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PTSD and the Student Veteran

Is Distance Learning the Answer?

By *Sgt. Maj. David C. Cox*

NCO Leadership Center of Excellence

When the Covid-19 pandemic was at its height, every institution around the world was forced to reconsider how to conduct operations with minimal disruptions to effectiveness, output, and user satisfaction. The military professional development system had to contend with migrating curriculum that had been originally developed for face-to-face learning to an online distributed learning environment. There is always a natural resistance to change—it's just in our nature as humans. We tend to stick with the familiar and are skeptical of alterations to our procedures until they have proven successful and beneficial to our lives. At the Sergeants Major Academy, as we transitioned to distance education, we were faced with technical hurdles, a perceived lack of end-user computer-skills, struggles over the most efficient way to conduct accountability, and had to discover the best ways to build a team in a virtual environment. But, along the way, we realized students performed better if multiple avenues of approach were afforded to them. Flexibility, for students and faculty, resulted in greater user satisfaction and end-state for all involved. Not only does online learning create safe and flexible environments for all students, but it gives them power over their education and process. And because of that success, and because of my research into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), I wrote this article for what I think would benefit and empower student-veterans the most toward their educational goals.

Upon completion of military service, veterans face extraordinary challenges as they transition back into civilian life. However, the trauma experienced by many during their military service may linger and result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can manifest in unexpected ways (i.e., difficulties with cognitive processing, attention deficit and memory disorders, sense of helplessness, and anxiety). Many veterans do not recognize the significance of PTSD-related symptoms or understand how to seek treatment. Student-veterans with undiagnosed PTSD may also encounter additional challenges that go beyond those of a typical student. While educational environments demand focus, time, and effort, PTSD can be a direct impediment to learning. This article will discuss ways student-veterans can use distance education to continue their education while also reducing the disruptive impact of PTSD.



U.S. Army Soldiers take an exam at the Education Center at Fort Knox, Kentucky, July 31, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Brian Hamilton)

PTSD in Society

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, up to 30% of Vietnam War veterans, 12% of Gulf War veterans, and between 11-20% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have been diagnosed with PTSD (“How Common is PTSD in Veterans?”, 2022). It often has a negative association in popular culture with movies like “Rambo: First Blood” – where Sylvester Stallone portrays a Vietnam veteran, a loner and drifter who carries a large hunting knife and dispatches police officers in the mountains of Washington state. But what the movie did get right, were some of the common symptoms of PTSD. Stallone’s portrayal of the character reflected his inability to concentrate on a task, keep a reliable occupation, or meaningful personal relationships outside of military service.

This stereotype, as well as a lack of understanding about PTSD, has led to a portrayal of veterans as being lazy, unpredictable, and aggressive. This affects all veterans experiencing PTSD, especially those who endeavor to further their education while overcoming challenges beyond those of typical students. As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are in their twilight, many veterans face this reality as they transition from military service and use their post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits to pursue their educational goals. These veterans and current and future educators, should be prepared and aware of challenges that may arise.

The Benefits of Self-Directed Learning

Veterans are no strangers to distance education. The military has been conducting distance education for de-

cadres. Because of high operational tempos, far geographical locations, or even COVID precautions, military personnel are used to, or have in some fashion experienced, distance learning at this point in their careers.

Safety

According to Brock (2018), “Emotions such as anxiety, self-consciousness, or fear, which may be present in a conflicted environment, can interfere with online students’ basic, cognitive abilities involved in constructing knowledge” (p.3). However, some students are more receptive to learning while in a more comfortable and stress-free environment, such as their home, and tend to acquire new information better this way. There is also less pressure and stress from the difference in age, maturity, and lack of understanding of the military experience by their student counterparts (Dove, 2020). This is one of the many positive benefits distance education, through online courses, provides for student-veterans struggling with PTSD. It gives them comfort and control over their surroundings, which can decrease their anxiety triggers.

Control

As pointed out by Shearer and Park (2019), “There is no single technology that addresses all the needs of learners or the results expected by the constituents involved in the distance education enterprise” (p. 261). Thus, distance education offers many options so learners can maintain a consistent flow of communication while allowing them to choose how and by which methods they will communicate (i.e., email, discussion postings, phone, text message, prerecorded audio files, video files, videoconferencing, etc.). These methods allow real-time interaction between the learners and provide a sense of connectedness in a less stressful way for student-veterans struggling with PTSD.

The Need for Healthy Coping Strategies

Brock's (2018) dissertation examines the unique experiences of the online educational process viewed through Soldiers' perspectives. Though her dissertation focuses on active-duty service members, she addresses problems and provides remarkable insight useful toward improving the overall learning experience for student-veterans.

Brock (2018) wrote, "strong organizational skills and healthy coping mechanisms are perceived to be critical to [online active military] student progress and success" (p. 97). Participants of Brock's study demonstrated that their success and high grades in online courses were a result of solid organizational skills: "To resolve the work/life balance conflict, good organization was a key issue in the ability to succeed in online course work" (Brock, 2018, p. 97). Other successful strategies included identifying one's strengths, drawing a sense of agency, and implementing healthy coping mechanisms:

"The participants utilized a variety of coping mechanisms to help them function in a high conflict environment, and to cope after such experiences. The participants showed success with evidence made by their statements indicating they'd engaged in conflict resolution strategies. Hawthorne [a participant] exhibited

examples of positive conflict resolution. For example, he stated that he avoided procrastination and doing the minimum, moderated his behavior (completed quality work) and attitude (perseverance) to mediate problems that could result from the issue (potential for low educational progress). He resolved the conflict to improve his online academic success by aligning his attitude and behavior to create a transformational result." (Brock, 2018, p. 97)

For student-veterans experiencing PTSD, these healthy coping mechanisms can help them focus and may help with their overall emotional wellbeing. Veterans affected by PTSD can learn these strategies, take control over their time and life, and perform better when provided the right resources and learning environment.

Conclusion

PTSD is not just relegated to combat veterans. It affects anyone who has survived or witnessed something traumatic. Distance education can be a great resource to help those affected control their environment, provide a safe and self-directed structure and allow them to continue their educational goals as they navigate their future. ■

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Sgt. Maj. David Cox is an instructor at the Department of Command Leadership, Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas. He has studied the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder on students for the last several years with an eye toward gathering best practices and sharing them with the force. He has a bachelor's degree in Homeland Security, as well as master's degrees in Adult Education and Leadership Studies. Cox is the author of *The Most Dangerous Course of Action*, a study of trends in transnational terrorism and domestic extremism written in collaboration with Sergeant Major of the Army (retired) Julius W. Gates.



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