

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

November is Veterans Awareness Month

Understanding Veterans' Mental Health Needs; A Call for Employer Support and Action

By Joel Axler, MD, *National Behavioral Health Leader*



November is recognized as Veterans Awareness Month, a time to honor and support veterans while raising awareness about their challenges — especially regarding mental health.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 1.5 million veterans in the US in 2020. Of them, 8.9 million were in the workforce, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Veterans, the brave people who have served in the military, often return home to face unique and complex mental health challenges. The transition from military life to civilian life can be a jarring experience, marked by stress, trauma and adjustment issues. Recognizing and addressing the mental health needs of veterans of an employer's workforce is crucial for their engagement, productivity and well-being, as well as the health of their families and communities.

Some of the most common mental health issues veterans face include:

**Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):**

Veterans may experience PTSD after exposure to traumatic events such as combat or witnessing injury and death. PTSD can lead to flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance and emotional numbness, making it difficult to reintegrate into civilian life and workforce.



Depression and anxiety: Many veterans struggle with depression and anxiety, often exacerbated by the difficulty of adjusting to civilian life. The loss of structure, purpose and camaraderie can contribute to feelings of isolation and hopelessness.



Traumatic brain injury (TBI): A TBI is a common injury among veterans, especially those who have experienced explosions or head trauma during service. TBI can affect cognitive function, memory and emotional regulation, often complicating a veteran's mental health situation.



Substance abuse: Some veterans turn to alcohol or drugs to cope. Substance abuse can become a significant barrier to mental health recovery and productivity.



Suicidal ideation: Unfortunately, veterans are at a higher risk of suicide compared to the general population. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), an estimated 17 veterans die by suicide each day¹. Addressing the root causes of mental health struggles and ensuring access to appropriate care is vital in reducing this tragic statistic.

1. <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2022/2022-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-508.pdf>



Meeting the mental health needs of veterans in a given workforce requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both the individual challenges they face and the systemic barriers to care. Here are several ways employers can support veterans' mental health:

- **Expanding access to mental health services:** Increasing the availability of mental health services, particularly in rural and underserved areas, is essential. Telehealth services have emerged as a promising solution, allowing veterans to access care remotely. Expanding telehealth offerings and ensuring veterans have the necessary technology can help bridge the gap.
- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs):** Offer EAPs that include counseling, stress management and wellness programs tailored to veterans' unique needs. Confidential access to mental health services can be vital for veterans adjusting to civilian work environments.
- **Reducing stigma:** Education and awareness campaigns aimed at reducing the stigma around mental health are crucial. Veterans need to know that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- **Training:** Provide training for supervisors and coworkers to better understand the unique challenges veterans may face, including mental health issues like PTSD or adjusting to civilian culture.
- **Veteran Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** Establish internal networks or affinity groups where veterans can connect, share experiences and receive mentorship. These ERGs can foster community and help veterans feel understood in the workplace.
- **Paid time off for mental health:** Allow veterans to take mental health days without stigma and promote overall well-being by emphasizing the importance of work-life balance.
- **Publicly acknowledge veteran contributions:** Recognize veterans' service and sacrifices by celebrating their achievements and contributions to the workplace. Beyond the month of November, events such as Veterans Day can be great opportunities to honor veterans within the organization. Partnering with organizations like **Give an Hour** or **Wounded Warrior Project** to provide veterans access to professional mental healthcare is another way to acknowledge veterans.
- **Suicide prevention programs:** Targeted suicide prevention programs, including crisis hotlines and outreach services, are essential in addressing the high rates of suicide among veterans. The VA's Veterans Crisis Line and community-based programs like the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline provide immediate support for those in crisis.
- **Support for families:** Veterans' mental health challenges often affect their families as well. Providing support for spouses, children and other loved ones can help create a stable and supportive environment for veterans as they navigate their mental health journey.

Veterans have given so much in service to their country, and it is our responsibility to ensure they receive the mental healthcare and support they need when they return home. Hiring U.S. veterans is beneficial for companies because veterans bring strong leadership, discipline and a proven ability to work under pressure, all of which translate into high performance and resilience in the workplace. Additionally, their diverse skill sets, adaptability and experience in teamwork make them valuable assets in various roles, enhancing both productivity and company culture.



Key Resources for Veterans' Mental Health

Here are several essential resources that offer support for veterans struggling with mental health challenges:

Veterans Crisis Line

Phone: 1-800-273-8255, Press 1

Text: 838255

Website: www.veteranscrisisline.net

Available 24/7 for veterans in crisis. Offers confidential support via phone, text and online chat.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Mental Health Services

Website: www.mentalhealth.va.gov

The VA provides comprehensive mental health services, including counseling, PTSD treatment and substance use recovery programs. Veterans can access services through local VA medical centers or community-based outpatient clinics.

Vet Centers

Website: www.vetcenter.va.gov

Vet Centers offer counseling and support to veterans and their families, focusing on readjustment counseling for those who have served in combat zones or experienced military sexual trauma.

Give an Hour

Website: www.giveanhour.org

A national network of mental health professionals who donate their time to provide free counseling to veterans, service members and their families.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Veterans & Military Resource Center

Website: www.nami.org/veterans

Provides information on mental health conditions and support for veterans, active-duty service members and their families.

Wounded Warrior Project (WWP)

Website: www.woundedwarriorproject.org

Offers a range of mental health programs for veterans, including the Warrior Care Network, which provides specialized PTSD and TBI treatment.

Military One Source

Website: www.militaryonesource.mil

A Department of Defense resource offering counseling, and financial and legal support for veterans, service members and their families.

Headstrong Project: Get Head Strong

Website: www.getheadstrong.org

Provides confidential, free and evidence-based treatment for PTSD, anxiety, depression and trauma for veterans and their families.

American Red Cross Military and Veteran Caregiver Network

Website: www.redcross.org/get-help/military-families.html

Offers support to veterans and their families, including mental health resources and caregiver assistance.

PTSD Coach (Mobile App)

Website: www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/ptsdcoach_app.asp

A free app created by the VA to help veterans and others manage PTSD symptoms with self-assessment tools, coping strategies and access to support.

These organizations provide critical resources for veterans seeking help for mental health challenges, offering both immediate crisis intervention and long-term support.



About the Author



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Dr. Joel Axler, MD, is Brown & Brown's National Behavioral Health Leader and is a proud Veteran of the US Army, where he served for 6 years, earning the rank of Captain. Dr. Axler is a board-certified child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist with over 30 years of experience in academic, private practice and insurance settings. He is a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He serves on several executive committees and organizations, including the Georgia Psychiatric Physicians Association and the Georgia Council on Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.



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