

Accommodating Veteran Employees With Mental Health Issues



**Addressing
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and
Traumatic Brain Injury**



www.peaceatwork.org

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Purpose

This is a report providing resources and ideas to employers, Human Resource managers, Employee Assistance professionals and other associated stake-holders who want to support returning veteran employees, especially those that may be suffering from the mental health impact of their combat duties. It is not specific advice for any particular company, employee or situation. All programs and procedures should be formulated, executed and monitored by a party of informed, diverse and committed personnel.

The primary objectives of any initiative or program should be to Provide Support, Ensure Safety and Facilitate a Smooth Transition.

Having a meaningful job is a vital aspect for most adults. However, for those with a disability or in recovery, it can play an even more significant role.

Those who return to work have a higher level of satisfaction in life and adjust better than those do not have a job.

The National Council on Disability

A job provides essential life benefits such as income to maintain security and independence, a purpose for getting up in the morning, social interaction with others, self-esteem for a job well done and personal growth through achievement.

As such, every program, policy and employee decision that is made with a veteran employee should be cleared with legal counsel. Maintaining equality and fairness may include consideration of the potential benefit for a small accommodation, the obligation to repay the veteran's service and the paramount importance of safety for all parties involved.

Support, not Stigmatization

This report in no way suggests or attempts to profile veterans as unfit for employment, unstable or dangerous to themselves or others. Employers can greatly benefit from the experience, discipline and capability that veterans can offer to any organization or company. However, employers need to be aware of the frequency and severity of mental health disability issues including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury.

What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Many people with PTSD repeatedly re-experience the ordeal in the form of flashback episodes, memories, nightmares, or frightening thoughts, especially when they are exposed to events or objects reminiscent of the trauma. People with PTSD also experience emotional numbness and sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, and irritability or outbursts of anger. Feelings of intense guilt are also common. Physical symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal distress, immune system problems, dizziness, chest pain, or discomfort in other parts of the body are common in people with PTSD.

From Deployment Health Clinic Center
<http://www.pdhealth.mil/clinicians/ptsd.asp>

What is Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)?

Traumatic brain injury (TBI), also called acquired brain injury or simply head injury, occurs when a sudden trauma causes damage to the brain. TBI can result when the head suddenly and violently hits an object, or when an object pierces the skull and enters brain tissue. Symptoms of a TBI can be mild, moderate, or severe, depending on the extent of the damage to the brain. A person with a mild TBI may remain conscious or may experience a loss of consciousness for a few seconds or minutes. Other symptoms of mild TBI include headache, confusion, lightheadedness, dizziness, blurred vision or tired eyes, ringing in the ears, bad taste in the mouth, fatigue or lethargy, a change in sleep patterns, behavioral or mood changes, and trouble with memory, concentration, attention, or thinking.

From The National Institute of Health
<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/tbi/tbi.htm>

Is PTSD and TBI a disability under the Americans with Disability Act?

There is not a set list of diagnoses that qualify for ADA. Rather, there is a broad definition of disability that the employee may fit under for eligibility. ADA does apply for mental as well as physical disabilities.

www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/902cm.html.

A Few Statistics

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

20 percent of returning U.S. soldiers have post-traumatic stress disorder or depression and only half of them receive treatment.

Rand Corporation

More than 22,000 veterans have sought help from a special suicide hotline in its first year alone. Roughly 1 in 5 soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan displays symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

ccarolinanewswire.com

An estimated forty thousand veterans have already been diagnosed with PTSD from the current two wars.

Pentagon statement

There are 442,862 veterans enrolled with the VA who have a diagnosis of PTSD out of a total 1,662,375 with some mental-health diagnosis.

Antonette Zeiss, Deputy Chief of the VA's Mental Health Service

Up to 17 percent of veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan have PTSD, major depression or other mental-health problems.

Dr. Joseph T. English, Chairman of Psychiatry at New York Medical College

Traumatic Brain Injury

Between 45,000 and 90,000 troops have been treated for traumatic brain injury symptoms.

Between 10 percent and 20 percent of soldiers and Marines, about 180,000 people, have screened positive for TBI.

*Brig. Gen. Loree Sutton
Director of the Defense Centers of Excellence for
Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury*

It's unknown how many suffer from mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI). Mild brain injuries are less often diagnosed because soldiers often believe getting knocked around is part of the job. But over time, with each successive mild brain injury, the effects can become more severe.

