

The U.S. Military Does Not Adequately Prepare Members for Transition from Service

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Nearly 250,000 U.S. military members transition out of service each year.
- Half of veterans say the military did not adequately prepare them for transition to civilian life.
- Current military transition programs, like the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), do not deal with the psychological impacts of separation of service.
- Spouses of military members face many of the same stressors as military members, but many spousal support programs are terminated upon military separation.
- Increased holistic programming related to the psychological impact of separation could better equip service members and their families to tackle transition stress.

Nearly 250,000 U.S. military members transition out of active service each year,¹ and between 44 and 72 percent of these members experience high levels of stress.¹ During this time of transition, veterans report worsening mental health from stressors related to education and employment searches, financial challenges, family relationships, and loss of community, culture, and identity.

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provides information, tools, and training to prepare service members for their transition to civilian life. However, nearly half of veterans say the military did not adequately prepare them for their transition from service.²

This brief highlights the shortcomings of veteran transition programs, like TAP, and provides recommendations for improving transition outcomes through more holistic programs.

Separation from Service is a Vulnerable Time for Veterans

Separating from military service is a unique event. Unlike other transitions in life, many changes are happening all at once. Separating military members face challenges such as finding employment, establishing health care, and grieving the loss of a community.

Separation from service often creates an identity crisis for veterans.³ The military offers service members a regimented career that provides a deep sense of camaraderie, purpose, and social connection. Upon separation, veterans immediately lose access to the camaraderie and purpose established during their service. Without these support structures, veterans must create new lives that are meaningful and worth living.

The heightened stress during this time, often referred to as ‘transitional stress,’ leaves veterans anxious about developing new routines and lifestyles, connecting with family and friends, and finding employment. After separation, nearly half of veterans are not immediately connected to the resources or services they need, resulting in the emergence of behavioral and mental health concerns.¹ In 2020, 5.2 million veterans experienced a behavioral health condition.¹

Veterans are often **socially isolated**, are at increased risk of turning to drugs or alcohol to cope, and are at the highest risk of suicide in the first three months following service.⁴

Current Military Transition Programs Fail to Prepare Veterans for Civilian Life

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was established by Congress in 1991 to help ease the transition from military to civilian life by giving veterans the tools to apply the skills developed in military service to civilian employment.⁵ In 2011, the program became mandated for all military members who planned to separate from service.⁵

TAP includes a week of workshops focused on equipping service members with the skills to be prepared for civilian life, including resume writing, mock job interviews, and how to start a small business. TAP also includes a workshop from the United States Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) on higher education, access to health care, and benefits.

Throughout TAP’s training, the potential psychological impacts of transitioning from service to civilian life are not discussed. Upon separation, service members report feeling like they have lost their family, tribe, and sense of purpose. Yet, TAP leaves veterans ill prepared for the emotional hardships ahead by treating military life as a job, rather than a service member’s identity.

Military Spouses Also Transition from Service

Most literature on military members transitioning from service focuses solely on the veteran’s point of view. However, because nearly half of military members are married, spouses play a significant role in the successful transition to civilian life.⁶

Research suggests that military spouses face similar stressors as military members upon separation from service.⁶ In addition to the loss of community, military spouses also face relocation and the task of providing emotional and financial support to their veteran.

Although the spouse’s health is crucial for the transitioning veteran’s health, many spousal support services are terminated at the time of separation, when family members need it most. TAP resources, although available to spouses, are often not marketed or targeted to them. This lack of information and resources leaves many spouses ill prepared for separation.

How Can Military Transition Programs Better Prepare Veterans for Civilian Life?

Military transition programs treat separation as the loss of a job or a career switch, rather than what it truly is: a loss of identity. Transition programs must view the service member holistically. Incorporating programming related to the psychological impact of separation into existing TAP training could make service members feel better equipped to tackle transition stress. For example, trainings on mental health, self-identity, and social connectedness could warn service members about the challenges they may face and provide suggestions for how to deal with these challenges.²

When considering military separation holistically, the need for additional transition programs targeting military spouses is evident. There is a direct correlation between the overall health and functionality of service members and the well-being of military spouses.⁶ Thus, programs need to be tailored and marketed to veteran spouses. This can be done through a 'couples track' - a segment of transition training targeting service members and their spouses.⁶ Support services should also continue to be available to spouses after termination of service, including supports related to child care, health care, and employment.

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Acknowledgements

The author thanks Alyssa Kirk and Shannon Monnat for edits on a previous draft of this brief.

Recommended Citation

Graham, Emily. (2024). The U.S. Military Does Not Adequately Prepare Members for Transition from Service. Lerner Center Population Health Research Brief Series. Issue Brief #68. Accessed at: <https://surface.syr.edu/lerner/252/>

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