The Influence of Psychosocial Factors in Veteran Adjustment to Civilian Life

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Why is it that most veterans have a successful transition to civilian life after leaving the Armed Forces, but that others struggle to adjust to the demands and challenges of civilian life?

This study explored whether a variety of psychosocial factors (stigma, likelihood of seeking help, attitude towards help-seeking and emotion regulation) predict veteran adjustment difficulties to civilian life in Scotland, UK.

TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Transitioning to civilian life involves leaving behind a job, home, community and way of life that is very different to the civilian world. The civilian world can feel unfamiliar, unsafe and unpredictable (Scottish Government, 2015). Some Service Leavers struggle to reintegrate and experience serious difficulties. So why is this?

CAN VETERAN ADJUSTMENT DIFFICULTIES BE UNDERSTOOD IN TERMS OF UNHELPFUL EMOTION REGULATION STRATEGIES?

- Various psychosocial factors have been associated with veteran adjustment.
- It has been suggested that the inability to express and regulate emotions appropriately may also be linked to veteran transition (Adler et al., 2011).
- Emotion regulation = strategies used to cope with unwanted thoughts or emotions.
- However, the relationship between emotional regulation and veteran transition has not yet been researched.
- A systematic review on emotion regulation and veteran mental health found that some emotion regulation strategies were associated with particular mental health conditions (Bowes, 2017).
- Reappraisal was found to be related to a reduction in veteran PTSD symptoms; and suppression and experiential avoidance were related to an increase in veteran PTSD, depression, and anxiety symptoms.

EMOTION REGULATION STRATEGIES THAT VETERANS MIGHT USE

COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL - generating positive or non-threatening interpretations of a stressful situation, so as to change the emotional response and reduce distress (Gross, 1998). Reappraising may reduce the veteran's sense of current threat and therefore have a positive influence on their mental health, quality of life and transition.

SUPPRESSION - "bottling up" unwanted emotions can lead to worse interpersonal functioning and reduced well-being (Gross & John, 2003). When deployed, suppressing emotional responses may be an appropriate way to manage emotions in a dangerous, life-threatening situation. However, once home, learning to recognise and appropriately express such emotions in the civilian world may be difficult and make adjustment challenging (Adler et al., 2011).

EXPERIENTIAL AVOIDANCE - unwilling or unable to remain in contact with difficult or uncomfortable internal experiences (such as unwanted thoughts, memories, emotions and physical sensations), and efforts are made to avoid, alter, or escape from those experiences (Hayes et al., 1996). Experiential avoidance may be adaptive in the aftermath of a trauma (e.g., in a combat situation); but can interfere with the process of trauma recovery.

METHOD: 154 veterans across Scotland completed a set of questionnaires which measured veteran adjustment difficulty, quality of life, mental health, stigma, self-stigma, attitude towards help-seeking, likelihood of help-seeking, experiential avoidance, reappraisal and suppression.

RESULTS: WHICH OF THESE FACTORS PREDICTS A POOR ADJUSTMENT TO CIVILIAN LIFE?

- Veteran adjustment difficulty and quality of life were significantly correlated to a number of psychosocial factors.
- Mental health, experiential avoidance and cognitive reappraisal were found to be predictors of veteran adjustment difficulty.
- Experiential avoidance and cognitive reappraisal partially mediated the relationship between mental health and veteran adjustment, with experiential avoidance being the stronger mediator (see Figure 1).

CONCLUSIONS:

- There are clear links between veterans' mental health, the way veterans regulate their emotions and the degree to which they adjust to civilian life.
- Our results suggest that it is the way veterans react to their mental health problems (experientially avoiding or reappraising them), that has the greatest impact on how well they adjust to the challenges and demands of transitioning from military to civilian life.
- Whilst strategies such as experimental avoidance may have been helpful in a combat environment, these results show that as a civilian with mental health problems, being able to reappraise and accept (rather than avoid) difficult situations, thoughts and feelings, is likely to be more adaptive and contribute to a better transition.

KEY MESSAGES:

- Veterans who have mental health problems and who are unwilling or unable to remain in contact with difficult thoughts, memories or emotions, and who try to avoid or change these experiences (i.e. experiential avoidance) are likely to have a difficult transition.
- Veterans who try to change aversive events by changing the way they evaluate them (i.e. reappraisal) as a way of regulating (such as seeking help or suppression), may improve the support provided for veterans, in terms of education, training, and psychological treatment. E.g. Early assessment of experiential avoidance and cognitive reappraisal and the provision of relevant emotion regulation skills-training could potentially reduce the veteran's need for more complex (and costly) psychological interventions in the future.