UNDERSTANDING YOUR CLIENT'S MILITARY BACKGROUND

You may be surprised to know that military background is not always assessed by clinicians or spontaneously share by Veteran clients.

Asking if the individual in your office has served in the military is simple, quick, and can have important implications for available benefits and care. Assessing Veteran status is not something that is commonly included in traditional behavioral health screenings and it's not unusual for clinicians to report that they aren't sure how many of their clients may have served in the military. In addition, Veterans may not self-identify as a Veteran to the clinician.

ARE YOU SEEING VETERANS IN YOUR PRACTICE?

Asking your client whether he or she has ever served in the military will ensure that each Veteran will have the opportunity to access the network of healthcare and support services for which he or she may be eligible. Learning more about his or her military experiences can inform treatment planning and increase awareness of the extraordinary strengths that Veterans often possess, as well as unique challenges that they may face.

Military service can be a significant, if not central, piece of one's background. The military is a distinct culture – and each branch (Army, Marines, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard) is represented by its' own unique symbols, values, and mottos. Even after separating from the military, Veterans often continue to feel a strong sense of affiliation with this culture. Deployment and combat experiences are also unique and can profoundly impact an individual's life. On this site we provide handouts and links to online trainings that can help you to learn more about military experiences and culture.

Additionally, many resources exist to support Service Members that can be accessed once a little more is known about his or her service. This includes not only access to VA healthcare but other resources through VA such as support services for college and employment.

The following are simple screening questions (suitable for both men and women) that, when asked with a stance of openness and respect, can be easily incorporated into a practitioner's usual intake process.

SCREENING QUESTIONS

Basic Questions:

1. Have you ever served in the military?
2. Did you serve in the National Guard, Reserves, Coast Guard or in any of the Active Duty Services?
3. Do you have a close family member who has served in the military?
   - Asking whether your client has close family members who have served in the military can, 1) lead to a deeper understanding of the client's family context, and 2) allow you to assess whether family functioning could benefit from connection with relevant resources.

Follow-up Questions:

1. What dates did you serve?
2. When did you separate from the military?
3. What branch and rank were you?

Additional Questions:

1. Where did you serve (e.g. in the US/where; overseas/where?)
2. What job/roles did you have when you were serving?
3. Were you ever deployed?
4. If so, where and when were you deployed?
5. Are there other things you would like to tell me about your military service?

KEEP IN MIND

1. The client may not consider him or herself to be a Veteran. To optimize understanding, interventions, possible referrals, benefits, and resources available, ask your client if he or she served in the military.
2. Use the sample questions above to guide your inquiry.
3. Ensure that you have enough time with the Service Member to allow them to expand on answers if desired.
4. The Service Member may not wish to discuss their experiences and the provider should respect this.
5. Convey a willingness to listen to the experiences if the Service Member wants to discuss them in the future.
6. If a Veteran has served in a combat theater, he or she may have experienced a range of potentially traumatic or stressful events including being under life threat, witnessing death and dying, and experiencing the loss of a fellow comrade. It can be helpful to become familiar with events commonly experienced in combat and potential reactions to this exposure.

FINAL THOUGHT

You may also want to create and hang a simple sign that indicates to Veterans and Service Members that you would like to know if they have served.