

Mental Health Pre-Service Examination

Issue: Servicemembers should receive pre-emptive mental health assessment before entering into the military.

Background: Many Servicemembers experience mental health problems prior to entering the military that are not treated or detected. Once these individuals enter the military, their mental health conditions often remain undetected and untreated. As a result, when these Servicemembers separate and transition as Veterans into civilian life, these mental health conditions have intensified due to combat stress and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Other conditions such as combat injuries, depression, unemployment, financial stress, alcoholism, and family discord contribute to higher rates of mental illness.

Schoenbaum and Kessler examined common mental health disorders among Army participants and whether the disorder developed prior to entering the Army.¹ They found that the most common disorders for Army participants were Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and intermittent explosive disorders. Both are mental health predictors for suicide and accidental death based upon the results from the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers. Other mental health disorders are prone to severe deterioration when exposed to the potential traumas of wartime combat that endanger the lives of their fellows, compromise their mental fortitude, and become difficult obstacles after separation from the military.

Mental health disorders have now become a serious threat to our Veterans' lives and livelihoods. Diagnosis of PTSD is increasing, because of the changing nature of warfare that increases the chance for injuries that affect mental health. The potential negative effects of mental health issues, such as homelessness and suicide, affect more than 107,000 Veterans who are now homeless. Finally, at least 21 Veterans die by suicide each day, increasing the urgency for a response to Veteran mental health needs.

Recommendation:

- DOD/VA determine disqualifying mental health conditions
- DOD/VA implement a mental health pre-service examination that is integrated into the Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS) exams to evaluate prospective Servicemembers.

¹ JAMA Psychiatry. 2014