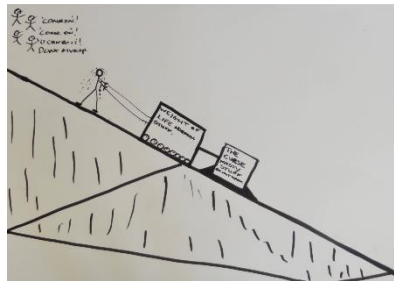


# Working with veterans Self-Help Guide

## SECTION 1: SUPPORTING ORGANISATIONS WORKING WITH VETERANS

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

A very warm welcome to this page. As a member of an organisation employing and/or supporting veterans, you'll appreciate the strengths and values they bring to your organisation, team or workplace.



This resource aims to equip you with a greater awareness of the key issues that impact veteran wellbeing and offer practical strategies to support you in your work alongside veterans.

As this resource is aimed at a wide readership, please pick the strategies that are possible and practical for your organisation.

The terms 'veteran colleague' and 'veteran participant' have been used to reflect this range of readership. Our hope here at Combat Stress is that you will find this a useful resource.

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## The strengths the veterans bring to the workplace

Veterans are an asset. The military experience will often enable veterans to thrive in their subsequent workplaces and they may be among the most well-equipped in a team to deal with pressure and crises. Depending on the nature of their service, former service personnel could be familiar with:

- Improvising under pressure and a strong ability to problem solve
- Having the ability to follow through on assignments even under difficult conditions.
- High sense of purpose, identity and pride
- Skilled at executing instructions methodically
- Can do attitude
- Ability to use humour and camaraderie to cope and maintain perspective
- Great team players
- Good at dealing with unprecedented challenge
- Sickness and absence record very low.



There are many more and these are all strengths that can be successfully drawn upon in the workplace.

## What might challenge veterans in the workplace?

Transitioning from the military to a civilian workforce might provide some initial challenges due to cultural and structural differences:

- **Mission and procedures:** veterans were taught to focus on a mission and to follow standard operating procedures or protocols to the letter. They may find it difficult if the 'mission' or protocols are unclear, or if others do not follow them appropriately.
- **Civilian culture and mission priority:** There is often a different sense of urgency within the civilian workplace. In the military, the tiniest of details can be the difference between life and death. Work is therefore conducted with life or death urgency with the mission, rather than personal needs, being the priority.
- **Roles and expectations:** The military functions like a machine, each cog in that machine with a defined role that determines the success of the whole. Veterans are therefore used to having clear roles and objectives and may struggle with ambiguity, or others not seeming to fulfil their roles and responsibilities

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- **Leadership and teamwork:** Veterans have high expectation of leadership and are used to being led by decisive leaders who have literally 'earned their stripes' and know their stuff. They more often than not have good leadership skills of their own too and are used to working within teams where they know each person 'has their back'.

## Potential difficulties veterans may have at work

While their specific strengths, skills and experience equip veterans to thrive within organisations, their values and very strong work-ethic could lead to some imbalance at work.



For example:

- Taking on extra tasks,
- Working longer hours
- Expecting unsustainably high-performance standards and precision from themselves and colleagues.

## Undiagnosed mental health difficulties

Thankfully, most veterans leave their service enriched by the experience, with a wide range of valuable skills to bring to their civilian life. However, a small but significant proportion of former-servicemen and women struggle with a range of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). You can find out more about each of these topics, and how veterans can cope with these problems, in our other self-help guides.

With all employees, mental health symptoms need to be identified as such before help can be sought, or treatment accessed. Symptoms such as low mood or sleep difficulties can persist for a long time before they reach a threshold that impacts on functioning. Veterans may be more used to functioning to a high level with very little sleep, and often work more when they are emotionally struggling, not less. You can play an important role by increasing your awareness of the signs of emotional distress and feeling confident to raise the topic (more information coming up).

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## Traumatic experiences both before and within services

Many former-military personnel have endured traumatic experiences as part of their service. Some will have witnessed multiple traumatic events. Many individuals can process and integrate these traumas over time, others require support to do so.

## Potential difficulties expressing/dealing with emotional distress

Veterans can understandably find it difficult to speak about their traumatic experiences and their mental health. Self-medication through use of alcohol or substances is common, particularly for those with undiagnosed PTSD. The military has historically had a culture that encourages emotions to be dealt with using alcohol to decompress and veterans may not have had the opportunities to deal with emotions in healthier ways.

## SECTION 2: STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT VETERANS

It will take ~5 minutes to work through Section Two

Supporting the psychological wellbeing of veterans.

### Reflect on what you know

If you are a member of an organisation employing veterans, you will already have a great deal of knowledge and familiarity with the veteran(s) in your workplace.

Some of you will already have veterans' networks within your structures and strong links to HR and Occupational Health, with access to mental health interventions that are veteran friendly.

As a result, you will have acquired a strong sense of the conditions which allow your veteran colleagues to thrive. Have confidence in this insight.



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Reflect on how you can support your veteran employees to do more of what they have found to be helpful and less of what is not, based on prior experiences. Here are some additional strategies to consider.

## Ask questions

Consider asking veterans entering your workplace the following questions

- What service did you serve within? (Army, Navy, Marines or Air Force)
- What was your job during your service?
- How do you feel working in a busy environment with lots of people around? (or a similar question relevant to your organisation).

## Create a healthy work environment

Guide your veteran employee to set up a healthy work environment. Depending on the nature of their role, assist him/her to aim for a well set-up work-station, with appropriate chair, desk of suitable height, keyboard mouse and monitor if they are using a laptop.

It might also be useful to have a discussion regarding other environmental factors.

It will be useful to get input from the employee about where they might feel more comfortable in the work environment – e.g.

