

Connections Between Well-Being Domains of Post 9/11 Veterans

Takeaway: This brief shares findings from a study that examined how different domains of veterans' well-being—physical health, mental health, financial, employment, and social—are interrelated and affect one another during veterans' transitions from military service to civilian life. Recognizing these connections is imperative to help researchers and professionals who work with veterans understand and improve the well-being of veterans. Understanding that improvements or declines in one well-being domain significantly impact other domains is critical.

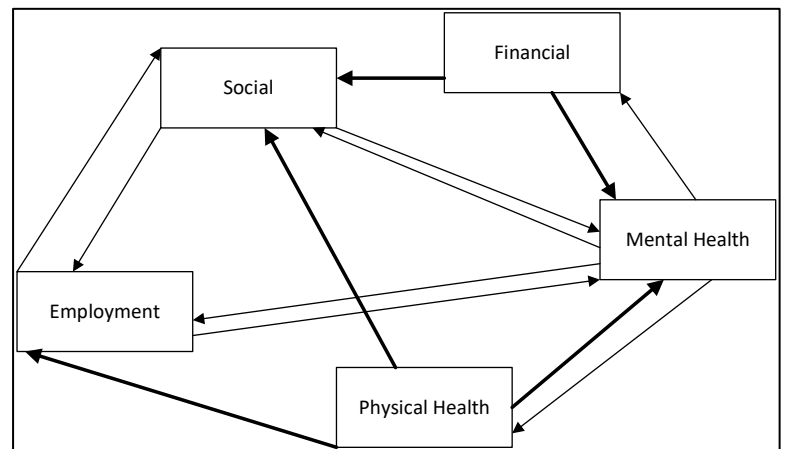
The Military-to-Civilian Transition

The study discussed here followed post-9/11 veterans for about 6.5 years after they separated from active duty military service. Following veterans over this timeframe allowed researchers to determine how well-being in different domains (i.e., physical health, mental health, financial, employment, and social) influenced or predicted well-being in other domains over time. Most post-9/11 veterans (~65%) reported feeling fully transitioned into civilian life about 3 years after leaving the military. However, a significant number, approximately 20%, reported not feeling fully transitioned 6 years after their service had ended. These perceptions have been supported by other, more objective measures.

Direction and Strength of Predictive Relationships Among Well-Being Domains

The figure to the right illustrates the overall findings of the predictive relationships among well-being domains. The figure shows that there are direct (i.e., when one domain influences another domain; represented by one arrow) and reciprocal (i.e., when domains influence each other; represented by two arrows) relationships among well-being domains. For example, physical health has a direct effect on employment, mental health, and social well-being. Mental health well-being has reciprocal effects with employment well-being and social well-being.

The results indicate that physical health was key to a veteran's overall well-being and life satisfaction during his or her transition. When a veteran's physical health improved over time, his or her mental health, ability to find and keep a job (employment), and social functioning (how well he or she connects with family and friends) also significantly improved. For example, reducing chronic pain for a veteran can lead to better relationships for the individual. This finding is important because it indicates that improving physical health by engaging in regular exercise, getting sufficient sleep, reducing risky behaviors (e.g., excessive alcohol use, smoking), and eating a nutritious diet can have an important positive impact across other areas of a veteran's life. However, evidence indicates the physical health of some post-9/11 veterans is not improving over time; therefore, these veterans' advancements in other well-being domains seem to be negatively impacted.



Note. Arrows represent the direction of relationships between well-being domains. Bold lines represent stronger evidence between well-being domains, while thin lines represent weaker evidence.

The results also revealed that when a veteran's financial situation improved, their mental health and social connections tended to improve. This finding indicates that financial security also plays an important role in veterans' overall stability and well-being. Clearly, physical and financial well-being are the principal predictors of overall well-being and life satisfaction for post-9/11 veterans.

Nevertheless, other domains influenced one another; however, their effects were generally weaker and less consistent. For example, experiencing an improvement in mental health led to small positive changes in other domains, like employment, physical health, and social connections. In another example, securing a job was found to have a weak positive effect on a veteran's social life and mental health. Similarly, having good social connections had a small positive effect on a veteran's employment and mental health.

Implications for Supporting Veterans

The most important implication is that organizations and providers who support veterans, like the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and veteran-serving organizations (VSOs), should focus on improving veterans' physical health and financial well-being to best advance veterans' general well-being.

Many veterans face challenges such as living far away from VA hospitals or clinics (geographic isolation) or feeling ashamed or embarrassed to ask for help (help-seeking stigma) that make it hard to obtain the physical healthcare they require. Expanding the use of mobile care units and telehealth (i.e., healthcare provided remotely through phone or video) can help provide veterans who live far from services with easy-to-reach options. In addition, the VA has developed programs that offer personalized medical care plans and health coaches to help veterans achieve their health goals. Finally, communities can play an important role in helping veterans receive the health services they need by expanding the availability of free or low-cost community-based healthcare for veterans. To address the stigma that many veterans report in terms of help-seeking behaviors, programs, brief and online, which specifically speak to and reduce the stigma associated with seeking care, could be developed and disseminated.

Some veterans encounter problems with finding employment or being underemployed and, thus, experience financial strain. Many VSOs are already working to help veterans find jobs and improve their finances. The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State has conducted prior studies that have found that some types of help are particularly useful, such as offering budget and financial planning, assisting with writing resumes, and providing real-world guidance on how to translate military skills into civilian job descriptions.

Moreover, the newly available Veterans Transition Screener (VTS) has been created and pilot tested as a free, empirically-based, and easily accessible tool, which can be accessed here: <https://veteranetwork.psu.edu/projects/veteran-transition-screener/>. It was created to help VSOs better understand and address the specific needs of the veterans they serve and connect them with appropriate resources. Clearly, finding ways to address the physical health and financial well-being of veterans will increase their and their families' opportunities, happiness, and security. For more information about the VTS, please email us at: VETERANetwork@psu.edu.

Study Summary

The Veterans Metrics Initiative: Linking Program Components to Post-Military Well-Being (TVMI) collected six waves (i.e., 3, 9, 15, 21, 27, and 33 months) of well-being and program utilization data from almost 10,000 post-9/11 veterans who had separated from military service in 2016. Additional waves (i.e., 51 and 78 months) of data were collected independently by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State through the Veterans Engaging in Transition Studies (VETS), which is part of the VETERANetwork. 3,514 veterans from TVMI voluntarily chose to participate in VETS.

Acknowledgements

TVMI research was managed by the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, Inc. (HJM), and it was collaboratively sponsored by the Bob Woodruff Foundation, Health Net Federal Services, HJF, Lockheed Martin Corporation, Marge and Philip Odeen, May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, National Endowment for the Humanities, Northrop Grumman, Prudential, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, Rumsfeld Foundation, Schultz Family Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Health Services Research and Development Service, Walmart Foundation, and Wounded Warrior Project, Inc. VETS Wave 7 was sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts. VETS Wave 8 was sponsored by the Wounded Warrior Project, The Heinz Endowments, May & Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, and The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation.

