

Research Brief

Challenges and Opportunities of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans with Disabilities Transitioning into Learning and Workplace Environments

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Research Highlights:

- PTSD and neurological disorders such as TBI are among the most frequent military service-related disabilities, and have been referred to as the signature wounds of OEF/OIF veterans. Veterans with PTSD or TBI may face unique difficulties transitioning into civilian employment or academic environments. The symptoms of PTSD and TBI are difficult to manage and are often misunderstood by the general population.
- Veteran friendly campuses and student veteran organizations can ease the transition to academic life for veterans with disabilities. Veteran friendly campuses include those that provide on-campus service offices, orientation programs and intramural sports programs for veterans.
- PTSD/TBI symptoms that interfere with work place performance can be alleviated by providing reasonable accommodation. Providing a low-noise environment, frequent rest breaks, peer or group mentoring, flexible schedules with reminders and tape recorders to use as memory aids allow for an optimal work environment. The Department of Labor provides institutions with online training, guidelines and brochures with tips on accommodation for disabled individuals.

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Abstract:

“As American communities welcome home U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, it is important to understand the unique set of circumstances for military personnel who served in these Middle Eastern regions. Differences in deployment, the type of injuries sustained and the mixture of personnel continue to affect transitions from military service and reintegration into civilian life.”

Implications

For Practice

In academic environments, veterans tend to report issues related to connecting with peers, limited access to services and difficulty keeping up with academic demands. Learning organizations can leverage this comfort level and address these issues by creating veteran-friendly campuses with policies to address the specific needs of veteran students. Some campuses have implemented programs allowing veterans to remain enrolled despite delayed government tuition payments, which would otherwise interrupt their educational process. Veteran friendly campuses have also found success by providing on-campus veteran offices, disabled veterans accessibility services, orientation and intramural sports programs. Classrooms that are crowded or noisy can contribute to issues with concentration in veterans with TBI or PTSD. Accommodations and working with veterans in honoring requests to leave the classroom periodically, and additional test taking time help reduce anxiety and improve performance. Symptoms of PTSD and other chronic illnesses fluctuate, therefore, levels of assistance and employer accommodations may need to be adjusted over time. Employers and educators could benefit from developing their knowledge of possible resources for veterans and other employees with disabilities. General recommendations for veterans include flexible scheduling, low noise environments, and peer or group mentoring that focuses on achieving the goals of both the employer and employee. Veterans with PTSD and TBI may also benefit from scheduling more difficult tasks earlier in the workday, limit multitasking and using tape recorders or task lists to compensate for cognitive difficulties. High unemployment and classroom dropout rates amongst veterans warrants referral to the Veteran Benefits Administration vocational rehabilitation specialist who can explain the employment and educational benefits, post-9/11 GI Bill time restrictions and other services available to veterans with disabilities.

For Policy

Policy makers in educational, work and government agencies can undertake similar approaches to address the needs of veterans with disabilities transitioning to academic and employment environments. In addition, federal, state and local agencies working together and coordinating the services they provide to veterans with disabilities can be helpful. Policy makers should work with veterans and advocacy organizations to ensure that policies intended to provide veterans with benefits do not become barriers to education or employment success.

For Future Research

As female troops now make up a much larger proportion of the U.S. military, researchers should examine transitions to civilian life for disabled female veterans. Future research should focus on gender specific outcomes for veterans readjusting to civilian life, including both employment and education outcomes. Additional stressors that effect the educational and employment success of the families of veterans have not been examined specifically. Additionally, consistent research methodologies can assist in accurate outcome measurements amongst all disabled veterans with a PTSD or TBI diagnosis. Comprehensive understanding of the effects of multiple deployments is complex and the stigma associated with a mental disability, such as TBI or PTSD, further challenge researchers in providing a direction to changes necessary for a better transition.

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