

Competencies for Counseling Military Populations

ELIZABETH A. PROSEK
University of North Texas

ELIZABETH E. BURGIN
University of North Texas

KATHERINE M. ATKINS
Governor's State University

JOSEPH D. WEHRMAN
University of Colorado Colorado Springs

DAVID L. FENELL
University of Colorado-Colorado Springs

CHEYENNE CARTER
Wake Forest University

LEIGH GREEN
West Texas A&M University

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Elizabeth A. Prosek is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling and Higher Education at the University of North Texas; Elizabeth A. Prosek is an Assistant Professor in the Counseling Program at the University of North Texas; Katherine M. Atkins is an Assistant Professor in the Counseling Program at Governors State University; Joseph D. Wehrman is the Department Chair and Associate Professor of Counseling and Human Services in the College of Education Center at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs; David L. Fenell is a Professor of Counseling and Human Services in the College of Education Center at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs; Cheyenne Carter is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Department of Counseling at Wake Forest University; Leigh Green is an Assistant Professor of Education in the College of Education and Social Science at West Texas A&M University. *Address correspondence to Elizabeth A. Prosek, The University of North Texas, Department of Counseling and Higher Education, 1155 Union Circle #310829, Denton, TX 76203. E-mail: Elizabeth.Prosek@unt.edu.*

The Competencies for Counseling Military Populations (CCMP) offers counselors a framework of foundational principles and practice for working with military-connected clients. CCMP represents all military populations including Active Duty, Reserve Components, Veterans, retired military members, and military families; and counselors should interpret each competency with understanding of foundational differences in experiences among these military populations. Counselors working with military populations can use the CCMP as a resource in their clinical and ethical decision-making processes, as well as for training and supervision purposes. In October 2016, the Military and Government Counseling Association (MGCA) appointed a Task Force to develop the competencies. The Task Force member composition was intentional to capture the diverse experiences of military-connected counselors and counselor educators. The Task Force followed a structured process in the development of the competencies including: review of previous counselor competencies endorsed by the American Counseling Association (ACA), review of the current research related to counseling military populations, conceptualization for a framework of competencies, formulation of competencies, and feedback with MGCA board members and reviewers representative of MGCA members at-large.

The intention of the CCMP is to provide a research-based set of guidelines that represent military considerations through the lens of a counselor professional identity: a strength-based philosophy grounded in principles of empowerment, wellness, prevention, and development. The framework for the CCMP is organized by seven core components: military culture, ethics, system features, assessment of presenting concerns, identity development, treatment, and advocacy. Additionally, to encourage counselors' competence and understanding of military structure and language, an overview of military key terms are defined.

1. Military Culture represents general information about the functioning and worldview of military service members and their families.

The professional counselor:

- a. Can identify the Active Duty service branches of the U.S. armed forces, and understands that each branch adheres to specialized structures, roles, ranks, and terms.
- b. Is aware that differences in military culture exist between each branch of service.
- c. Is aware that differences in experiences may exist between Veterans who previously served and Service members/Veterans who currently serve, as well as Veterans who served in different eras.
- d. Acknowledges values, beliefs, traditions, and functions of the military that influence the client's worldview.
- e. Is aware of the mission-first value system of the military.
- f. Acknowledges sacrifice, honor, and humility as values for Service members.
- g. Recognizes the importance of collectivism within the military culture, including a desire to limit risk or harm to others.
- h. Explores the introjection of military culture in the client's personal and professional functioning.
- i. Respects the individual motivations of Service members to enlist or commission in the military, as well as their individual experiences during their time in service and decision to leave or retire from the military.

- j. Recognizes the unique within group cultural differences of Service members including gender, race, ethnicity, age, education, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, ability-status, and religious/spiritual orientation.
- k. Understands the potential for variance in the resources and support systems available to Reserve Component Service members.
- l. Seeks education on the training methods and objectives of military operations, including potential differences among combat zones.
- m. Is aware of the potential for differing worldviews between Service members and civilians.

When working in military employment settings, the professional counselor:

- n. Is aware of, respects, and adheres to military base policy, protocol, and standard etiquette practices.

2. Identity Development represents the whole person concept of military life including one's personal identity as a Service member and connection to mission and core values of working as a military Service member across the lifespan.

