

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

November 11 is
Veterans Day!

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17 years
of service!

supporting EAP professionals

Creating a Veterans-friendly EAP

By Sally Hartman, EAP Counselor, FEI Behavioral Health

With the President's recent announcement to bring U.S. troops home from Afghanistan by 2016, employers should anticipate an influx of military veterans entering the workforce. In addition to providing jobs for these returning vets, employers must also provide an employee assistance program that includes veterans-specific services in order to help cultivate a veterans-friendly workplace environment.

Information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates veterans unemployment for the Gulf War-era

II (September 2001-present) demographic alone was more than 9% in February 2014 — which was two percent greater than overall unemployment. Since the beginning of the year, almost 600,000 veterans have been unemployed and looking for work.

Notable efforts have been made by the federal government to create awareness of joblessness among veterans populations, including the Joining Forces veteran issues initiative, supported by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden, and President Obama's effort to offer tax credits to those businesses that hire veterans. Yet, only a small percentage of employers are familiar with resources for veterans.

Transition to Civilian Life

While most veterans exhibit resilience when reintegrating into civilian life, some have more difficulty. It's important for employers to be aware of issues facing veterans in both their personal lives and the workplace.

An EAP can be an invaluable tool when addressing the needs of veterans in the workplace. Counseling can help manage mental health conditions or substance abuse, and an EAP coun-

selor can connect veterans to other resources that are available locally. According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs' 2013 Veterans in the Workplace study, a veteran-friendly EAP will exhibit the following:

- An intake, assessment and referral process in which confidentiality is emphasized.

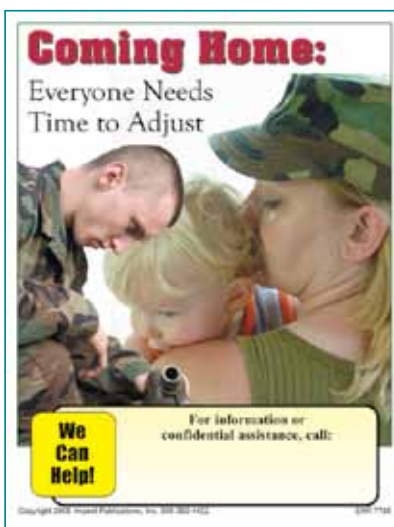
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Posters, like the one shown here, available for purchase at www.impact-publications.com, can help EA professionals enhance awareness of veterans' issues in the workplace.

- EA counselors trained in knowledge of military culture and who know how and when to assess for PTSD, suicide, substance abuse, depression and anxiety. Counselors must be trained to recognize when to refer to another provider or connect the veteran with treatment resources.
- The ability to provide education on VA resources for veterans and their families.

“An EAP counselor who has knowledge of military culture and the unique characteristics of these issues in veterans can provide a thorough assessment and counseling tailored specifically to the veteran.”

- Management and supervisor consultation regarding military transition issues, appropriate responses to employees who exhibit behavior issues, and how to encourage and de-stigmatize the use of EAP services by veteran employees.
- Training programs for employees, supervisors, managers and EAP providers.

Let's look in greater detail at some key challenges faced by veterans returning to the workforce and how an EAP can help: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empisit.t05.htm>

❖ **Education and training:** Veterans face a competitive job market in which job postings express a required minimum of a bachelor's degree and at least three years' experience. A veteran may have difficulty translating his or her military experience into skills needed for civilian jobs. The EAP can help employers understand how those frontline skills can transfer to the business. For example, a former platoon leader could be a potential project manager, or a military technology specialist might be perfect for the IT department.

Common readjustment challenges in the workplace include becoming used to a less rigid chain of command, a work environment that may be less team-work oriented, feeling that co-workers and supervisors don't understand the military experience, and work that may seem pointless or trivial. An employer might rely on the EAP for that context and may, for example, develop a program that provides mentors who are other veterans to assist with readjustment of new veteran employees.

