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Research Brief

Student Veterans: A National Survey Exploring Psychological Symptoms and Suicide Risk

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Research Highlights:

- In contrast to the average student and VA clinical populations, a large number of student veterans are experiencing significant psychiatric symptoms, with a considerable number of heightened risk for suicide.
- The “average” student veteran reported experiencing moderate anxiety, moderately severe depression, significant symptoms of PTSD, and evidencing at least some noticeable suicide risk.
- It has been estimated that 20% of these veterans are subject to PTSD or depression and 19% have some sort of traumatic brain injury.
- 82% of those who had experienced a suicide attempt have significant symptoms of PTSD.

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Abstract:

“The current study explored psychological symptoms, symptom severity, and suicide risk in a national sample (N = 628) of student veterans. We hypothesized that the rates, types, and severity of problems experienced by student veterans on campus would in many ways mirror those reported by active duty service members as well as the Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom veteran population. Almost 35% of the sample experienced “severe anxiety,” 24% experienced “severe depression,” and almost 46% experienced significant symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. Of particular concern, there were significant numbers of participants thinking about suicide (46%), with 20% having a plan, 10.4% thinking about suicide “often or very often,” 7.7% making an attempt, and 3.8% believing that suicide is either “likely” or “very likely.” Implications of the findings are discussed, with a particular focus on college and university campuses.”

Implications

For Practice

2 million veterans will be returning from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF). As veterans return home from OEF/OIF we must not only learn to help them with their transition back into society but their transition into colleges and universities as well. The number of student veterans is expected to be extremely high as a result of the GI Bill Benefits. Whether or not college campuses are ready to accommodate to the needs of student veterans is yet to be determined. According to Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD), they found that in general the number of reported problems from counseling centers on campus were 38% depression, 40% anxiety, 9% self-injury, 11% substance abuse/dependence, 7% eating disorders, and 15% suicidal thoughts and/or behaviors. Few studies have looked at the student veterans population, and whether the counselors are trained to adequately to deal with their exposure to combat and their unique physical, emotional, and psychological issues. The Department of Defense has put a specific focus on suicide and psychological problems in military members and has found that suicide is second in the cause of death of military service members. This research is one of the first national surveys focusing on student veterans and their transition into college. The survey included questions on demographic, college experience, military service history, and psychological disorders. The results of the survey showed that 34.6% experience "severe anxiety," 23.7% "severe depression," 45.6% "PTSD," 46% "suicidal thought at one point," 20% "suicidal with a plan," 10.4% "thinking of suicide often," and 7.7% had "previous suicide attempts." The results showed just how prevalent and grave these issues are, based on the sample group and how the results are much more severe when compared to other groups. It is clear how important it is for student veterans to receive the care when it comes to transitioning into a college atmosphere.

For Policy

There are many challenges that face student veterans transitioning into a college atmosphere. More supporting policies for these transitioning veterans will hopefully enter into policy agenda soon, because of the anticipated number of student veterans entering higher education. Veteran-related policies should take into account the scope and depth of the problems faced by student veterans. This would provide more trained specialists to aid their needs, as well as special care for this specific group. Colleges and universities must be willing and able to have adequate support for their student veterans. Counselors must be trained to deal with issues that are relevant to student veterans, such as PTSD and combat exposure. This research points out that even, "these numbers are alarming, not only in comparison to the model college or university student, but also in contrast to VA clinical populations" in that there is a large number that are experiencing significant psychiatric symptoms, with a considerable number of heightened risk for suicide. Veteran-related policies should provide more support to discover what other problems exist in the student veteran population and other ways that they can be helped.

For Future Research

Though the research is clear in revealing the severity and frequency of the issues with the student veteran population, the policies to reduce these issues are not all in place at the moment. It must be realized that this does not require the help of the ordinary college counselor, but something more than that. First, the research needs to become more widespread with more students for a better understanding, since 628 just gives us a slight understanding of these problems. It would also be beneficial if the domains of the survey were expanded to other issues, not just psychological problems but physical problems and others that could possibly play a part in their anxiety, depression, etc. For future research other variables should be discussed besides PTSD, without dismissing any PTSD claims already made since they play a huge factor. Lastly, this research describes a lot about suicide but not really anything that could be done to help steer away from suicide at all. Also, improving additional counseling ways and other ways to help student veterans should be further emphasized.

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