



When Veterans Return: The Role of Community in Reintegration

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Through qualitative analysis, this study examines the shared experiences and challenges that active duty service members and military veterans face upon their return to civilian life. Findings show that many veterans desire a formal transitional period from military to civilian life to help them readjust.
- The author assessed the three phases of assimilating into military culture: separation, liminality (or transition) and incorporation. The three phases of assimilating into military culture can lead returning service members to experience great difficulty readjusting to civilian life. Separation from service, the need to adapt to new societal norms, the removal of rigid rank structure, and integration into interpersonal relationships based more on equality (and therefore the introduction of ambiguity), can cause many service members great difficulty finding comfort outside of the military upon their return home. Some service members and veterans reported resorting to isolated lifestyles or using substances, such as alcohol, to cope with the difficulty of transitioning.
- Active service members and veterans found meaning and mutual understanding from telling stories and sharing their narratives. By building a coherent narrative of their experiences, some service members had an easier transition to civilian life because it diffused potential future identity crises.

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ABSTRACT:

“Experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans were explored to understand the challenges of reintegrating into civilian life and the impact on mental health. Respondents completed preliminary electronic surveys and participated in one of six focus groups. High levels of distress exist among veterans who are caught between military and civilian cultures, feeling alienated from family and military, and experiencing a crisis of identity. Narrative is identified as a means of resolution. Recommendations include development of social support and transition groups; military cultural competence training for clinicians, social workers, and college counselors; and further research to identify paths to successful reintegration into society.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Service members and veterans voiced a desire to have a transitional period to facilitate their return home. These transitional periods could be informally arranged to bring together military service members to discuss their experiences while integrating non-military participation. Non-military support networks should seek to educate themselves about the service member's experiences while re-establishing and strengthening connections that were present prior to service. Additionally, service members should join peer mentor or support groups with other veterans who had similar experiences and feelings about their reintegration into civilian life. Veterans who are experiencing difficulty transitioning to civilian life should also seek out support groups that focus specifically on storytelling in order to build their coherent narrative, thereby avoiding the gaps in their personal stories that have sometimes led to a crisis in identity for other service members experiencing the same tensions. Families and friends of returning service members and veterans should learn about the experiences of the service member in order to better accommodate the unique needs and assistance each desires. Local communities could also offer support for the transition by working with local mental health professionals to understand the sort of challenges many veterans and service members in their community may be facing.

FOR POLICY

The Veterans Health Administration and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs may consider expanding access and information about programs specifically designed to help ease the reintegration process for returning service members and veterans such as local Vet Centers. This could be done by geographically expanding the programs to serve veterans and returned service members residing in rural areas that may not have as many resources available as urban and metropolitan centers. Additionally, online resources such as inTransition, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense, and MakeTheConnection.Net, sponsored by the VA, may provide some assistance to transition in situations where physical access to services is difficult or unavailable. The VHA and the VA may also find it beneficial to provide military cultural competence training for their mental health practitioners, helping mental health practitioners better address the unique reintegration challenges faced by veterans returning home. Policy makers might work with VA administrators to create a comprehensive transitional program for service members who are leaving the military in order to facilitate a smooth re-entry into civilian life.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should further assess the impact of traumatic events and the role of mental health disorders in shaping or creating identity. Further exploration of the links between identity, culture, mental health and reintegration issues could be also beneficial to better understand the difficulty of transitioning from military to civilian life. The research should also focus on the amount of time elapsed from each participant's return from combat and their participation in the study. Analyzing the different problems faced by active service members compared to those of veterans could also provide helpful information. Additionally, future research should assess the impact of transition and readjustment depending on the varied number of deployments of participants. Future studies should also include women and highlight how service members' experiences vary by military branch. Findings on reintegration may also be strengthened by assessing reintegration issues of returned service members from conflicts occurring prior to the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Future researchers should gather longitudinal data to examine how different generations of veterans resolve the challenges of reintegration over extended periods of time.

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