

CLEARINGHOUSE FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

Mental and Behavioral Healthcare and the Military-Connected Community Rapid Literature Review and Resource Guide

Clearinghouse Technical Assistance Team

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Executive Summary

This report was developed in response to a request for information and resources relating to the mental and behavioral health treatment of members of the military-connected community. The Technical Assistance team reviewed research and resources that identified and incorporated best practices when treating this population.

Providing mental and behavioral health care to the military-connected community can be different than doing so with civilian populations (Myer & Wynn, 2018). Supporting military populations effectively requires a measure of competency in military culture (Meyer, 2015). This cultural competency may allow service providers to better understand and address problematic behaviors or thoughts in Service members, veterans, and their families.

This report provides information on the following elements:

- Background of providing mental and behavioral health service to a military community,
- Challenges of mental health seeking in the military-connected community,
- Brief discussion of post-traumatic stress disorder, and
- Trainings and Resources for serving the military-connected community.

Note, this rapid review provides a preliminary examination of the research. Thus, given the brief timeline, this report is not intended to serve as a comprehensive review of the literature, and the resources provided are not endorsed by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State. Rather, the information about the resources is provided to help stakeholders make data-driven decisions about next steps.

Introduction

The Technical Assistance (TA) team at the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse) conducted a brief, rapid literature and resource review of topics and resources that can be used to support the military-connected community. Research that examines the topic of interest was identified by searching peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature, and an emphasis was placed on research published between 2012 and 2022. Search queries included various combinations of the following terms: military, PTSD, cultural competency, stigma, service provider, mental, behavioral, health, and rural.

Background

Mental health treatment may need to be approached differently when providing services to military-connected populations in comparison to civilian populations. Most former Service members who have transitioned to civilian life do not struggle with severe mental health issues (Morgan et al., 2020). However, there is a small number of veterans who do experience mental challenges that are related to their military service. These challenges may be a combination of experiences and results of physical injuries sustained during service. How the military-connected community approaches mental health, well-being, and treatment may look different than it does in the civilian sector because of cultural values that are specific to the military (Meyer et al., 2018). Many of the strengths that are focused on during military training and service, such as perseverance and self-reliance, can present as liabilities to mental and behavioral health well-being. For example, because military culture can focus on grit and self-sufficiency, these admirable qualities may also inhibit veterans from seeking help (Kaplan, 2019; Westphal & Convoy, 2015).

In the United States, one of the main behavioral and mental health topics that impacts Service members and military veterans is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The military experience can increase the likelihood of an individual developing PTSD (Loignon, et al., 2020). Therefore, those serving military-connected populations should recognize that PTSD may be more prevalent than in civilian populations, and they should develop professional competency in treating PTSD.

In Pennsylvania, service providers frequently face two main challenges when presenting mental health care to veterans: mental health stigma and the large number of rural communities. Mental health stigma is one of the more frequent barriers that veterans experience as they pursue treatment in this area. (Perkins et al., 2017). Mental health stigma refers to a perception that community members have negative opinions of those who participate in or seek mental health treatment (Morgan, 2020). Another challenge that has been identified through needs assessments is transportation to care (Perkins et al., 2017). Although this situation is not specific to rural communities, a lack of public transportation in these areas is most likely a factor in veterans not seeking healthcare (Oluyede, 2022). The following section provides a brief overview and general recommendations for a few common topics relevant to this population: PTSD, mental health stigma, and rural challenges to healthcare.

Topics that impact the healthcare of the military-connected population

Post-traumatic stress disorder

PTSD is a negative response to trauma, and its effects hinder one's ability to consistently manage his or her mental and emotional functioning (Bryant, et al., 2016). PTSD remains an issue for the military community. For Service members and veterans who have experienced traumatic events, PTSD is a frequently diagnosed disorder. PTSD in Service member and veteran populations has reached as high as 16% of the military population compared to 9.8% of the civilian population (Loignon, 2020). A meta-analysis of probability conducted by Loignon et al. (2020) found that veterans were almost twice as likely to develop PTSD when compared to civilians. For those struggling with long-term PTSD, civilian social supports (e.g., family and community help networks) have been shown to be a more impactful intervention than social support from military sources (e.g., fellow Service members, unit command) (Blais, et al., 2021).

The following section provides information on trainings and resources for service providers. The trainings explain the experience of military service to increase service providers' military cultural competency and communication skills. The curated list of resources for service providers offers mental and behavioral health tool kits that can help providers better serve the military-connected community.

PTSD resources

National Center for PTSD

The National Center for PTSD is the leading authority in PTSD treatment and research. As part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Center for PTSD offers information and tools for providers and for individuals who are impacted by PTSD.

- <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

Veterans Crisis Line

The Veterans Crisis line is a free and confidential resource that connects those in crisis with immediate intervention. The service is available 24 hours a day, and users do not need to be enrolled in any specific organization to use this resource. Some examples of resources provided include the following:

- Measures to be used by mental health professionals to assess trauma and PTSD,
- Continuing education for those who treat clients who have experienced trauma,
- Consultation for providers who may encounter veteran clients who are experiencing PTSD,

- Advice and recommendations on how to integrate technology into mental health care, and
- Materials designed to help the provider educate his or her patients on PTSD and how this psychiatric disorder is treated.
- <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help-now/military-crisis-line/>

Mental health stigma

Through needs assessment evaluations, Perkins et al. (2017) identified mental health stigma as one of the more substantial barriers to health seeking behavior among veteran populations. Service members and veterans often find themselves in situations where help-seeking behavior is discouraged. Military-connected communities tend to display norms that discourage and stigmatize seeking mental health treatment (American Public Health Association, 2014; Morgan et al., 2020; True, 2014). Morgan et al. (2020) notes that a further complication in treating mental health concerns is that current and former members of the military have a level of distrust in programming that is designed to support them. Some ways to reduce mental health stigma as a barrier include the following (Kaplan, 2019):

- Offer assurance to Service members and veterans that their care and treatment will be kept confidential;
- Help your military-connected client to understand that mental health treatment can be effective;
- Involve the client in as much decision making about the treatment as possible;
- Explain to those seeking help that doing so is not a form of weakness; and
- Communicate your understanding that you may not have experienced the same situations, but you still may be able to help your client.

Rural Locations

Rural locations act as a physical barrier to seeking healthcare for the military-connected community. According to Hale-Gallardo et al., (2020), 58% of veterans registered with the Veterans Health Administration live more than 25 miles from their healthcare providers. In addition to the physical distance from a healthcare provider, additional challenges such as physical immobility or poor mental health may further magnify barriers to engaging in treatment (Hale-Gallardo et al., 2020).

However, providers can implement strategies with rural populations to encourage engagement with services. Interacting with rural populations via digital means has proven to be successful. Telehealth and social media present two electronic options for

engaging clients. Telehealth has shown increased success over the years as it continues to leverage additional technological tools (e.g., health apps) that can augment virtual clinical visits (Hale-Gallardo et al., 2020). Social media engagement (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) is another tool that has shown promise in engaging a widespread audience. Evidence suggests that social media is an effective way to increase awareness of resources and escalate help-seeking behavior (Pederson et al., 2015).

Trainings and resources

Understanding how to communicate and empathize with the military community is important in delivering successful mental health interventions. The last 15 years have shown impressive efforts in the development of accessible tools and trainings for civilian service providers to use to develop a better understanding of how to interact with the military community (Meyer & Wynn, 2018). The following eight resources are free and accessible online.

Trainings

Military Culture: Core Competencies for Health Care Professionals Military Organization and Roles

This 2-hour module offers the provider information regarding how military culture may impact the treatment of Service members and veterans seeking healthcare. Continuing education credits (CEC) are offered.

- <https://www.train.org/vha/course/1056278/>

Military Culture: Enhancing Clinical Competence Course Description

This 2-hour training is designed for civilian mental health providers and offers a basic background of military culture information that may be relevant in the treatment of military individuals. Learning objectives of the training include the following:

- Identify the different parts of the United States military,
- Understand the unique characteristics of the military-connected population, and
- Recognize why a separate culture exists within the military.
- <https://deploymentpsych.org/Military-Culture-Enhancing-Competence-Course-Description>

Pennsylvania Department of Human Services: Military Cultural Competence Training

This is a free course offered by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. This course offers an introduction to providing services to military-connected families.

