

Ten Things You Should Know About Today's Student Veteran

Alison Lighthall, RN, BSN, MSN, is a military behavioral health consultant for HAND2 HAND CONTACT (www.hand2handcontact.org), which provides specialized training and consulting to colleges, universities, law enforcement and corrections agencies, as well as social service, non-profits, and military organizations. She can be reached at alisonlighthall@yahoo.com.

<https://vetfriendlytoolkit.acenet.edu/search/pages/results.aspx?k=ten%20things%20you%20should%20know%20about%20today%27s%20student%20veteran>

10. Student veterans are a highly diverse group—as diverse as America itself.

There are no generalizations that are remotely accurate about this group, other than their common hope that more education will make their lives and their families' lives better. Returning military personnel come from all over, and are a rainbow of colors, shapes, religions, sexual orientation, and political views.

9. Veterans do not see themselves as victims. Ever.

Victims are people who feel no control over their lives and perceive themselves as being at the mercy of others. Even when student veterans are psychologically struggling or physically wounded, they see themselves as powerful warriors. This is part of the reason it's difficult for them to seek appropriate accommodations in the classroom. Framing these accommodations as “adaptations” that many people need, not just veterans, helps this internal struggle. And, once they can accept the adjustments, academic life often gets significantly easier.

8. They can feel very alone on campus.

When a service member is discharged from the military, it's aptly termed “separation.” They just spent the last several years inextricably tied to some type of social system, whether it was a brigade, battalion, company, platoon, squad, team, or just one on one with a battle buddy. The loss of friendships, purpose, identity, structure, and income is enough to push most people to their limits. Throw in an unfamiliar social system that bears no resemblance to the military, has no clear chain of command, and is filled with many students and faculty who can't even imagine the student veterans' experiences, and you have a deeply alienating environment for many of them. Typically, student veterans are also older and more experienced than their freshman peers. They can manage huge amounts of pain, both physical and mental, without complaint. But consequently, they also bristle at trivial matters called “crises” by others, and scorn the frequent self-absorption of their peers. Connecting student veterans can effectively ease this isolation, and it's especially helpful if connections can be made between new veterans and those who have successfully navigated college.

7. They are often unaware of their own mild traumatic brain injuries.

Most of the frontline soldiers I've talked to have experienced a significant explosion. But if it wasn't their truck that blew up or their limb lost, they often don't see it as their experience. When a bomb detonates, its concussive impact on nearby soldiers is massive. If it weren't for the brain's remarkable plasticity and the indomitable human spirit, these men and women would be mostly incapable of learning, much less taking on a college education. Difficulties with memory, attention and concentration, as well as mental processing, abstract reasoning, and executive functioning, are common problems for student veterans. But there are ways to assist your student veterans, and some of the most common strategies will not

only assist them, but all of the students in your classroom. For example, make and share recordings of your classroom lectures and discussions, and allow note taking on laptops so that students can review and process the classroom material in a less sensory-stimulating environment. Wear a microphone to enhance auditory clarity, and make sure that class videos are captioned. Also try to use texts that can be obtained electronically, in case the student needs the text to be read aloud. Posting your notes ahead of time will help the student veteran better prepare, and allowing students to use a ruler during exams will help them keep their place. If they're highly anxious during exams, it may be helpful to give them a different time and place. Make yourself available for out-of-class office hours.

6. There are three things you should never say to a student veteran (but they still hear them every day).

"These wars were atrocities and a waste of human life," "I don't get why you're having so much trouble—you volunteered, right?" and worst of all, "Did you kill anyone?" These comments do more than upset veterans; they wound the hearts of men and women who are already overburdened with sorrow. I believe faculty's opinions about the military or recent wars are best kept out of the classroom. You may not always be able to prevent a student from saying something hurtful, but faculty and staff can model awareness of other viewpoints, and explain how these comments might be hurtful.