The professional counselor:

- a. Understands that the military experience may be fused into all aspects of self, including cognitive, behavioral, affective, social, and spiritual components.
- b. Respects that Service members may integrate their core sense of self with military service identity such as style of dress and methods of communicating and relating to others.
- c. Understands the mental toughness and physical preparation required to make the choice to put self in harm's way in service of others.
- d. Understands the fusion of one's sense of self may be related to specific occupational roles and connection to specific units, jobs, positions, roles, deployments, and key training experiences.
- e. Understands how military rank, structure, and career progression influence sense of self.
- f. Respects Service members' perceptions of their military experiences, positive or negative, and regardless of societal or political opinions.
- g. Understands the professional career lifecycle experienced by Service members may have unique requirements for career progression and that roles, perspectives, limitations, and expectations may vary.
- h. Understands identity development related to transitions to civilian life such as ending of enlistment, retirement, separation, and physical or psychological injury.
- i. Has awareness of potential for grief and loss associated with transitions across the military career lifespan.
- j. Is aware of potential transition concerns associated with health resources, including continuity of care relative to health insurance.
- k. Understands that Service members may vary and exhibit unique characteristics based on generational affiliation.
- l. Understands the emphasis Service members may place on physical fitness related to self-concept.

- m. Has awareness of the role that aggression and targeted violence have related to self-identity and membership in a warrior culture.

- 3. Systems** represents general information about how Service members' families, spouses, and children experience the nature and structure of the military lifecycle including, but not limited to, deployment, health and wellness, employment, long periods of separation, consequences of injury, and retirement.

The professional counselor:

- a. Can identify the stages of military deployments and the unique interpersonal and intrapersonal factors of each; and recognizes the variable of length and types of deployments.
- b. Is aware of unique characteristics of military families including demographics such as age of marriage and blended families, which may vary by branch and type of service.
- c. Is aware of the complex nature of stressors faced by military families including factors related to separation and relocation.
- d. Understands that Reserve Component families must often negotiate the complexities of two worlds, both civilian and military, with varying degrees for structural support from both worlds.
- e. Understands the high level of adaptation and resiliency skills are beneficial for military families to meet the common demands of military lifestyle including stress, uncertainty, and frequent separations.
- f. Is aware of the roles and expectations experienced by military families including factors such as separation, career evolution, and transition.
- g. Is aware that dual-military marriages may be characterized by unique challenges such as the de-synchronization of training, deployment, and advancement opportunities, given the need to balance the goals and duties of both military careers and familial obligations.
- h. Is aware of the unique identity developed by children raised in military households and challenges placed on military families, to include adult children of military upbringing.
- i. Is aware of the potential physical, cognitive, and emotional demands of military service and the resulting impact, on self and others, of serving in a high-risk occupation.
- j. Understands potential of familial impact related to military retirement including the implications of the type of discharge from the military as well as medical retirement.
- k. Respects the unique and sometimes challenging decisions military families make in service of their fellow Service members, community, state, and country.
- l. Is aware that relational dissatisfaction in military marriages/relationships may be associated with combat exposure, traumatic-brain injury (TBI), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, substance use, and infidelity.
- m. Understands that the custody or conservatorship of children in military families may be impacted by training and deployment of military caregivers.

- 4. Assessment of Presenting Concerns** represents common areas of clinical concerns that Service members frequently present when seeking mental health services.

The professional counselor:

- a. Understands that military-connected clients are often concerned that they will experience stigmatization, which creates barriers to seeking mental health services.
- b. Recognizes the prevalence of TBIs and head injuries during military service and is aware that TBIs are associated with higher rates of other mental health and physical symptoms.
- c. Is aware that the number of Veterans seeking and receiving treatment for PTSD continues to increase in congruence with continued military missions.
- d. Is aware that combat exposure increases the risk of co-occurring concerns such as substance use disorders and suicidality.
- e. Understands the importance of assessing trauma in all military personnel given service-related injuries are not always combat-exposure related, and that secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, and preexisting trauma may exist.
- f. Recognizes that moral injury is a prevalent concern among the broad range of symptoms that may manifest following traumatic exposure.
- g. Recognizes that alcohol is the most prevalent substance Veterans misuse and frequently co-occurs with other mental health concerns and suicidality.
- h. Is aware that the unique stressors and differences in each branch of service results in significant differences in the levels of at-risk behaviors among Service members.
- i. Has awareness of current military sexual trauma (MST) rates among women and men Service members and recognizes that increased mental health disorders are often observed in those who have experienced MST.
- j. Becomes knowledgeable of the variances in current suicide statistics among Active Duty, Reserve Components, Veterans, retired military members, and military families when compared to national statistics.