- <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/Services/Mental-Health-In-PA/Pages/Military-Cultural-Competence-Training.aspx>

Star Providers

Star Providers offers numerous trainings designed for civilian behavioral healthcare providers. These trainings cover many topics that are relevant to military culture, military connected healthcare and discusses treatments for military-connected populations.

- <https://starproviders.org/providers-home/>

Resources

Military OneSource: Service Providers and Leaders

Military OneSource is a Department of Defense one-stop site that provides information that relates to many aspects of military life. This resource is often the “go to” resource when there are questions about providing help to military-connected communities. The link provided will direct you to a hub of information and tools for service providers.

- <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/leaders-service-providers/>

National Association of Community Health Centers: Supporting our Centers

This site provides resources and information for healthcare centers that interact with the military-connected community. Service providers can access several webinars and publications regarding the treatment of military-connected populations by community healthcare centers. This site also offers participation in an online collaborative group called the National Association of Community Health Centers Veterans Interest Group. This group is an informal networking center for healthcare providers, and it offers a platform for providers to share their experiences regarding working with military populations and their challenges and successes.

- <https://www.nachc.org/health-center-issues/special-populations/veterans/>

RAND: Improving the Quality of Mental Health Care for Veterans

This briefing, provided by RAND Corporation, delivers a summarized meta-analysis of their prior reports on the quality of healthcare provided to the military-connected community. This resource offers a thorough overview of the present circumstances of veterans and healthcare. The report breaks down the two systems of healthcare for veterans, the VA and private/nonprofit sector, and provides examples of strengths and weaknesses of each.

- https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10087.html

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMSHA): Recorded Webinars

These webinars are part of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services' Service Members, Veterans, and their Families Technical Assistance Center (SMVF TA Center), and they cover a range of behavioral health topics that impact Service members, veterans, and their families. Webinars are delivered throughout the year and are available live and on-demand.

- <https://www.samhsa.gov/smvf-ta-center/resources/webinars>

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: Community Provider Toolkit

This toolkit was designed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) specifically for civilian healthcare professionals outside of the VA healthcare system. Topics include the following:

- How to talk to veterans about military service,
- How to work with veteran populations and sub populations (e.g., women veterans),
- How to support mental health and wellness in veterans, and
- How to navigate veteran benefits and services.
- <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders/#sthash.dnscVmh7.dpbs>.

Conclusion

Providing mental and behavioral healthcare to military-connected families can come with unique challenges. The military-connected community faces barriers to accessing services such as negative attitudes toward help-seeking behavior and their location of residence. Both factors may impact one's desire or ability to seek help. Removing or mitigating barriers to accessing treatment may increase the number of military-connected individuals who access services.

Identifying the mental health issues that are more prevalent in military communities, such as PTSD, can also help service providers be prepared as they treat this population. Understanding that someone who has served has an increased chance of developing PTSD will help providers diagnose and treat the individual and connect them with relevant resources.

In order to best serve and meaningfully engage with the military-connected population, service providers must have a level of understanding regarding this unique population and must be able to communicate effectively with them. At the base level, introductory trainings on military cultural competency will help service providers develop a mental

model of what types of ideas, morals, values, and experiences Service members and their families build their lives around. Having this understanding will give the service provider a better means with which to help identify and solve problems.

Tanielian et al. (2014) offers a few recommendations for civilian healthcare facilities to embrace, so they can better serve the military-connected population:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of cultural competency trainings to ensure they are effective at preparing staff to understand and communicate with the population.
- Ensure healthcare facilities offer an extensive number of trainings that convey evidence-based approaches for treating PTSD.

Additional Assistance

The TA specialists at the Clearinghouse provide support to professionals as they examine and make informed decisions about which programs fit specific situations and are worth the investment. Whether connecting one with the resources and tools to conduct a needs assessment in a specific community, suggesting the best evidence-based program or practice for a certain situation, or developing an evaluation plan, the TA team of experts is a call or email away.

Please visit the Clearinghouse's website at www.militaryfamilies.psu.edu or call 1-877-382-9185 to speak with a TA specialist.

Suggested Citation

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