Adjustment Issues in the Classroom

VA College Toolkit Handout

Transitions can be a challenge, and the transition from the military to the classroom is no exception. Adjustment difficulties may be amplified if a Service Member or Veteran is transitioning to civilian life after one or several deployments. Some of the more common adjustment issues are recognized below, along with tips and suggestions for how to help. Please keep in mind that in addition to Veterans, there may be Active Duty, Reservists, and National Guardsmen on campus, some of whom have or will be deployed. These tips are applicable to them as well.

DISTRACTION

Veterans may appear easily distracted. They have been trained to assess for threat, and noises and movement may pull their attention from the instructor. Distractions could include other students using cell phones during class or using electronic devices for social networking/web surfing during class. People entering class late may also interfere with focus. Loud noises or smells can be triggering. For example, a dropped book may be quickly overlooked or forgotten by most people. Someone who has just returned from a combat zone may be immediately on guard since a loud noise could indicate danger. A Veteran may not be able to concentrate for the rest of the class period due to this single incident.

What can I do? Your first inclination may be to encourage the Veteran to sit in the front of the classroom, out of sight of some of these distractions. However, Veterans often prefer to sit in the back, where they have a better opportunity to assess the situation and any danger. Invite a conversation about what seating arrangement would work best for the Veteran. It may also be helpful to set rules around conduct in the classroom. For example, cell phones should be turned off or put on silent.

PROVOCATIVE CONTENT

Class content may contain triggering material. Certain writing assignments, readings, or videos may serve to bring up painful reminders. Although these materials may seem innocuous, the Veteran may still attribute meaning to them. This could lead to difficulty in concentrating.

What can I do? Provide information and prompts prior to introducing potentially distressing content (e.g., combat, war videos). Encourage pre-screening of videos or skimming of readings and assignments. Be open to discussing alternative options for fulfilling the requirements of the class.

SITTING QUIETLY

A Veteran may have difficulty sitting for extended periods of time. Military training fosters quick reactions and being ready to mobilize at a moment's notice. In the classroom, this can look like inattention and hyperactivity. Do not assume the Veteran has attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Consider the life-saving function of this training and remember that there is no un-training that occurs when the Veteran leaves service.

What can I do? Offer breaks during the class. Offer the option of standing in the back of the classroom, if appropriate, or stepping outside as needed.

SLEEPINESS

Many Veterans have trouble sleeping. They may have difficulty falling asleep, nightmares, or wake up multiple times a night. As a result, they may be drowsy in class. This may become evident if a Veteran appears to be nodding off or falling asleep.

What can I do? If you notice this behavior, it may be helpful to speak with the Veteran in person. Together, brainstorm ways to help him or her stay engaged (taking notes, asking questions, calling his or her name). It is not a good idea to tap/touch a Veteran who is sleeping, as he or she may react quickly and in a manner of self-defense.

UNSTRUCTURED SETTING

Structure and discipline are a part of daily life in the military. Further, the military has a specific chain of command, demanding respect for authority. Campus life is less structured, often with an unknown hierarchy. This may lead to problems with open-ended assignments, leaderless or small group assignments, and uncertainty about how to communicate during class discussions.

What can I do? It may be helpful to be explicit about the students' roles and define expectations during class discussions and group assignments.

- Encourage students verbally and in the syllabus to ask questions and actively participate. Veterans are trained not to challenge authority, and this may lead to them not asking questions in class.
- Encourage interactions with peers through discussions, group work, etc.
- Communicate expectations and assignments in a clear, direct manner with specific goals.

- Encourage students to approach you with questions after class and during breaks or to use office hours and email. A student asking for an extension or flexibility on an assignment or test may be doing so for various reasons. For example, if the Veteran has an appointment in the Pain Clinic at the VA Medical Center, and the Pain Clinic only has appointments available on the first Tuesday of the month, it may his or her only opportunity to get medical treatment for something that is impacting his or her sleep, concentration, and attention. Further, if a student is a National Guardsmen and has drill on the weekend, he or she may be away from home from Friday through Monday. This could affect the student's ability to complete an assignment or study for an exam. Some flexibility with assignments, tests, or attendance policies, based upon individual situations, should be considered.

CAMPUS CULTURE/CLIMATE

Be aware of political statements that may be overtly expressed in the classroom and on campus. These may elicit strong emotions in Veterans. Always assume that someone in the class has been or knows someone who has been in the military.

Situations to be aware of include:

- Public anniversary dates (e.g., Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Veterans Day).
- Protests. These can be triggering events, both due to inflammatory content (e.g., anti-war) and due to discomfort with large groups congregated in a single place.
- Private anniversary dates. Dates on which events of personal significance have occurred (e.g., deployment date, return date, death of a buddy).

What can I do? Be respectful and mindful of the impact the above situations may have on the Veteran. Like other diversity groups on campus, make an effort to learn more about your student Veterans.

PRIVACY

Some Veterans may not want to bring attention to their service. There may be many reasons for this, one of which is that he or she may not wish to speak of his or her experiences.

What can I do? Be respectful of a person's desire to disclose or not disclose his or her Veteran status.

- If you are interested in providing Veterans in your class an opportunity to covertly disclose his or her status, you could hand out note cards during the first class to gather information about the students in your class. You could ask them to include Veteran status or information about their past military experiences.
- You could also consider expressing support through non-verbal means (pins, stickers, ribbons) which may make it easier for a Veteran to approach you with questions.

RELATING TO OTHERS

Student Veterans may not only be several years older than their fellow students, they may also have different responsibilities, such as childcare and outside employment. Combat Veterans have often witnessed and experienced extreme life and death situations. This may lead to some student Veterans feeling a disconnect from students who are often younger and who may have less varied life experience.

What can I do? Recognize that the carefree college attitude of some students can be troubling to Veterans who have seen the real world. This can make it difficult to relate to peers. Help Veterans get connected to your campus student Veterans club or Student Veterans of America (SVA) chapter where they may be better able to relate to some of their peers.

RESPECT

When Veterans and Service Members were asked to identify the most helpful thing faculty and staff could do, they responded with a request that they be treated with respect.

What can I do? Treat all students with respect.