

Combating Social Isolation and Loneliness Among Veterans after Separation from Military Service

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Veterans are at high risk for social isolation and loneliness, and poor mental and physical health.
- Separation from service, loss of social support, and difficulty forming new connections contribute to isolation and loneliness.
- Beekeeping and gardening are creative and effective ways to combat social isolation among veterans.

Approximately half of U.S. veterans report feeling they don't belong in society after separation from military service.¹ This diminished sense of belonging is often associated with feeling socially isolated or lonely, regardless of the strength of familial support at home. Loneliness isn't necessarily the same as being alone. Loneliness refers to the distress people feel when their social involvement and relationships are not what they want them to be, such as feeling left out or alone, when they'd prefer to be involved or interacting with others.² The transition from active duty to civilian life, loss of social support, and difficulty forming connections with the general population upon separation from service worsens social isolation and loneliness.³ Loneliness can have negative health consequences for veterans, such as depression, anxiety, and premature death.¹

This brief summarizes the negative impacts of social isolation and loneliness on veteran health and wellbeing. It provides recommendation for programs that would aid in the mitigation of these negative outcomes. To combat social isolation and loneliness among veterans, policymakers need to develop and implement programming that connects veterans to each other while mimicking the values veterans miss about military life, including camaraderie, identity, purpose, physical activity, and learning.

Separation from Military Service Contributes to Loneliness and Social Isolation

Separation from service isn't just a "career switch" for veterans. For many, the military isn't just a job - it's a lifestyle, sense of identity, and purpose. Transition can lead to an identity crisis.⁴ While in service, military personnel lead very structured lives. They are told when to eat, what to eat, what to wear, and what to do.⁴ A famous saying in the

military is that the job is “simple.” All it takes to succeed is being at the right place, at the right time, in the right uniform.

Losing this structure contributes to many veterans feeling vulnerable. When they return home after service, the structure, purpose, and daily regimen is gone, and they suddenly have to make a lot of decisions, and create a new life worth living for themselves.⁴ Upon separation, veterans find themselves excited about the future, overwhelmed by the number of choices ahead, and unbeknownst to most, grieving the life they once had. During this grief period, veterans mourn the loss of a reliable community - one that gave them a deep sense of purpose and camaraderie.

Leaving service also means suddenly losing touch with friends, which worsens loneliness. Separation from service breaks bonds and makes relationships difficult to sustain.¹ A sudden loss of these relationships can be difficult for veterans, contributing to feelings of loneliness and isolation. “Being cut off from others is like not being connected to your battery” says Dr. Somnath Saha, a staff physician at the Veteran’s Administration (VA) in Portland, Oregon.² He adds, “You lose an important source of energy...that loss of energy often results in less motivation to engage with others and to seek help.”²

That same sense of community and belonging is often hard for veterans to find post-separation. Veterans often struggle with reestablishing old friendships, making new friends, and finding the same intensity of connections they had during service. Service men and women identify connections formed during service as the “cornerstone” of their career.¹ Despite the challenges of service, veterans report that the military environment itself was a “family” that took care of its service members.⁵ Veterans view their fellow military personnel as “brothers and sisters” and their superiors as “mother and father figures.”¹ Even those who are able find social support after service report feeling isolated. Military experiences are unique, and those who have not served often cannot relate to veterans’ experiences and stories.⁵ Additionally, veterans report difficulty explaining their military experience to others, which may hinder the ability to form connections.

Loneliness Isn’t Just Mental, It’s also Physical

Loneliness can negatively impact health and well-being. These feelings can contribute to trouble coping with everyday life stressors, leading to an increase in poor mental health symptoms. Loneliness is associated with high levels of depression and suicidal ideation, and is the most common trigger for a mental health crisis among veterans.⁶ Combined with a lack of social supports, veterans are at an increased risk of homelessness and substance use compared to non-veterans.³ Veterans admitted for inpatient mental health treatment are five times more likely than other veterans to be readmitted if they are at high risk for social isolation.⁶ Socially isolated and lonely veterans are also less likely than other veterans to adhere to health care recommendations, worsening existing physical and/or mental health symptoms. As such, veterans have the lowest levels of patient effort to manage their health and to seek medical help.²

Social isolation and loneliness also impact physical health, significantly increasing a person’s risk for premature death. It rivals risk factors such as smoking, obesity, lack of access to health care, and physical inactivity.⁷ Social isolation increases the risk of dementia by 50%, heart disease by 29%, and stroke by 32%.⁷ It also depresses immune system functioning.⁸ Because of this, those who experience loneliness and social isolation have impaired immunity and are at greater risk for illness.

Opportunities for Veterans to Meet One Another is Not Enough

Policymakers need to provide funding for programs that connect veterans with other veterans - giving them a sense of purpose, identity, and camaraderie critical to a successful transition out of service. Veterans consider peer support essential for maintaining a sense of identity and purpose after separation from service.¹ But simply providing an opportunity for veterans to meet one another is not enough. Programming needs to build communities that bring veterans together, while targeting the values that veterans miss about military life to instill a sense of belonging and inclusion and mitigate feelings of isolation and loneliness. This includes communities that increase socialization, learning, physical activity, and opportunities to develop and use skills in valued roles.¹⁰

Combating loneliness calls for creative solutions.² Beekeeping and gardening have been shown to be highly effective ways to reconnect veterans to their peers while instilling a sense of purpose.¹¹ Veteran gardening programs are shown to improve mental and emotional wellbeing, socialization and comradeship, sense of identity, and learning of new skills.¹² Gardening programs also provide veterans the opportunity to be part of a team with positive roles and build skills that promote positive leisure, healing, and recovery.¹² Community gardens and other green spaces are increasingly recognized as therapeutic spaces that support reintegration by encouraging veterans to interact and socialize with other veterans while engaging in a personally and physically satisfying activity.¹²

Beekeeping gives veterans an adrenaline rush in a safe environment while giving a sense of camaraderie.¹¹ Like military members, every bee in the hive has a role and purpose, an aspect of beekeeping that veterans find comforting.¹¹ Beekeeping activities bring veterans back to the present, decreasing anxiety and depression symptoms.¹¹

Allowing veterans to label themselves as a “beekeeper” or “gardener” gives them a new sense of positive identity and connection and highlights the needs of the veteran community. Programs like these diminish feelings of isolation and loneliness among veterans by replacing the key components of military life that veterans are longing for after separation.

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