- 5. Treatment** represents general information about unique concerns that may arise in the treatment of military-affiliated clients and approaches supported by research for military populations, including best practices of military care systems, as well as holistic, wellness-oriented services.

The professional counselor:

- a. Is aware of evidence-based treatments utilized by the U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- b. Recognizes that treatment needs may include a range of presenting concerns prevalent among Service members (e.g., sensory impairment, decreased memory/concentration, headaches, sleep disturbance, physical symptoms, and interpersonal isolation).
- c. Is aware of the adjunctive interdisciplinary services (e.g., occupational therapy, physical therapy, command consultation, embedded behavioral health, chaplaincy, and peer support) available within the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).
- d. Understands the effects of pharmacotherapy and supports appropriate client medication management services as needed.
- e. Supports coping skills development for effective functioning within several areas

- including career, recreation, housing, justice involvement, financial solvency, and interpersonal relationships.
- f. Considers inclusion of the military member's family and social supports in treatment.
 - g. Continually assesses for the nature, frequency, and severity of trauma exposure, as well as ongoing stressors and protective factors, such as social support, substance use, risk-seeking behaviors, and financial stability.
 - h. Is aware of holistic, mindfulness-based treatment approaches that are supported by research for military populations.
 - i. Seeks strategies to improve military members' access and engagement in mental health services.
 - j. Recognizes that operational tempo impacts scheduling for mental health services.

When working in military employment settings, the professional counselor:

- k. Recognizes that a limited number of Veterans eligible for services are enrolled for care with a Veteran Health Administration (VHA) provider.

6. Ethics represents counselors' self-awareness and motivation to serve military-connected clients, as well as ethical considerations working with military populations.

The professional counselor:

- a. Maintains competence by completing formal training for working with military personnel; and when possible, the training is experiential in nature.
- b. Identifies personal and professional motivations to counsel military populations.
- c. Brackets personal values and attitudes of war policies; addresses potential prejudices about military service or war; and recognizes their own political opinions of current and previous combat operations.
- d. Seeks consultation and supervision when ethical challenges arise specific to military populations.
- e. Remains mindful of legal requirements (see Federal Regulations and U.S. Department of Defense disclosure laws) in documentation and disclosure of records to service members' commands, medical board, or military court.
- f. Actively adheres to a self-care routine to prevent burnout, depersonalization, compassion fatigue, and impairment.
- g. Who also identifies as military-connected, assesses for and addresses potential countertransference.

When working in military employment settings, the professional counselor:

- h. Considers the potential impact to power differentials when taking leadership or administrative duties.
- i. Clarifies multiple-relationships in informed consent documentation and develops a collaborative plan with Service members for handling boundary crossings.
- j. Is prepared to discontinue personal relationships with colleagues when clinical services are required.
- k. Adheres to minimum disclosure requirements and need-to-know policies developed by Federal Regulations and the U.S. Department of Defense with attention to permissive language.

- l. Accepts the implications of determining fitness for duty status, honoring the client-counselor relationship in the process.
 - m. Adheres to the clinical practice guidelines of employment setting with attention to flexibility within the protocols when in the best interest of the client.
 - n. Considers community referrals when in the best interest of the client.
7. **Advocacy** represents counselors' ability to understand and influence individual, system, and public policy efforts to increase access to mental health resources for military-connected clients and promote the role of counseling professionals working with military populations.

The professional counselor:

- a. Advocates for strength-based, wellness approaches when counseling military-connected clients.
- b. Advocates for the development and accessibility of mental health care for military populations, with specific attention to family members, such as children.
- c. Forms collaborations among agencies serving military-connected clients.
- d. Compiles reputable non-VA resources to provide military-connected clients.
- e. Understands the complexity associated with VA Benefits programs and advocates with clients to receive the assistance to which they are entitled, as appropriate.
- f. Supports initiatives for trainings to decrease stigma associated with mental health within military populations.
- g. Supports initiatives for diversity trainings to generate positive cultural change, including the decrease of cultural stigmas of diverse individuals within military populations.
- h. Considers training opportunities to increase counselor competence among trainees and professionals working with military-connected clients.
- i. Supports prevention programs that connect military family members to the community.
- j. Advocates to change laws that conflict with counselors' ethical codes.
- k. Advocates to maintain the inclusion of counselors as mental health providers for military populations.
- l. Actively assists Active Duty, Reserve Components, