

# The Impact of PTSD on Veterans Job Placement and Retention

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**Abstract:** My uncle, who works closely with veterans, often tells me about the incredible sacrifices that American soldiers have made. Many of his patients have lost limbs and their closest friends in combat, which often leads to severe mental disorders such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Moved by his stories, I felt compelled to learn more about their conditions. To my dismay, a majority of veterans struggle to secure employment due to the psychological effects of war. Symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts in regard to the traumatic event. Civilians are sometimes unaware of the hostile environment of war zones that our soldiers have endured. Deadly mines, RPGs, gunshots, and death have haunted hundreds of thousands of veterans. To make matters worse, less than half of veterans fail to report symptoms due to the stigma of psychotherapy. Soldiers are trained to withhold emotions and to be aggressive on the field. Such absolutistic thinking discourages expression of one's feelings since emotions are deemed as a weakness in the military. Alternatively, soldiers express themselves through anger and hostility which makes them vulnerable to substance abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation. Through a literature review of both quantitative and qualitative data, researchers have concluded that soldiers have difficulty obtaining employment without effective job placement and transitional work experience programs in place. In that process, it is pertinent to provide mental health programs to veterans suffering from PTSD. In order to successfully transition into the workplace, veterans must understand how to express their feelings in a healthy way. Teaching emotions will help veterans develop emotional intelligence incorporating various scenarios that may arise in a work setting. By learning crucial interpersonal skills, veterans can learn to rise above an increasingly discriminatory hiring process. However, there is hope for veterans, as more and more businesses commit to hiring veterans in the years to come.

**Keywords:** (PTSD), veterans suffering, Job Placement, Retention, Soldiers.

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Veterans return home to detrimental social, economical, and medical conditions who often end up in homeless shelters or halfway homes. Soldiers risk their lives to protect Americans but receive minimal assistance when transitioning back home. Civilians are unaware of the hostile environment of war zones that our soldiers have endured. Deadly mines, RPGs, gunshots, and death have haunted hundreds of thousands of veterans who now struggle from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental health condition triggered by terrifying events in one's past. Symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts regarding the traumatic event. Once veterans return home, soldiers are unable to obtain employment for various factors including PTSD and discrimination in the workplace. This paper aims to analyze the current status of job placement programs for veterans struggling with PTSD.

The US Department of Veterans Affairs have determined that 31 percent of Vietnam War veterans suffer from PTSD. Approximately 10 percent of Gulf War veterans and 11 percent of Afghanistan veterans also struggle with the disorder (Fragedakis and Toriello 481). Less than half of veterans report symptoms even though they suffer from PTSD. This is because in combat, soldiers are trained to withhold emotions and to be aggressive on the field. Such absolutistic way of thinking discourages expression of one's feelings since emotions are deemed as a weakness in the military. Alternatively, soldiers express themselves through anger and hostility which makes them vulnerable to many mental disorders such as substance abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation in addition to PTSD (Fragedakis and Toriello 483). Hence, many veterans do not seek treatment nor acknowledge their mental condition for fear of the negative stigma.

As a result, job placement becomes an increasing challenge when veterans do not seek the proper help they need to help themselves. However, the issue of job attainment goes beyond a mental illness. The strict and rigid training soldiers have received during military training affects his or her transition into civilian life. Veterans have always been in an extremely close team environment where soldiers are willing to risk their lives for another. After veterans retire, they are suddenly left as individuals who must bear the burden of their lives on their own. When veterans are “no longer in a team environment,” they “view themselves deficient” as well as “mentally deficient” (Wright 37). Hence, veterans can have an identity crisis with two different personas: civilian and veteran (Wright 40). Outside of combat, veterans are confused about their role - whether to be the protector of our country or a busy working citizen. As such, an identity crisis combined with symptoms of PTSD can be overwhelming for any retired soldier. The heavy mental strain can have a significant influence on their job performance once in the real world. Without proper training and treatment, veterans will become more vulnerable to unemployment.

In regards to PTSD, there exists varying degrees. In less severe cases, an antidepressant prescription may be sufficient in improving one’s anxiety and uncontrollable thoughts. The most popularly distributed drugs are citalopram, fluoxetine, and sertraline. In more severe cases of PTSD, veterans may suffer from psychosis or suicidal ideation, in which the patient must be immediately admitted into a mental health program. More often than not, however, veterans who end up in the primary care clinic are less likely to seek proper treatment due to shortcomings in mental health services available (Driesenga, Rodriguez, and Picard, 251). In short, they receive mere prescriptions minus the counseling needed to control their symptoms.

However, in recent years, the Veterans Health Administration has made efforts to improve care for mental health patients in hospital settings. Those who do not show severe symptoms learn “Safety Planning,” which teaches problem-solving skills, enhances social support, and provides motivation in a veteran’s life (Knox et al. S33). This program is an attempt to prevent severe symptoms of psychosis and suicidal ideation among veterans. Health care providers recognize that psychoeducation is an important aspect of self-help for veterans who are unaware of their own mental condition. However, patients whose symptoms escalate into suicidal thoughts, the veteran is placed into detainment in which a Suicide Assessment and Follow-up Emergency Treatment also known as SAFE VET is administered (Knox et al. S33). SAFE VET integrates a strict follow-up intervention protocol that involves both the veteran and his or her family members in an individualized safety plan.

Veterans who find themselves in a hospital setting do receive job placement support through VA programs. While readily available, the quality of the service is lacking in multiple ways. In one random clinical trial of veterans with psychiatric disorders, only four participants found a job out of 39 participants (Penk et al, 298). Most veterans who were able to obtain competitive jobs did so through the support of family and friends (Penk et al, 298). Many prefer a transitional work experience (TWE) program in order to attain paid activities while receiving psychiatric treatment in the hospital. Such an experience allows veterans to learn social conduct and receive immediate income. Though TWE is more effective than mere job placement programs, TWEs alone will not aid veterans in obtaining a competitive job in the long-run.

It is crucial that researchers observe in detail why veterans are not being hired in the larger global market. One reason may be that veterans face an increasingly discriminatory hiring process. In the past, Congress passed the Vietnam Era Veterans’ Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRAA), which significantly improved the employment rate by advocating affirmative action for veterans (Stone, 73). Similarly, Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) “prevents the employers from treating a PTSD veteran unfavorably” (GotYour6 1). Finally, the O’Net program help employers measure similarities between a veteran’s military duty with a potential job position in their company (Stone, 76). The program provided an opportunity for employers to become familiar with a veteran’s background and lifestyle. Nonetheless, according to Stone and Stone (2015), employers still feared that if they hire veterans as employees, the psychological traumas might trigger the veterans to commit crime, wrongdoings, and severely damage the company. Though these programs have made honest attempts to advocate on behalf of veterans, many managers feel that the disadvantages far outweigh the benefits of having veterans as employees. For many businesses, it is a liability to have a hypervigilant, “time-ticking,” and depressed employee (Stone and Stone, 69).

As such, the decisions, mindsets, and personal biases of the decision makers (often called as “raters” or “observers”) heavily influence the job hiring process. Dr. Stone explores these biases and stereotypes. For instance, Dr. Stone states that raters with “high empathy levels may feel more discomfort” rather than confidence in giving jobs to disabled veterans

(Stone, 73). Dr. Stone demonstrates that when a rater has an overwhelming amount of empathy towards the veterans who have mental and physical disabilities, he or she will be unable to grant an industrious or assiduous job to them in order to avoid seeing them work with great difficulty. Also, if the decision maker had any “previous contact with veterans or military experience,” one may decide not to hire the veteran as the observer fully understands the difficulty of transitioning from military to civilian duties (Stone, 74). Most of all, if the observer perceives that the military culture is not similar to that in the commercial world, the veterans would “have less chance of getting employed” (Stone, 75). Employers are bent to think that veterans are incapable of functioning in an egalitarian environment where ideas are shared and privacy is respected.