Congressional Brain Injury Task Force

Indications that an employee may need support

Warning Signs

An employee may not be aware of, been diagnosed or may not inform an employer of any mental health disability. As an additional challenge, employees suffering from these issues may be resistant to admit that there are complications, or to seek support. *Therefore, it is the responsibility of those that surround these individuals through a full work week, to recognize when an employee is in need of additional support.*

Personality and demeanor

- Mood swings that may include irritability and hostility
- Limited coping skills
- Low threshold for managing stress
- Outbursts
- Avoidant behavior
- Appears to be lacking adequate sleep
- Disheveled appearance

Job Performance Issues

- Absenteeism
- Tardiness
- Mistakes in calculations or in written reports
- Memory deficiencies
- Difficulty with concentration
- Difficulty working with others
- Inability to maintain organization

Finally, do not forget your basic instinct or intuition. The most important warning sign is that you think that something may be wrong. This is a purely subjective assessment and talking with support services or with others who are familiar with employee may confirm concerns. *The most important way of noticing an employee in duress is to meet with them regularly to notice any change or issues.*

Promising Practices

The following are few ideas to develop programs in your workplace to help veteran employees. Specific resources to implement some of these ideas are listed at the end of this report. Peace at Work has not tested these ideas for their value or effectiveness, but provides them as a guide that can be beneficial if delivered with thought and sincerity. *Again, it is vital to make all decisions about any policy or personnel action, through informed consideration in planning and honest appraisal in its evaluation.*

Listen

The first thing to do, and always to do, is to simply.....*Listen*. With any individual intervention or program support, it would be a mistake to take action without conferring with the parties involved. Make certain that what is being done does not exacerbate the condition or cause more problems. It is vital to continually evaluate any accommodations to determine what to continue, revise or remove.

Checking in

Meet with the employee on a regular basis just to check in, not just when there is an incident or issue to be addressed. Provide a means to meet with management or supervisors on very short notice.

It is essential to recognize and reinforce the positive behavior and performance as well as addressing concerns. Naturally, this is not just for veteran employees but good management with all workers. Supervisors need to make the personal investment to check in on the progress of the employee and to assist in the development of the other practices listed below. During these meetings there can be written, straight-forward expectations and goals, both long and short term. Employees may benefit from having their progress outlined in achievable, incremental steps to measure their success at reintegration.

Support Figure

While the direct supervisor is the natural position for this role, it may be another person to act as a job support or coach. This can even be an informal assignment, but having someone that the employee can count on is invaluable.

This support person can offer guidance with work related issues, whether it be task completion or with inter-personal issues. The employee should be able to contact and have access to this support at any given time. While there can be training and even accreditation for the role of a "job coach", it

is vital for the employee to have a real, personal connection with this person to get the most out of this one-on-one relationship.

Additionally, this person can act as a liaison for the employee to communicate the needs and concerns to management. By no means should this be used or seen as a “spy” that monitors the employee condition and work performance. This relationship and need for support may decrease over time and as the employee develops more independence. However, recovery is rarely made in a linear path and the employee should be able to access this support as the need arises.

Veteran Mentor

No one can help someone like a person who has been through it themselves. For those who have a high risk for complications, have exhibited some warning signs, or as a general support measure for all veteran employees, an appropriate person can be appointed as a mentor. Ideally, someone who has had similar experiences, has resolved their own issues and who could act as a genuine support. They could meet regularly and/or an open door policy.

This is different from the support person or job coach as they will address the specific experience of combat veterans. They can provide the counseling, friendship and advice. The focus is not on job performance but on the personal challenges and development of the employee. While employee assistance programs typically fill this role of addressing the personal problems of an employee, the aspect of having a veteran with similar experiences would be essential.

This role may be difficult to create or implement. While it would be important for this person to be qualified, have proper training, be clear of their own agendas and issues and be accountable, it also requires for there to be a natural relationship based on respect, authenticity and empathy. The same access should be available so that the employee can contact the mentor at any time and through multiple means.

Support Groups

As a similar concept, if there are opportunities for employees to share their challenges, experiences and issues with others like them, they may be able to express themselves to a group that really understands.

If the workforce is large enough, there may be numerous veterans that can gather. If not, such groups can be developed through companies that are geographically near by or similar industries. It may even be possible to host these meetings online and through conference calls.

It can be a formal or very informal gathering. However, it will more likely succeed if the employees develop the program themselves “organically” as opposed to being invited through an HR program. Privacy and confidentiality of these meetings would be essential. A veteran with some experience and ability to lead a group can act as a facilitator for these meetings.

