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**ARMED FORCES VETERANS
AND MENTAL HEALTH**



People who join the armed forces are making a great sacrifice for their country. Unfortunately, this sacrifice does not protect them from problems associated with mental health.

Rates of mental disorders seen in military healthcare services have fallen since 2019/20 (Ministry of Defence, 2021). This could be attributable to lockdown restrictions reducing pressures from military personnel life, although greater awareness and treatment options may also affect this statistic.

Levels of PTSD in the military are actually lower than one may expect, as this only affects 1 in 1000 military personnel (Ministry of Defence, 2021).

There may be disparities and inaccuracies between military mental health statistics among different countries. Unfortunately, there are a number of factors explaining why accurate statistics are not always available. For example, militaries worldwide have their own culture and weakness is seen to be a poor trait in a soldier, therefore those who incorrectly interpret mental health as a weakness are unlikely to come forward to report their suffering. This then results in statistics that are under representative of the true problem. Another cause of unrealistic statistics is military policy in regard to substance abuse. For example, the US Army has a zero tolerance policy for illicit drug use and so sufferers are unlikely to report their problem and usage in fear of dishonourable discharge. Perceptions and the stigmatization of mental health in the military can negatively impact help-seeking, particularly for those with PTSD (Williamson, Greenberg, & Stevelink, 2019).

- 1 in 10 (10.5%) UK armed forces personnel were seen by military healthcare services for a mental health related reason in 2020/21 (Ministry of Defence, 2021).
- 1 in 50 (2%) of personnel in the UK armed forces were seen by a specialist mental health clinician in 2020/2021 (Ministry of Defence, 2021).
- PTSD affects approximately 1 in 1000 personnel in the UK armed forces (Ministry of Defence, 2021).

Regardless of the statistics, what we do know is that those in the armed forces can be susceptible to mental health problems. We also know that mental health problems are largely treatable and manageable and those who feel like they are suffering should not be ashamed to seek help. This short leaflet is designed to outline some commonly occurring problems and causes of mental health problems in service personnel, as well as suggesting the first steps to take on the road to recovery.

Commonly occurring conditions

Those who serve in the armed forces can be affected by all the same mental health problems as those in civilian life. However, due to the experiences of life in the armed forces they may be more susceptible to a number of specific conditions. Below are four conditions that are often associated with the armed forces.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – PTSD is a disorder resulting from a traumatic experience. PTSD causes the sufferer to re-live the event through nightmares and flashbacks. In some cases, there are triggers, such as a certain location, that will exacerbate symptoms. The onset of PTSD will not always occur immediately and may in fact take a number of years before becoming apparent. It is important to remember that having upsetting thoughts after a traumatic event is normal, but when these persist and interfere with a person's day to day life and sleep then it may warrant a diagnosis of PTSD.

Depression – Often confused with the idea of being sad at any given time, depression involves having a depressed mood, or feelings of sadness, for weeks or months at a time. Depression is a debilitating condition that has a wide range of symptoms, including feelings of hopelessness and constant fatigue.

Depression can greatly impact a person's quality of life and can cause a person to become completely unable to function.

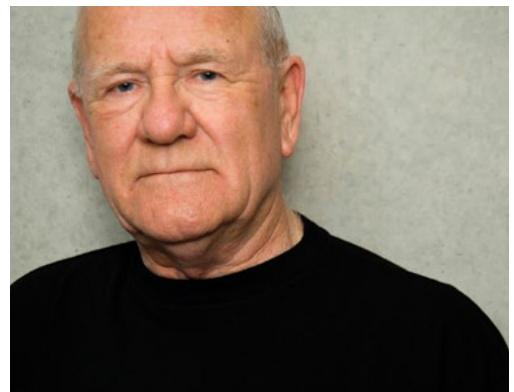
Substance Abuse – Substance abuse includes a dependence on alcohol and drugs, both legal and otherwise. Whilst some veterans may have the

occasional drink or smoke, those with a substance abuse disorder are using substances to a harmful level. In many cases this can lead to dependence and the subsequent withdrawal symptoms when substances are not available. Unfortunately, not only do the substances themselves pose a risk to users, but the desire to obtain more drugs can lead people to partake in illegal activities.

Adjustment Disorders – An adjustment disorder results from a person being unable to adapt to a change in their life or lifestyle for a considerable amount of time. It is normal to take a few weeks or months to adjust, but if after a few months a person is still struggling then an adjustment disorder may be present.

Adjustment disorders can cause people to be self-destructive and to have low moods. This can then unfortunately lead to other conditions such as depression.

Eating Disorders – It is common for military veterans to suffer from eating disorders, particularly for those who have been exposed to abuse during their service in the armed forces. An eating disorder is any persistent set of behaviours which creates disturbances surrounding one's perception of food and eating habits. Some common examples of these disorders in veterans includes bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder.



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Why do some soldiers develop mental illness?

There are numerous reasons why a soldier or veteran may develop a mental health problem. Whilst these situations are often unique to the individual, there are some regularly occurring themes in the causation of mental illness. This short selection is by no means exclusive, nor does it mean that if somebody has experienced any of the below that they will definitely experience poor mental health. Instead, this section is designed to highlight some experiences and risk factors that may contribute to the development of mental health problems.

War Zone Experiences – This is likely to be the first thought that people have when considering the causation of veteran mental health problems. War zones are not pleasant locations and as such, many combatants are likely to experience or witness traumatic events, as well as high stress situations. They may also be in positions where they are required to take the life of another human being. This can all accumulate and cause potential mental health problems when returning to civilian life.