These employers are not without good reason in their reluctance to hire veterans. Veterans need the proper training to successfully transition into a civilian work setting. This means self-esteem building as well. For many veterans, the word “PTSD” is itself a mental injury. At work or during interviews, when the raters categorize the veterans as “possessing PTSD,” then they have a “hard time imagining themselves fit for society,” which ultimately decreases their self-esteem and self-efficacy (Wright, 39). This component heavily influences the veteran’s performance during an interview. Freud also suggests that there is a transferring of certain beliefs, for instance veterans believe that military skills are abnormal and defective, that “the dominant ones (the civilians) are [implanting] onto the less dominant (the veterans)” (Wright, 40).

All in all, in order to improve the employment rate of veterans, first and foremost, current job placement and TWE programs must be reevaluated. Instead of merely providing job connections, it is crucial to provide PTSD psychoeducation to veterans. These men and women must understand how to express their feelings in a healthy way. They need social training on various scenarios that may arise in the workplace. Teaching emotions and sentiments is important for one’s emotional intelligence. This will immensely aid with interviews or interpersonal skills on the job. Group counseling on how to control triggers during the job placement program could help veterans understand acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the workplace. Furthermore, the VA Health Administration must find ways to increase access to TWEs for veterans even outside of the hospital setting. Without proper knowledge of services available, veterans cannot receive the help they need to find employment. As the number of homeless veterans increase, an outreach program that assists these veterans with psychotic mental illness not only get the treatment they need but eventually become self-sufficient and find employment.

Rejiv Chandrasekaran, a journalist who co-authored *For Love of Country: What Our Veterans Can Teach Us About Citizenship, Heroism, and Sacrifice*, stated that it is a significant loss “if [the company] doesn’t recognize the value that the military can bring to the business community and the American society at large” (MarketWatch 1). Veterans bring both industrial force and teamwork into the workforce that can help the company produce products at a faster rate. They also significantly increase the level of work satisfaction among employees as veterans inspire others to embrace cooperation in cultivating team spirit on the job. In recent years, Starbucks has hired 10,000 veterans in which the research team saw that veterans with PTSD were significantly “less likely” to have “post-deployment adjustment problems” (MarketWatch 1). Amazon also found that veterans were more than satisfied working in their warehouse. Many veterans felt that the “military [actually] taught them to be adaptable, dependable and gave them the discipline to work in a fast-paced environment” (MarketWatch 1).

Today, over 2,000 businesses (including Uber and General Electric) hired about 500,000 veterans combined last year (MarketWatch 1). The US Chamber of Commerce Foundation has spurred “Hiring Our Heroes” program which met with an exceptional response from the business community. Such efforts provide veterans incredible opportunities for social mobility in our modern world today. With this flood of job openings, it is essential that the VA Health Administration make such opportunities accessible to those who need it the most many of whom wander the streets or do not have the proper support system to know where to begin. It is critical that both nonprofit and non-government entities supplement what the government cannot provide. Social skills development and job skills training are a couple examples that need attention particularly for those suffering from PTSD. For maximum optimization of job performance, effective communication between the VA Health Administration, non-government organizations, and veteran-friendly businesses is essential in creating strategic programs.

For veterans, the stigma of PTSD or any mental illness is not easy to overcome. At the end of the day, it is a personal choice to receive the help that one needs. However, psychoeducation plays a vital role in helping veterans understand their own emotions and move towards progress. Many veterans may be unwilling to be psychoanalyzed but for the sake of

obtaining a job, veterans may be willing to learn how to transition into a civilian workplace successfully which will require self-analysis. Finally, further research specific to PTSD veterans and job placement is lacking. General research on the effectiveness of a job placement program exists but there is not enough literature on how PTSD and job placement is correlated. This may pinpoint further insight for the VA Health Administration to design effective programs for veterans.

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