

STUDY NOTES

FACTORS INFLUENCING MENTAL HEALTH CARE ACCESS FOR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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HIGHLIGHTS

WHAT ARE STUDY NOTES?

Study Notes provide a plain-language summary of a research project led or supported by the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families. The aim is to ensure that Veterans and Families can better access and understand emerging research and key findings.

A single research study cannot give us all the answers, but every well-conducted study gives us a piece of the puzzle.

- The review looked at the literature to identify factors that affect Veterans and their Family members' access to mental health care. The results revealed 23 barriers (i.e. factors that hinder access) and 14 facilitators (i.e. factors that help with access).
- The authors categorized each barrier and facilitator into four key areas: 1) structural, 2) practical, 3) social and cultural, and 4) personal beliefs and knowledge.
- The most common barriers were structural: difficulty navigating the mental health care system, health care providers' lack of familiarity with military culture and Veteran-specific health concerns, and limited choice of services.
- Veterans and Family members had some of the same barriers and facilitators, but not all studies reported every barrier. This suggests that Veterans and their Families have different experiences when accessing care.
- Many factors served as both barriers and facilitators (for example, low versus high levels of mental health knowledge, absence versus presence of trust).
- Few studies specifically focused on Veteran Family members, the Canadian context or the early years following military release. This lack of research makes the authors less sure about applying the conclusions of the review to these specific groups or contexts.



WHY IS THE STUDY IMPORTANT?

Transitioning to post-service life after military service can be challenging for Veterans, affecting not only them but also their Families^{1,2}.

Accessible mental health services are crucial during this period to support Veteran and Family mental health, enhance their well-being and facilitate a successful transition into post-service life. Improving access to care can also support resilience and improve participation in community life. Previous studies have described some of the things that prevent or help Veterans access mental health care post-service³⁻⁵, but a comprehensive review and summary has been lacking.

A summary of barriers and facilitators for Veterans and Veteran Families accessing mental health care could guide policy to improve access and promote well-being.



WHAT DID THE STUDY AIM TO FIND OUT?

The aim of this review was to review the literature to identify key barriers and facilitators that influence access to mental health services for Veterans and Families during the post-service transition period.



WHAT DID THE STUDY DISCOVER?

This review included 60 documents that focused on understanding the barriers and facilitators for Veterans and their Family members in accessing mental health care during the post-service transition period.

Among these documents, 23 barriers and 14 facilitators were identified across four categories:

- Structural barriers (e.g. navigating the system, wait times)
- Practical barriers (e.g. transportation, scheduling, costs)
- Social and cultural barriers (e.g. stigma, military culture norms)
- Personal beliefs and knowledge barriers (e.g. understanding symptoms, trust in providers)

Difficulty navigating the mental health care system was identified as the main barrier among Veterans and Families. This finding suggests a strong need for policy and system-level improvements. Those who received support navigating the system identified this as a significant facilitator.

Studies mostly focused on Veterans, highlighting the need for more research focusing on Veteran Families.



HOW WAS THIS STUDY CONDUCTED?

The authors conducted a rapid review. This is a type of literature review that aims to provide a quick and thorough summary of the available evidence on a practice- or policy-relevant question.

For this review, the authors combined insights from studies exploring how Veterans and their Families access mental health care during the post-service period.

To be included, studies had to have been published in the last 10 years, be available in English or French and take place within a Five Eyes country (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom or the United States).

Each study was reviewed to identify various factors that could either hinder or help access to mental health services as well as to assess how well the study itself was conducted (i.e. its methodological quality).



WHAT ARE SOME STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY?

Few studies specifically examined Canadian Veterans or Family members. The findings of this review may reflect the barriers and facilitators for mental health care access of Veterans in the United States, as this is where most of the studies were conducted. These barriers and facilitators could differ for other contexts (e.g. Canadian, years since release from the military) and Veteran subgroups (e.g. age, Indigenous individuals).

Despite the limitations of the available studies, this review offers a unified summary of barriers and facilitators identified by Veterans and their Families.



WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY?

For Veterans

This review highlights a range of obstacles in accessing mental health care. At the same time, some Veterans reported positive experiences with seeking care. Being informed of both the negative and positive experiences can empower Veterans to proactively seek services tailored to their unique needs, potentially improving their transition and mental health. This approach ensures that the distinct needs and specific hurdles of each individual are considered.

For Veteran Families

Veteran Family members experience many of the same challenges and facilitating factors as Veterans themselves. However, significant knowledge gaps remain that prevent a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives. Further research is needed to understand Veteran Families' unique barriers and needs. This is because addressing Family well-being is important for improving Veterans' overall health and successful reintegration.

For service providers

The findings suggest that there is an opportunity to enhance the civilian mental health care system's ability to meet the mental health needs of Veterans and their Families. Teaching civilian health care providers about military culture and the mental health challenges faced by Veterans is an important and promising step for improving care. This training could also help improve outcomes for Veterans.

For researchers

The majority of the studies did not explore how certain characteristics (e.g. Canadian context, time lapse since the end of military service) may influence perceptions of barriers. Understanding which barriers to care are most influential may help inform how best to optimize services.

For policy makers

Efforts to address barriers to mental health care should occur across all four domains (structural, practical, social and individual) at the same time to maximize benefit. Making the system easier to navigate, giving comprehensive training to health care providers and offering more mental health supports and services are promising targets for improvement.



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