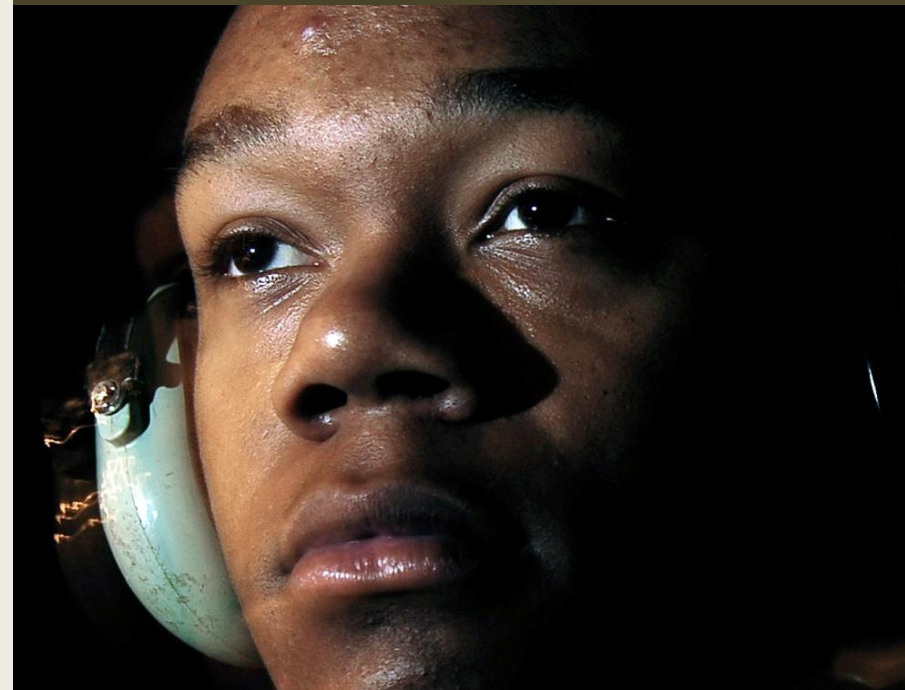
After making the decision to seek treatment, don't be uncomfortable about asking all sorts of questions to medical and psychiatric professionals. Questions such as:

- ▶ *"How will treatment help me?"*
- ▶ *"How is PTSD counseling or group different from just regular therapy?"*
- ▶ *"So what's the deal with medication 'X'?"*
- ▶ *"Do you have any pointers on discussing this with my family or my boss?"*

For more information about filing a claim for PTSD, please contact Swords to Plowshares or the nearest Vet Center.

If you choose to take one or more medications, ask a lot of questions. Pills are not magic, they don't just make PTSD go away. Doctors at the VA hospital can give you medication in addition to setting you up with counseling. Educate yourself about what you are being prescribed.

PTSD is a special kind of injury, but an injury nonetheless. Seek treatment for it! We know it is hard to get past the stigma and potential embarrassment of going to see a counselor, but they are there to help and they will. Don't be alarmed if you start to develop symptoms of PTSD years after your service. This is also normal. What matters is that you can and should get the care you need and deserve.



Military sexual trauma (MST)



"I wish more info/counseling had been available and presented publicly about military sexual trauma (MST)."

"...It's difficult to explain an experience that is so alien to a civilian; I think that they are mostly uncomfortable around me especially in a liberal town. That I am opposed to the war but wholeheartedly support our troops. I'm not an overtly aggressive girl who'll kill them if they look at me wrong."

"Women who chose the profession of arms deserve respect. They also deserve institutional mechanisms to provide for their safety and, in the worst case scenario, their treatment for trauma as a result of sexual violence associated with the U.S. Armed Forces."

Military sexual trauma (MST) is a very real part of military service affecting the careers and health of active duty and veteran women *and men*. There are many resources about MST and they're getting bigger and better. Civilian rape crisis centers are equipped to counsel and help with the sexual assault aspect but are often not prepared to fully understand and address the military component. The rape crisis centers near bases are more experienced with military members. *Remember, their services are confidential.*

Military sexual trauma is unique because the victim often lives and works with the perpetrator and often must continue to do so after the trauma occurs. The perpetrator may be the victim's same rank, below, or a superior. Due to close quarters and focus on unit cohesion, coming forward with allegations can be really scary and laced with retribution. Consequently, many cases of sexual assault and harassment are not reported. Being blamed and ignored often has significant negative consequences to a survivor's recovery and adds to the trauma. The alienation from peers is only made worse by the sense of betrayal from the command and even the government as a whole. If you or a friend has experienced MST, please seek help from the VA or a rape crisis center.

