

JOINING FORCES AMERICA

Community support for returning servicemembers

With the number of returning servicemembers marching toward the 2 million mark, there are fewer and fewer Americans who are personally untouched by the sacrifices these men and women have made through their service in Iraq, Afghanistan, and earlier operations. It seems nearly everyone has a friend, neighbor, or co-worker, if not a close family member, who has returned from combat.

"[Family and friends] allowed me to ease into non-combatant life by patiently waiting for me to open up. They were not judgmental, they did not blame me for the actions and failures of war. We did not get into political discussions ... They welcomed me with open arms and ears."

- Survey respondent

Recent headlines have focused on the serious mental and cognitive conditions suffered by some returning servicemembers, and the gaps in treatment within the military and U.S. health systems.

The Joining Forces America study, sponsored by Capella University, also examines mental health issues of returning servicemembers, but goes behind the headlines to explore issues related to the stress of combat duty and, more particularly, the stress of returning from combat and getting back to "normal life." The Joining Forces study includes two separate but similar surveys, one for post-combat servicemembers and veterans, and the other for mental health professionals. (For details, see About the Joining Forces America study, p. 14.)

The study addresses two essential questions:

- What mental health and day-to-day challenges do servicemembers face when they return from combat?
- How prepared is the mental health professional community, as well as the community at large, to help with these issues?

Survey of those with combat experience

What are the major stressors, and how prepared are family, friends, and community members to help?

From the servicemember perspective, the goal of the study was to explore the impact not only of serious mental health problems, but also of less serious or "minor" mental health issues. The survey also asks about re-entry stressors that might not be considered mental health issues, but that can significantly affect the day-to-day lives of servicemembers and their families as they transition from a combat role back into their home community or military base. Further, the survey touches on the preparedness of family members, friends, community members, and the mental health community to help with re-entry issues, and captures servicemembers' views about the best way to help with re-entry.

Survey of mental health professionals

How prepared is the mental health community to help with post-combat issues?

With an expected influx of servicemembers returning from combat with mental health needs, the Capella study sought to determine how prepared members of the mental health community feel to address the needs of this population. The survey is unusual in its focus on mental health professionals' own perspective on their individual and collective readiness to address servicemembers' needs. The survey also invited mental health professionals to make recommendations to the mental health community and the community at large on how to address the needs of returning servicemembers.

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About the Joining Forces America study

This study was sponsored by Capella University to explore post-combat mental health and re-entry issues from the perspective of returning servicemembers and the mental health community, and to solicit ideas for what we as a society can do to make post-combat transitions smoother for returning servicemembers. Two separate but similar survey instruments were used, one for servicemembers and one for mental health professionals.

Join the online conversation

To invite further conversation and help communities better understand the mental health and re-entry issues of returning servicemembers, Capella University has created an online public forum, joiningforcesamerica.org, to offer servicemembers, their families, friends and other interested parties the opportunity to share their ideas for helping servicemembers transition from combat duty to their home community.

The confidential servicemember survey was conducted online between May 27 and June 4, 2008. The survey group consisted of Capella University adult students who were affiliated with the military, including active servicemembers, veterans, and their immediate family members. Combat zone experience by the individual or an immediate family member was required to participate in the survey. In total, 238 participated as servicemembers/veterans and 11 participated as family members. The sample size of the family members was too small to be statistically reliable and their results are not included in this report. For the purposes of this report, the term "servicemember" is used to report the combined responses of servicemembers and veterans.

The confidential mental health professional survey was conducted online between May 27 and June 8, 2008, among four groups: an online panel of 201 mental health professionals; 29 members of a military psychology online discussion group; 1,064 Capella University adult students and alumni who were enrolled in or graduated from an advanced degree program with a mental health, counseling, or psychology focus; and 37 Capella University psychology and counseling faculty members. The reported results include the responses of the 999 survey participants in these four groups who identified themselves as working mental health professionals.

Additionally, members of the American Counseling Association (ACA) were invited to complete the mental health professional survey in the June 17, 2008, and July 1, 2008, editions of ACAeNews, an email newsletter of the association. Fifty-one ACA members completed the survey between June 17 and July 8, 2008. Their results are reported separately in this report and are not included in the totals or subtotals for all mental health professionals.

Significant demographic comparisons between ACA respondents and the larger group of "all mental health professionals" who completed the survey:

- 82 percent of ACA members who completed the survey identified themselves as licensed professional/mental health counselors, compared to 18 percent of all mental health professionals who completed the survey. Other mental health professions represented in the "all mental health professionals" sample included licensed marriage and family counselor, licensed psychology practitioner, licensed social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, and "other mental health professional."
- ACA members and "all mental health professionals" had similar experience levels, with ACA members averaging 9.1 years of practice in the mental health field, compared to 10.1 years for all mental health professionals.
- As a whole, ACA members who completed the survey had more professional experience with the military than other mental health professional respondents. More than 62 percent of ACA survey respondents said they had experience counseling servicemembers with combat experience, compared to 41 percent of all mental health professional respondents. Fifty-one percent said they had counseled servicemember families, compared to 37 percent of all mental health professional respondents.
- ACA respondents also had, on average, more personal military experience than other mental health professional respondents (such as current or past military experience, or having a close family member in the military). Only 16 percent of ACA respondents said they had no personal military experience, compared to 34 percent of other mental health professional respondents.