Take a Break (from work)

Allow employees to request time off, even with little notice. Employees may need to take a time to readjust and they may not be able to give work their full attention. A few days may be needed to help someone get back on track.

At the same time, request time off can also be a warning sign. Adequate support and communication must be ensured so that the employee will be safe. If the employee is suffering from depression or has exhibited any suicidal behavior, the employer can help put the safe guards in place.

Take a Break (while at work)

Provide opportunities for employees to take breaks during their shift. They will need a way to request this support, someone to cover their duties and a place to relax and refocus. Allow for self-paced task assignments. During this break, they may request to contact their mentor or coach to touch base or get support.

Work Accommodations

The nature of work and the workplace environment varies greatly. For each situation, consider what the unique limitations and challenges the employee may face in their job. Meet with the employee and monitor their progress to adjust their tasks and assignments accordingly. Accommodations do not mean making exceptions or compromising your policies. It is about matching the strengths and capabilities of the employee to the needs of the job duties to reach optimal performance.

If there are any changes in their workplace such as location, duties, supervisors or co-workers, recognize that such transitions may take longer and should be introduced in an incremental manner. Schedule the more physically and mentally challenging tasks near the beginning of the shift when they have more energy reserves.

Do not engage them with work that would stimulate their PTSD condition. Jobs that have loud noises or that are inherently stressful could trigger the symptoms. Employees may use a sound machine or play music to create a more comfortable environment. Allow them to have a private space to work where they will not be interfered with or distracted.

Physical Accommodations

Provide access and user support equipment such as ramps, glare resistant screens and move their office closer to the entrance. Lighting is an important feature, so increase natural lighting by giving them a workspace with windows or replace fluorescent tube lights with bright, white lights.

Simplify and Clarify Tasks

Jobs can be reduced to simple steps with clear, written instructions. Assign one job at a time. Give employees a chance to expand on their job responsibilities as they see fit and can handle them.

Instructions and explanations can be broken down into separate, simple units. Provide multiple means to get instructions including taping meetings, sending emails, written assignments and voicemail. The employee's unique learning method may be auditory, visual or through experience. Experiment to find out what works best. It may be required to provide additional training for any new procedures or policies. Those with TBI may require larger print, simpler terms and color coded check lists.

Post instructions for any complicated machinery or equipment. Provide frequent but not harassing reminders about meetings, deadlines and other key time commitments.

Co-worker Awareness

Provide sensitivity training, which may include conflict resolution and mediation skills development. While being careful not to stigmatize or profile the veteran employee, educate others about the impact and issues of PTSD, TBI and other potential disabilities.

Asking for Help

Provide a means for communication. Allow several means for a distressed employee to communicate their issues. An 800 #, an ombudsman that will act as a liaison with the administration or an email address that they can contact.

It is crucial that an employee can ask for assistance or disclose their problems without fear of retaliation or negative employment action. The report can be a request of leave, a call for support services or any communication that needs to be made discreetly and reliably. *These reports and notifications must be confidential.*

Professional Support

Get professional, qualified, experienced and caring support
It is not in the scope of this report to refer to or suggest any specific service or company. But finding a qualified service is the same as any other outsourced service - ask colleagues for referrals and check references, ask about qualification and get to know the principal contacts that will be working with you and the employees.

Key services include:

- Job Coaches, specializing in veteran disability issues
- Employee Assistance Programs, trained and experienced in mental health issues of veterans

Family Support

Do not forget to provide support services for the employee's relations. An employee's best support may be their own families - parents, spouses, siblings and even children. By ensuring that their needs are met, they are more likely to be a better support for the employee.

Reserve and National Guard Employees

Support protocols for returning Reservists and National Guardsmen

(Please visit Employer Support for Guard and Reserve- www.esgr.org)

- Contact with these employees while they are still on duty.
- Send seasonal cards with a handwritten, personal note.
- Inform them who they can contact if they have any questions or needs.
- Contact with their family members to see how you can help them while the employee is deployed.
- Develop a welcome home package providing: Information on who/how they can contact for ID badges, wage allocation, insurance, benefits and access information for email and entry. Don't forget the niceties too such as cards, snacks and gifts.

