



## Stigma in the Military

**Service members are often worried about stigma when they need to seek help for mental and physical deployment injuries.** Service members are frequently concerned that going for treatment or getting labeled with a specific condition will lead to loss of security clearance, demotion, medical discharge, disrespect among unit members, disappointment from CO's, etc. This fear can keep service members (and sometimes their families) from seeking needed help.



One of the most common myths is that seeking support will somehow render someone as 'unfit for duty' or hamper one's eligibility for promotion. However, top brass report that negative career consequences for seeking mental health services are fairly *uncommon* in reality. A recent study showed that of the service members who self-

referred for mental health treatment, only three percent had a negative career impact. In comparison, 39 percent of service members who were referred by their commanders had a negative career impact. <sup>1</sup>Colonel Scott Marrs, Ph.D., Chief of the Air Force's mental health division said: "Seeking mental health care doesn't harm your career. It's not being able to do your job because of personal issues that can harm your career."

And while many service members worry that their security clearance will be revoked if they see a behavioral health professional, the truth is that less than one percent of those investigated for clearances are rejected solely on the basis of their mental health profiles<sup>2</sup>. In fact, in May 2008, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates announced that the Department of Defense had revised "the infamous question 21" on its security clearance questionnaire. Now, people who seek help for combat-related issues or who receive marital counseling don't have to answer "yes" when asked if they have ever "consulted with a health care professional regarding an emotional or mental health condition."

<sup>1</sup>*Military Medicine*, 171 (11).

<sup>2</sup>Pentagon; Army Times, May 2008.



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### The Consequences of Stigma

Dealing with adjustment challenges after deployment is hard enough. Stigma adds another layer of difficulty for returning service members. Misperceptions and prejudices can lead to problems getting or keeping jobs and housing, among other things.

Because service members might be stigmatized based on their deployment injuries, the possible negative consequences might include:

- The fear of being stigmatized or rejected keeps many service members from talking to friends and family about their problems. This leads to isolation, loneliness, and shame. Plus, social support is extremely important when coping with deployment stresses; thus, service members would miss out on this important healing factor.
- Service members who need treatment or counseling refuse to go get it because they are afraid of possible consequences for their careers, which can lead to years of avoidable suffering and negative outcomes.
- Families of struggling returning veterans do not seek help for problems at home because they don't want to cast doubt on the service member's fitness for duty. Meanwhile, home life can become much more challenging than during the deployment.
- While maintaining the "secret" of the returning member's difficulties, relationship problems can emerge between the service member and family or friends.
- Instead of asking for help, service members with post-deployment challenges start giving up on personal goals that now seem out of reach. Friends, family, colleagues, and even the service members themselves can become disappointed and angry with the changes.
- Even with the best efforts to mask problems, work can suffer and struggling service members can be "found out" by command or by colleagues. This often leads to worse outcomes than when people self-refer for face-to-face care.



When fear of stigma interferes with seeking help, it can cause serious problems. Studies show that recent returnees are at an increased risk for suicide. Out of 100,000 service members from all branches, between 11 and 20 committed suicide in 2008 (the exact estimate depends on the branch)<sup>3</sup>. These numbers are significantly higher than the civilian population and there is reason to believe that many deaths could be avoided if service members felt comfortable asking for help.

<sup>3</sup>Cook, F. (2009). Culture of Stigma is a Key Cause of Military, Veteran Suicides. *Suicide Prevention News and Comment*.



### Choose to Combat Stigma

The evidence is clear – **BE PROACTIVE**, take control and seek out face-to-face support.

Many service members have ideas about what post-deployment problems look like, who gets them, who goes in for help, and what counseling is like. Some of these ideas are not completely accurate and unfortunately, can keep service members from seeking needed help.

One of the best ways to overcome stigma is to get input from someone you know and respect. First, is there anyone you know who has received counseling? If so, you may want to ask them about their experiences and how they decided to go for face-to-face care. You may find that you are not alone in experiencing adjustment challenges after deployment. Second, even if you do not know anyone who has gone for counseling, challenge yourself to speak with at least one person that you trust about the difficulties you have been having. They may be able to assist with weighing out the pros and cons of seeking professional care.



**Help is available to you.** You have bravely served and sacrificed for your country and it is your right to receive care and support. It is in your best interest, and the interest of your family, friends, and mission for you to get the help you need. A safe and effective force is strong and mentally healthy. There is courage in asking for help, strength in learning to manage struggles, and pride in moving on from challenges.

**Help is available for others.** If a friend is struggling, suggest that they seek face-to-face care<sup>4</sup>. Even if you have never received treatment yourself, you can be open and supportive in giving your fellow service members an opportunity to talk. Be a comrade: look out for signs that others are struggling and use your knowledge of stigma to understand why they may not seek help even if it is needed. Do what you can to help others get past stigma in order to overcome the post-deployment challenges.

<sup>4</sup>Vogel, D. L., Wade, N. G., Wester, S. R., Larson, L., & Hackler, A. H. (2007). Seeking help from a mental health professional: The influence of one's social network. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 63(3), 233-245.