- Arranging for someone who might find the distractions of an open-plan office detracting from their work performance to have a desk in a quiet corner.
- Moving a person's workstation so that they are not placed in busy areas or with their back to the door.
- Provide a quiet space for breaks away from the main workspace.
- Some employees might also find hotdesking difficult and need an area where they can add personal items that helps with attention and focus e.g. pictures, water bottle and a chair that allows movement.



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## **SECTION 3: WHAT TO DO IF A VETERAN IS STRUGGLING**

It will take ~5 minutes to work through Section Two

How to recognise if a veteran might be struggling and what you can do to better support them in the workplace.

### **Be alert for signs a veteran might be struggling**

The following are some of the signs or changes you may notice in the workplace that may indicate your veteran colleague is struggling emotionally:

- **Appearing to zone out during conversations**
- **Change of appearance.**
- **Being forgetful**
- **Starting late or leaving early regularly.**
- **Habitual poor time keeping or being absent more often**
- **Isolation or seeming more withdrawn than usual**
- **Boredom**
- **Finding fault**
- **Becoming more indecisive**
- **Difficulty concentrating**
- **Pacing and restlessness**
- **Generally being less productive**
- **Working excessively long hours**
- **Irritability, impatience or outbursts of anger**
- **Reports lethargy/fatigue or trouble relaxing or sleeping**
- **Greater self-criticism or a sense of hopelessness**
- **Showing signs of excessive drinking (e.g. smelling of alcohol on arrival at work)**

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## Questions to consider asking

If you're concerned about a veteran, here are some questions you could ask them

- Do you notice yourself feeling more on edge and easily irritable?
- Are there events which you repeatedly think about, even when you don't want to?
- Do you ever have trouble sleeping?



## Normalise emotional reactions

### Provide reassurance and empathy

If your veteran colleague/participant is showing any of these or other signs that cause you concern, aim to have an open conversation.

Recognise and acknowledge stressors and dispel feelings of failure, shame or blame. Reassure and normalise that the experience and expression of different emotions is a healthy response when feeling overwhelmed. Here are some suggestions of phrases you can use/adapt to convey these qualities:







- Talk openly: "I've noticed xyz and I'm a little worried..."
- Empathise: "What you're going through sounds really tough, thank you for sharing this with me"
- Offer your help and support: "How can I/we best support you? What needs to happen for you to feel more at ease? What has helped you in the past?"
- Reassure: "I'm here to support you, we'll find a way through together"
- Discuss the advantages of seeking extra support to promote mental fitness (see section below for further details)
- Consider and check in regarding confidentiality of information shared and organisational needs regarding employee wellbeing and record keeping

## Tips for specific challenges

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## Strategies to help you support a veteran with specific challenges in the workplace

	<h3>Lack of concentration</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider ways you can reduce distractions in the work environment.</li> <li>• Increase natural lighting or increase full spectrum lighting</li> </ul>
	<h3>Memory problems</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide written instructions and written minutes of each meeting</li> <li>• Follow up each verbal instruction with an email confirming the task</li> </ul>
	<h3>Panic, Anxiety or Flashbacks</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help your veteran colleague to identify and remove environmental triggers such as particular noises or smells.</li> <li>• Allow the employee to take a break and go to a place where s/he feels comfortable to use coping skills/relaxation techniques or contact a support person</li> </ul>
	<h3>Feeling stressed or overwhelmed</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign a mentor, manager or supervisor to answer questions</li> <li>• Consider pairing up with a buddy for informal peer support</li> <li>• Allow time off for therapy appointments</li> </ul>

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## **How we can support veterans**

**Combat Stress has developed an extensive library of online self-help resources for veterans to offer specific support for many mental health and wellbeing issues. Please do signpost veterans to the Combat Stress website to access these 24/7.**

**Our helpline is also available, free of charge, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on 0800 138 1619. Our helpline team is there for veterans, currently serving military, and their families.**

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## **SECTION 4: THANK YOU FOR YOUR COMMITMENT TO SUPPORTING VETERANS**

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Four

Thank you for supporting veterans in your workplace

Thank you for your commitment to supporting the veterans in your organisation. Our hope is that you have found this resource helpful.

If you are interested in receiving further education on this topic, you may wish to explore the Combat Stress training course: 'Training for Organisations to Improve Veterans' Wellbeing'. If that is of interest, please do contact Dr Jen Bateman, Lead Clinical Psychologist at [Jen.Bateman@combatstress.org.uk](mailto:Jen.Bateman@combatstress.org.uk) for further information.

Thank you for taking the time to read this resource. Wishing you well as you work alongside veterans in your organisation.

### **What to do next?**

#### **Signposting veterans to mental health support services**

If you have concerns about your veteran colleague/participants' emotional wellbeing, encourage him or her to speak to their GP and seek a referral for appropriate psychological support.

Veterans can self-refer to Combat Stress services and access 24/7 support via the Combat Stress Helpline: 0800 138 1619 / text 07537 404719 / email [helpline@combatstress.org.uk](mailto:helpline@combatstress.org.uk)

If your veteran colleague/participant tells you they have had thoughts of harming themselves, do accompany them to their GP so their mental health can be assessed by a health professional. Accessing help via NHS 111 online or via phone. Call 999 if they are in immediate risk to themselves or others.

Combat Stress has developed an extensive library of online mental health resources to support veterans. Please do signpost your colleagues to the Combat Stress website:

[www.combatstress.org.uk/](http://www.combatstress.org.uk/)

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## **You've completed the Support for Organisations guide. Well done!**

We hope you've found this resource to be helpful.

Thank you.

### **Urgent help**

If you require more urgent help, either yourself or a member of your family feel unsafe, please contact your GP or telephone 111.

This information was publishing on 30 October 2020.

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