Resources

Reports, Documents and Guidelines

Invisible Wounds of War:
Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences,
and Services to Assist Recovery
Rand Corporation
<http://rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720/>

Accommodation and Compliance Series: Employees with
Brain Injuries
By Kendra M. Duckworth, MS
<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/BrainInjury.html>

Accommodation and Compliance Series: Employees with Post
Traumatic Stress Disorder
By Kendra M. Duckworth, MS
<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/ptsd.html>

Supporting Employees with PTSD - Accommodations That
Can Help Your Workers With Combat Stress
Michael Reardon
<http://tinyurl.com/d76wae>

Accommodating Service Members and Veterans with PTSD
Laura Artman, MA and Kendra Duckworth, MS
<http://tinyurl.com/bx4mb2>

Government and Support Agencies

America's Heroes at Work is a U.S. Department of Labor project that focuses on the employment challenges of returning service members living with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and/or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Designed for employers and the workforce development system, this Web site is your link to information and tools to help returning service members affected by TBI and/or PTSD succeed in the workplace - particularly service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
www.americasheroesatwork.gov/index.html

Wounded Warrior Project's Warriors to Work program helps individuals recovering from severe injuries received in the line of duty connect with the support and resources they need to build a career in the civilian workforce. The mission of the Wounded Warrior Project is to honor and empower wounded warriors, to raise awareness and enlist the public's aid for the needs of severely injured service men and women, to help severely injured service members aid and assist each

other, and to provide unique, direct programs and services to meet the needs of severely injured service members.

www.woundedwarriorproject.org

Veterans Across America is an employment program of the nonprofit organization, The Center for Military and Private Sector Initiatives. Based in New York, Veterans Across America is dedicated to helping veterans compete for quality employment—and to educating employers about the value that veterans represent as a talent pool. VAA is currently focused on helping wounded and disabled veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,

www.veteransacrossamerica.org

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program's primary function is to help veterans who have service-connected disabilities become suitably employed, maintain employment, or achieve independence in daily living. The purpose of this web site is to present information about the services that the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program provides to veterans with service-connected disabilities. The web site also provides information about vocational counseling available to active duty service members and veterans who have recently separated from active duty.

You will also find information about vocational counseling and special rehabilitation services available to dependents of veterans who meet certain program eligibility requirements.

www.vetsuccess.gov

Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve is a Department of Defense organization. It is a staff group within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs (OASD/RA), which is in itself a part of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. ESGR was established in 1972 to promote cooperation and understanding between Reserve component members and their civilian employers and to assist in the resolution of conflicts arising from an employee's military commitment.

www.esgr.org

Disability Management Employer Coalition's primary goal is to assist employers in developing cost-saving programs, encouraging responsive market products, and returning employees to productive employment. They provide educational resources to members in the areas of disability, absence, health, and productivity.

www.dmec.org

The Job Accommodation Network is a service provided by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). JAN's mission is to facilitate the employment and retention of workers with disabilities by providing employers, employment providers, people with disabilities, their family members and other interested parties with information on job accommodations, entrepreneurship, and related subjects. JAN represents the most comprehensive resource for job accommodations available. JAN consultants have obtained at least one Master's degree in their specialized fields, ranging from rehabilitation counseling to education and engineering. The development of the JAN system has been achieved through the collaborative efforts of the U.S. DOL Office of Disability Employment Policy, the International Center for Disability Information at West Virginia University, and private industry throughout North America.

www.jan.wvu.edu

The North Carolina Military Business Center is a business development entity of the North Carolina Community College System, headquartered at Fayetteville Technical Community College (FTCC). The mission of the NCMBC is to leverage military and other federal business opportunities for economic development and quality of life in North Carolina.

The NCMBC also conducts employment programs to integrate highly skilled, transitioning military personnel and family members into the state workforce, and supports economic developers in recruiting defense-related businesses to North Carolina. The NCMBC maintains a searchable, historical database of transitioning military personnel to help economic developers quantify this potential workforce for businesses locating in North Carolina.

www.ncmbc.us/transition

**About
Peace at Work**

Peace at Work is a non profit agency dedicated to the prevention of violence, in and through, the workplace. Our goal is to help develop and maintain healthy and respectful workplaces through policy development, training and consultative support. The Director, Johnny Lee, was previously the Workplace Violence Specialist for the North Carolina Office of State Personnel and the Training Director for the UNC-Chapel Hill Injury Prevention Research Center's PREVENT program, delivering a CDC funded, national violence prevention training program.

For his published work, he is author of the book, *Domestic Violence in the Workplace*, published by HRD Press in 2005.

For more information, please visit www.peaceatwork.org.