5. Female veterans suffer deeply, and almost always in silence.

While women make up about 15 percent of today's military, it's still very much a man's domain. Women had to do it better, faster, and smarter than the guys to earn their respect. And we had to have a better sense of humor and a stronger sense of self to survive their constant covert, and sometimes overt, tests of our emotional and physical strength and trustworthiness. But more insidious, and infinitely more damaging, is the persistent sexual harassment and sexual assault of female soldiers. The Veteran Administration estimates that at least 22 percent of females are sexually assaulted during their time in service. It's important to understand that when a female service member experiences a sexual assault from a comrade, she experiences it as incest. After all, this is her military family, and these men are her brothers in arms. This physical and psychological breach causes immense damage to the assaulted soldier, who often feels she must keep it a secret to maintain her own safety and "family" unity. Only when she gets home can she begin the long process of fully untangling this very complex experience.

4. They often want to go back to the war zone.

Combat veterans often miss the intense closeness they had with their comrades, and being in an environment where everyone understands them, where they're doing a job they're trained for and competent at, where everything they do matters. Often, returning veterans feel guilty about surviving when friends have not and they may want to go back, regain that closeness, and "make things right." When veterans get home, not only do they feel alone and that their lives suddenly have less meaning, they also feel bored. Facing death every day made them feel completely alive, but being bored makes them feel dead. It takes quite a while to throttle down and adapt to the lower level of adrenaline that civilian life calls for. That's part of the reason so many discharged soldiers go into law enforcement or engage in extreme sports. They're trying to experience that same adrenaline rush that made them feel so alive before.

3. Combat trauma is an injury, not a mental illness.

Witnessing your best friend get blown apart by an improvised explosive device (IED) is a massive shock to the amygdala, the brain's emotional command center. And the emotional shock is just one component to the injury. The subsequent events and bursts of emotions that swiftly follow an attack of that magnitude will flood the brain with chemicals and commands that leave behind physical imprints that can cause long-term physical, psychological, and emotional distortions. Healing often can't begin until the service member is no longer receiving signals of danger and the brain's chemistry begins to normalize. Sometimes, it takes months, other times, years. But adaptation and recovery are well within the human capacity, and that fact should be reinforced to the student veteran at every opportunity.

2. To succeed, veterans need your understanding, compassion and respect.

Because the vast majority of Americans choose not to join one of the branches of the military, our student veterans are surrounded by people who have no experience, or context, for understanding their experiences. To many of them, the student veteran's behavior may be confusing, inexplicable, or even frightening.

Because of anxiety or injury-related disorganization, they may show up late or even miss a class. Or they may come 15 minutes early so they can find the perfect desk that allows them a full view of the room, reducing their sense of physical threat. During class, they may have difficulty sitting still or staying focused, and they may need to leave the room to compose themselves. After class, still struggling to process the taught information and skills, they may be silent or stoic when they need to be reaching out for guidance and support. Regardless of how it looks, what you're seeing is almost never meant to be disrespectful to you. Your student veterans value and honor authority figures; being deliberately disrespectful would go against their military training and experience.

Understanding that their actions are not personal, reaching out to them with compassion and respect, accommodating their individual learning needs, and most importantly, seeing them as people who chose to serve our country and who have endured burdens beyond anything we can imagine, could make all the difference to that student veteran.

And.....

1. Student veterans are one of America's greatest untapped human resources.

They are emotionally mature, goal-oriented, mission-driven, experienced leaders. They work tirelessly to achieve their objectives and look for ways to make meaningful contributions. They are self-sufficient; they will only ask questions when they cannot find the answers themselves. They not only understand the concept of sacrifice for the greater good, they've lived it. They are respectful and protective of those around them. They think globally and bypass most things trivial or trendy.

In short, they are the kind of role models we need on our campuses, and graduating to lives of fulfillment in our workplaces. With your support, their academic success can allow them to become some of America's strongest, most insightful leaders. We owe them our gratitude, of course. But more importantly, we owe them a chance to have meaningful new careers and fulfilling civilian lives, from which we will all richly benefit.