

Eating Disorders in Military Personnel and Veterans

Resources for Health Care Providers

Screening for Military Service

Providing effective patient-centered care for military personnel and veterans requires an understanding of your patients' military backgrounds:¹

- In addition to other cultural contexts, a history with military service can influence patients' ideals, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors.
- Each individual service member belongs to a different military sub-culture depending on their time and place of service, military branch, and military occupation.

Not all patients spontaneously share information about military service, so conducting a screening is essential to inform treatment planning and to ensure that veterans access the services available to them.²

- Access a list of military service screening questions and tips for the process at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/communityproviders/screening_howto.asp

Symptoms of Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are serious complex mental illnesses related to biological, psychological, and social factors that affect people of all demographic backgrounds. In general, eating disorders involve severe disturbances in eating behaviors and related thoughts and emotions. People with eating disorders often become preoccupied with food and their body weight. Identify patients that may be experiencing an eating disorder by looking for the following warning signs.³

Physical symptoms

- Fluctuations in weight
- Gastrointestinal complaints
- Menstrual irregularities
- Dizziness or fainting
- Dental problems
- Dry skin and hair
- Fine hair on the body

Emotional and behavioral symptoms

- Preoccupation with weight, food, calories, and dieting
- Refusal to eat certain foods
- Discomfort eating around others
- Withdrawal from usual friends and activities
- Use of food rituals
- Extreme concern with body size and shape
- Extreme mood swings

Please note that there is no universal presentation of an eating disorder. Each individual struggling will have a unique set of symptoms and look different.

Eating Disorders in the Military Population

The emphasis on physical fitness, weight, and body shape in the military increases risk for developing an eating disorder. Exposure to trauma causes distress that active duty military personnel and veterans may cope with in unhealthy ways, including disordered eating.

Men and women who experienced trauma are more likely to have an eating disorder than the general population.⁴

Veterans, especially males, who experienced military sexual trauma are at a two-fold higher risk for developing an eating disorder.⁵

Over half of active duty service members reported experiencing weight-based stigma and one third of the respondents used unhealthy methods to lose weight quickly.⁶

To learn more about the experiences veterans have with disordered eating, watch video testimonies at <https://maketheconnection.net/symptoms/eating-problems>

Eating Disorder Treatment

If you are concerned that a patient is experiencing symptoms of disordered eating, it is best practice to help them access appropriate treatment as soon as possible, given the seriousness of these illnesses.

- To confirm concerns, have patients complete an online screening for eating disorder risk at <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/screening-tool> or conduct a screening yourself using a quick assessment for eating disorder concerns, S.C.O.F.F.⁷
 - 1) Do you make yourself sick because you feel uncomfortably full?
 - 2) Do you worry you have lost control over how much you eat?
 - 3) Have you recently lost more than 15 pounds in a three-month period?
 - 4) Do you believe yourself to be fat when others say you are too thin?
 - 5) Would you say food dominates your life?

If your patient answers "yes" two or more times, it is "quite likely" they have an eating problem and should seek further evaluation by a qualified professional.

- Treat patients using evidence-based treatments for eating disorders or if needed, refer patients to mental health professionals with expertise in eating disorders so that patients can receive proper diagnosis and treatment.
- Make sure that patients understand the treatment benefits they have earned as veterans by visiting <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/>
- Explain to patients that treatment ideally will address the medical implications of eating disorder symptoms in addition to the psychological, emotional, and interpersonal factors that contribute to eating disorders through psychotherapy. Depending on the severity, there are care levels available ranging from residential treatment to outpatient therapy.⁸

Continuing Education

- Increase your awareness of military culture by completing core-competency training modules for healthcare professionals at <https://deploymentpsych.org/military-culture-course-modules>
- Learn more about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder through a course for professionals working with people who have experienced trauma at https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/continuing_ed/military_culture.asp
- Read about the mental health services that the VA provides at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/MHG_English.pdf
- Access VA/DOD clinical practice guidelines for many physical and mental health conditions at <https://www.healthquality.va.gov/>
- Access training for providers in evidence-based treatments for eating disorders, offered through the Missouri Eating Disorders Council by visiting www.moedc.org

References

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5. Blais, R. K et al., (2017). Military sexual trauma is associated with post-deployment eating disorders among Afghanistan and Iraq veterans. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 50(7), 808-816. (5)
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**GET REAL
GET HELP**

MOEDC

For more information, visit the **Missouri Eating Disorders Council** website www.moedc.org

If you are interested in professional trainings on eating disorder assessment and evidence-based treatments, contact Dr. Ellen Fitzsimmons-Craft of Washington University in St. Louis at fitzsimmonse@wustl.edu, Executive Director of the Missouri Eating Disorders Council's Training Initiative.