Physical Injury – With the dangers of war it is unfortunately unsurprising that a number of veterans are injured in the line of duty. Physical injuries can then impact the quality of life that a person was previously used to. They can also cause ongoing pain and may require treatment and medication going forward. Unfortunately, this can lead to conditions such as depression.

Transitioning to Civilian Life – You may think that leaving the armed forces is immediately a positive experience for people who have served. After all, it means they will no longer have to be subjected to the conditions of war. However, for many this transition can be an extremely difficult time. The armed forces have their own culture compared to civilian life and transitioning can be extremely difficult. A veteran will go from a highly structured and focused day to day life, to one that is a lot more changeable. This can be a very confusing time and can lead people to a number of conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Loss of Identity – When a person has been in the armed forces for an extended period of time they are likely to greatly identify as a soldier. When their time in the armed forces comes to an end they may find that they struggle to find their own identity. This can lead to periods of confusion and depression.

Survivors Guilt and Bereavement – Fatalities are an unfortunate result of armed conflict and the loss of a co-worker in the battlefield is likely to cause a mixed array of emotions and grief. This is compounded by the fact that the closeness of these relationships are often akin to a brotherhood or family. Not only do these fatalities cause the expected reactions of grief and loss, but they can also be accompanied by survivor's guilt, as veterans may believe that they should have been the one to be doing a certain role when the fatality occurred.

Family and Marital Problems – As much as people want to be supportive of their loved ones in the armed forces, enlistment can cause immense strain on relationships. Long term deployments and the stress of the job can create barriers in relationships. This may be further compounded if family or loved ones are not themselves members of the armed forces, as this can make understanding the experiences of veterans or serving personnel more difficult. In some cases, this unfortunately leads to a breakdown in family communication and divorce, which in turn can lead to a number of problems such as depression.

Suicide in veterans

Unfortunately, suicide amongst veterans and active service personnel is a problem that needs to be addressed. Due to a number of factors impacting on service personnel across the globe, a number do, unfortunately, turn to suicide. Statistics regarding exactly how many veterans turn to suicide, worldwide, vary dramatically and are not readily available. In fact, in the UK it is agreed that there is currently not enough information regarding veteran suicides for accurate analysis. Where statistics are available, the outline is extremely negative. Japan's self-defence force have a higher suicide rate than their civilian counterparts. The Australians have found that, if they include veteran suicide figures when looking at the recent conflict in Afghanistan, it triples the combat death toll! The United States of America is also suffering with a suicide problem amongst its veterans. Recent campaigns have claimed that there were 22 veteran suicides a day in 2010. There has been some debate over the collection of this data, but there is agreement that there is at least one suicide every day in the veteran community. A more surprising finding is that suicides tended to be higher in those veterans who were not deployed.

Clearly, there is a suicide problem worldwide amongst veterans and this needs to be addressed. With increasing mental health support being made available there is hope that suicide rates will decrease over the coming years. If you or somebody you know is contemplating suicide, then please do contact your local health care professionals or emergency health providers immediately to get the help you need.

What to do if you are a veteran who is suffering

It is important to remember that it is not a sign of weakness to ask for help. In fact, it takes a lot of confidence to admit when you need help with your mental health. If you do feel you are suffering, then it is important to ask for help as soon as possible.

If you are currently serving in the armed forces, then you may know of a specific person to approach to discuss your options. This may be a superior officer or a medical officer. The rules of confidentiality differ to those found in civilian life and information may need to be shared with other military personnel, depending



on your current role. Whilst this may not be ideal we do encourage you to take the first steps towards asking for help as soon as possible; the quicker you seek help, the quicker you can make a full recovery. Many branches of the military around the world now have their own mental health providers to assist you, with many of these people being trained specifically to deal with the problems that arise from military service. If your military branch does not have their own medical staff, then they will likely have arrangements with external companies to assist you in the best way possible.

If you are no longer an active service member, then you may have a slightly different approach to seeking treatment. Militaries around the globe differ on the services provided, but thankfully, a large number of branches are now introducing specialist services to continue looking after veterans' mental health once they have left the service. Some countries will be able to provide specific care programs, whilst others have full hospital grounds dedicated to veterans. If you know your

armed forces offers this service, then you should contact your military medical office as soon as possible.

If your country does not offer any specialist services for veterans, then we advise you to contact your regular health care provider now so they can start the treatment process for you through civilian services.

What to do if you know a veteran who is suffering

If you believe you know a veteran who is suffering, then the most important thing you can do is to be supportive. Feeling you may be unwell can be a very isolating experience and so having a solid support network will be a crucial part of helping a veteran recover. Whilst it may be a difficult subject to discuss, talking about your concerns with the veteran can let them know that somebody cares and wants to help them through these difficult times. It may be that they are happy to discuss their current situation with you, but if they do not want to go into details then you must be careful to respect their wishes. You can still let them know you are there to support them on their journey, without knowing all the details.

In many cases professional help may be required. In these situations, you can still be of great support both in the locating of suitable professionals and throughout the treatment process. Unfortunately, sometimes symptoms deteriorate, or can lead to aggression and, as much as you want to help, you need to respect your own boundaries. If you are not comfortable with some topics or behaviours then do not feel guilty referring these lines of conversation to a more professional setting.

Unfortunately, there may be situations where the veteran is a danger to themselves or others, and in these situations you will need to involve professionals for the safety of everyone involved. Whilst some people feel guilty doing this, and some veterans will react in a negative way, please remember that you are doing this because you care. You are only trying to keep the person safe. After the initial hurt, many people will come to realise this and will appreciate the action you had to take.

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**If you would like more tips about living with
mental illness then please visit our website:
www.shawmind.org**



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