FIVE EYES MHRIC

# A MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE IN MILITARY, VETERAN AND FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

**Plain language summary**

## THE WAY FORWARD: TREATMENT OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER IN MILITARY PERSONNEL

### THE ISSUE

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a common mental health problem that affects military personnel and veterans. It can be mild. It can also become chronic and severe and impact a person's quality of life and ability to function. People can develop PTSD from different types of traumatic events, including events that take place in demanding operational deployments with high levels of threat, hostile physical environments, and exposure to human suffering. Challenges in adjusting to civilian life following a person's military career can also increase their risk for developing mental health problems.

Past research has focused on prevention, treatment, and management of PTSD. Our research aims to advance earlier work to understand barriers and deliver evidence-based treatments that will lead to positive outcomes for military personnel, veterans, and their families.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Military personnel in combat roles have a greater chance of developing PTSD. Other stressors can increase the risk and severity of PTSD, including:

- military sexual trauma
- training exercises conducted under extreme conditions
- multiple traumatic events and cumulative exposure to trauma

When a person with PTSD does not engage in treatment or get support when it's needed, they are at a higher risk of chronic, long-term PTSD. This can have significant negative consequences for both the person living with PTSD and their families.

### WHY WE DID THIS RESEARCH

We looked at the challenges of providing evidence-based treatments for PTSD to military personnel and veterans at key points:

- acknowledging the problem
- making the decision to enter treatment
- accessing care
- staying in treatment
- maximizing the effectiveness of treatment

Our goal was to come up with innovative solutions to these challenges. We wanted to understand the status of PTSD treatment and explore research directions to advance this work.

The Five Eyes Mental Health Research and Innovation Collaborative is composed of thought leaders from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States. These experts conduct research and provide advice to governments on mental health issues. Our shared goal is to improve mental health outcomes for past and present military personnel and their families.

## WHAT WE DID

Our team of subject matter experts looked at treatments for PTSD in military and veteran populations. We highlighted the need for improved treatment and approaches to symptom management. We identified challenges in delivering treatment and provided a framework for future research to respond to these challenges.

## WHAT WE FOUND

### Acknowledging a problem and asking for help can be difficult

Military personnel find it challenging to recognize and accept that they are living with a mental health problem. It's also difficult for them to ask for help. They often refuse mental health care and try to self-manage or handle the problem on their own.

### The stigma around mental health issues can negatively impact care-seeking and a person's career

Many worry that getting support for PTSD will impact their career. The stigma around mental health remains a major barrier. People fear being treated differently by military leaders or colleagues. On deployment, they are highly focused on the operation, making it difficult to seek help.

### People with PTSD may go to extreme lengths to avoid reminders of trauma

Many treatments for PTSD require the person to confront the memory of their traumatic experience. This can prevent people from seeking help, or it may lead them to drop out early or delay returning to treatment.

### Healthcare providers play a key role in recognizing the signs

As the first point of contact for mental health conditions, healthcare providers need to find ways to recognize possible PTSD and support patients in seeking treatment.

### Military personnel and veterans do not respond as well to treatment as others

Military PTSD is associated with high levels of anger, substance misuse, sleep disturbance, and emotional numbing. These impact treatment outcomes. More evidence is needed to define and guide supports for people for whom treatment has been less effective.

### A strong relationship between the therapist and military member achieves better outcomes

Practitioners should understand military culture, stay engaged while listening to traumatic experiences, and have the expertise to deliver trauma-focused treatment.

## KEY MESSAGES

- **Better awareness of treatment benefits is needed**. Initiatives targeting military leadership, unit members, and family can help identify strategies to increase engagement in PTSD treatment.
- **Identifying members who will benefit from intervention is key**. Screening efforts for PTSD should focus on where the gains will be most substantial. Screening should go beyond self-reporting.
- **Success requires a team approach**. Collaborative care models may help increase engagement with PTSD treatment and match the care according to complexity and needs.
- **Effective treatment response requires an understanding of the risk factors**. Shame, anger, depression, guilt, anxiety, and disassociation can lead to poorer treatment response. It's important to understand the risk factors to be able to address them and to predict outcomes.
- **Consistent PTSD terminology is critical**. Agreeing on the meaning of treatment success, failure, non-response, resistance, remission, and cure is essential to treatment planning.
- **Further research is needed to improve, complement, and enhance current treatments**. This includes:
    - learning more about promising non-trauma focused treatments
    - developing more effective medications
    - using personalized medicine tailored to the patient
    - evaluating non-traditional approaches to wellness, such as support animals, hiking, and rehabilitation that helps people return to work

---

**This is a plain language summary of Treatment of military-related post-traumatic stress disorder: challenges, innovations, and the way forward.**

**Published**: May 2, 2019 | https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2019.1595545

**Authors**: David Forbes, David Pedlar, Amy B. Adler, Clare Bennett, Richard Bryant, Walter Busuttil, John Cooper, Mark C. Creamer, Nicola T. Fear, Neil Greenberg, Alexandra Heber, Mark Hinton, Mal Hopwood, Rakesh Jetly, Ellie Lawrence-Wood, Alexander McFarlane, Olivia Metcalf, Meaghan O'Donnell, Andrea Phelps, J. Don Richardson, Nicole Sadler, Paula P. Schnurr, Marie-Louise Sharp, James M. Thompson, Robert J. Ursano, Miranda Van Hooff, Darryl Wade, and Simon Wessely