Military sexual trauma (MST)



A study done by the Veterans Affairs Long Beach healthcare system found that female veterans “...with MST had significantly higher clinician symptom ratings and more difficulties with readjustment than those without.” They concluded that, “these preliminary data suggest that MST in OIF/OEF women seeking mental health services appears to be a significant factor for predicting symptoms and difficulty with readjustment to civilian life.” (Women who served in Iraq, n.d.)

The VA has a program called “Disability Compensation for Sexual or Personal Trauma.” This particular disability claim is for veterans with PTSD and those who have “lingering physical, emotion, or psychological symptoms” from traumatic events including: rape, physical assault, domestic battering and stalking. You will use the same form—VA form 21-526—you use to file for any other disability.

Entering a government facility after surviving rape, harassment, or physical abuse can be terrifying, but for better or worse VA hospitals have some of the best facilities and providers to care for people suffering from MST. We strongly advocate going to the VA’s clinics to seek counseling and groups specific to PTSD and MST. There are men and women specific clinics and groups. The fellow survivors that you meet may also aid you in the healing process.

The VA has set up special clinics to handle MST. Find out more information here: www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp.

Vet Centers are also equipped to handle MST, and many people have found them to be incredibly helpful.

Journaling



*"I didn't know what to do with myself
because I had free time. I'd sit there anxious
because I felt like I needed to be active but
had no idea what to do."*

One suggestion to dealing with pent-up energy or emotion is to write about it. Journaling can be a great way to write down what is hard to say. It is also a good tool for your memory. It can help those who suffer from PTSD by creating a point of reference to understand how much the symptoms of PTSD are manifesting. Writing may help you sort things out, remember, let stuff go, function as a healthy distraction, and serve as a place to vent. Give journaling a try—you might surprise yourself!

Writer Lori Ritchie has some useful tips on journaling. She suggests skipping the first page if beginning your journal becomes overwhelming. Dedicating your journal to someone can mean a lot to you and maybe help sort through some memories. Pasting pictures into your journal can inspire you to write, or sometimes say more than even words. Copying lyrics from songs you have a memory associated with are a good addition. Writing about history, politics, or current events can help give you a point of reference when re-reading your journal later. Including poetry you have written can also add another dimension.

The following are journal prompts to help you get started. Remember, you don't have to buy a blank notebook and fill it up. Take out a piece of paper and try a prompt.

- ▶ What's on your mind?
- ▶ How have things changed for you since coming back from deployment?
- ▶ Do you miss parts about being on active duty?
- ▶ Did you lose any friends in Iraq or Afghanistan? If so, what memories do you have of them?
- ▶ What are some of your strengths? What are some of your weaknesses?
- ▶ Write about the transition process. What has your experience been like?
- ▶ What were some of your childhood dreams?
- ▶ List three of your current goals.
- ▶ Look at a photo. Write about that moment.
- ▶ Is there something you want to say to someone that you never had the chance to say?



The transition from the military to civilian life isn't always easy. There is a lot to know about what benefits are out there, how to access them, how to move on with your life, what to do next, etc. This can be an exciting and nerve-racking time, but also one full of opportunity.

Some people find the transition easy and some find it harder. The good news is that there are resources and people out there that want to help you. Don't be afraid to contact them and ask questions. You have served your country—now let them serve you.

In conclusion, we hope that your transition process goes as easily and smoothly as it possibly can. Please give us a call or write if you have any questions at all. Welcome back and welcome home!

Here's a "bottom-line" checklist of things we recommend you do:

- ✓ Make copies of your medical and service records (DD-214) and store them in a safe place.
- ✓ Connect with other veterans in your area.
- ✓ Enroll in VA healthcare.
- ✓ Apply for service-connected disability benefits.
- ✓ Learn about the other benefits out there and apply for the ones that you qualify for.
- ✓ Re-apply or appeal if you get denied a benefit. Remember: you earned it and you are your best advocate!
- ✓ Seek treatment for any conditions that stem from your time in the military, regardless if they are physical or mental.
- ✓ Document everything.
- ✓ Talk to your family and friends. They love you, but may not have a good idea of what your experiences have been.
- ✓ Take time to do the things you enjoy and the things you didn't have time to do while serving.