❖ **PTSD, mental health, and substance abuse:** Vets may experience a wide range of mental and emotional injuries, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI). Veterans also have a suicide rate almost twice that of the general public.

Substance abuse by veterans and members of the military has been on the rise for the past ten years and also is higher than the norm. An EAP counselor who has knowledge of military culture and the unique characteristics of these issues in veterans

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can provide a thorough assessment and counseling tailored specifically to the veteran.

❖ **Physical challenges:** It's not uncommon for returning veterans to have physical challenges ranging from partial deafness to lost limbs. An EAP can help the employer anticipate veterans' needs and develop a physical environment that is

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conductive to workers with physical challenges.

Employers should have a clear understanding of the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)* and be able to determine effective accommodations and apply them to veterans' disabilities. For example, allowing a flexible work schedule for a disabled veteran to address health concerns or attend doctor or physical therapy appointments may be an appropriate accommodation.

❖ **Access to veterans' services:** Despite assistance available through the VA, many veterans express frustration with an inability to both access and maneuver the current system. EAP counselors familiar with the needs of military veterans and the VA can help veterans navigate through the system to get the help they need.

Even though navigating community resources or services available through the local VA office can feel overwhelming, employers need to emphasize as well as understand the benefits of such services. The company that hires or is considering hiring veterans should be familiar with community resources, the VA and online resources, and plan to provide flexibility to veteran employees who require assistance.

❖ **Training, education, and consultation:** An EAP can provide training, education, and management consultation to employers to assist them in better understanding the veteran's experience as they transition back into the workplace and deal with any workplace issues that arise. These resources can also be of value in helping to



Editor's Notebook

With veterans reintegrating back into their communities and workplaces in numbers the likes of which our country hasn't seen since the Vietnam War ended in the 1970s, if you haven't been dealing with this issue in your practice, chances are you *will be*. It's a myth that military organizations alone can meet the vast needs of returning service members as they return to work and civilian life. Fortunately, the EAP is in a perfect position to help.

But assisting veterans isn't easy. RaeAnn Thomas pointed out in the May *EAR* that a comprehensive resource that considers the needs of not only veterans and their families – but also *non-military* employees and managers is crucial.

Understanding as much as possible about military culture and returning soldiers will also help. Resources include Military 101 (www.military101.com), the

Citizen Soldier Support Program (www.citizensoldiersupport.org) and the Wounded Warrior Project (www.woundedwarriorproject.org).

In addition, as noted in this month's *Brown Bagger* insert, it may also be useful for the EAP to help provide mentoring programs that link returning soldiers with veterans already in the workforce. The common bond of military experience can support the successful reintegration of returning service men and women.

Many thanks to Sally Hartman for reminding us about the importance of supporting our veterans in this month's cover story. Lastly, don't forget that November 11 is Veterans Day. Until next time.

Mike Jacquart

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de-stigmatize issues common to veterans and prepare for veterans in the workplace.

Summary

It's important to note that the majority of veterans make a successful transition to civilian work and life, but the transition process takes time and can pose a variety of challenges for the transitioning service member, and his or her family and co-workers. Employers who provide an EAP that offers military-focused services are taking a step in the right direction to become more aware of common challenges veterans face and see the strengths and benefits veterans bring to the workplace. ■

Sally Hartman is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker specializing in developing and implementing programs to meet the unique needs of military members, veterans, and their family members. She is currently focusing on EAP services to meet the needs of military members, veterans, and family members affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as services to help employers develop practices to support veterans returning to the workplace.

FEI Behavioral Health is committed to providing employers with a full spectrum of services and training to ensure that the transition of returning veterans to the work place is productive and beneficial to employers, veterans and their families. Partnering with a wide range of corporations, government entities and non-profits, FEI is a social enterprise wholly owned by the Alliance for Children and Families, a national network of nearly 500 organizations. For more information, visit www.feinet.com.