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NOW WHAT?

A straightforward transition manual
for those exiting the military.

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Appendix A – Bad conversation starters



The following is a list of bad conversation starters to ask a returning OIF/OEF/OND veteran compiled from written interviews from a veteran retreat. Although some of the answers are humorous, they also illustrate the serious social disparity in this country due to civilians' lack of knowledge about what these men and women have been through.

- ▶ So what was going to war like?
- ▶ What do you think of the war?
- ▶ Did you see anyone (people) die?
- ▶ Did you kill anyone?
- ▶ Would you go back?
- ▶ Why did you go when you knew people would die?
- ▶ How was it?
- ▶ Are you opposed to the war?
- ▶ Are you okay (mentally)?
- ▶ Can we trust you?
- ▶ How can you be proud of your training?
- ▶ So you were a baby killer, eh?
- ▶ My mom told me not to date a veteran.
- ▶ Why are you all so rebellious?
- ▶ Does it suck?
- ▶ Are you experiencing PTSD?
- ▶ Did you see any action?
- ▶ Was it cool?
- ▶ Do you have emotional problems?
- ▶ So how was Iraq?
- ▶ That must have been hard...
- ▶ Did you lose any friends?
- ▶ People wanting to hear a story about an incident and saying "cool."
- ▶ Talking about "why" we shouldn't be "there."

Appendix B – PTSD Checklist

Another site that provides useful information is PTSD Support Services (www.ptsdsupport.net). They have a checklist/survey because it is sometimes difficult to talk about your experiences or symptoms. By filling this out before going for treatment at the VA or elsewhere, it may be easier for you to express what you need.

Check the symptoms below that you experience (that may or may not be related to a traumatic event) and make notes as needed:

I experienced or witnessed a traumatic event during which I felt extreme fear, helplessness, or horror.

The event happened (day/month/year)

What happened?

- 1 I have symptoms of re-experiencing or re-living the traumatic event:
- ☐ Bad dreams or nightmares about the event or something similar
 - ☐ Behaving or feeling as if the event were actually happening all over again (this is known as having flashbacks)
 - ☐ Having a lot of emotional feelings when I am reminded of the event
 - ☐ Having a lot of physical sensations when I am reminded of the event (e.g., my heart races or pounds, I sweat, find it hard to breathe, feel faint, feel like I'm going to lose control)

- 2 I have symptoms of avoiding reminders of the traumatic event:
- ☐ Avoiding thoughts, conversations, or feelings that remind me about the event
 - ☐ Avoiding people, places, or activities that remind me of the event
 - ☐ Having difficulty remembering some important part of the event

- 3 I have noticed that since the event happened:
- ☐ I have lost interest in, or just don't do things that used to be important to me
 - ☐ I feel detached from people; I find it hard to trust people
 - ☐ I have a hard time falling or staying asleep
 - ☐ I am irritable and have problems with my anger

- 3 Continued
- ☐ I have a hard time concentrating
 - ☐ I think I may not live very long and feel there's no point in planning for the future
 - ☐ I am jumpy and get startled easily
 - ☐ I am always "on guard"
 - ☐ I feel emotionally "numb"
- 4 I experience these medical or emotional problems:
- ☐ Stomach problems
 - ☐ Intestinal problems
 - ☐ Gynecological problems
 - ☐ Weight gain or loss
 - ☐ Chronic pain (e.g., in my back, neck)
 - ☐ Chronic pelvic pain (women)
 - ☐ Problems getting to sleep
 - ☐ Problems staying asleep
 - ☐ Headaches
 - ☐ Skin rashes and other skin problems
 - ☐ Irritability, a quick temper, and other anger problems
 - ☐ Nightmares
 - ☐ Depression
 - ☐ Lack of energy, chronic fatigue
 - ☐ Alcoholism and other substance use problems
 - ☐ General anxiety
 - ☐ Anxiety (panic) attacks

(Ruzek & Swales, PTSD Support Services, 2007)

Thoughts, notes, reflections



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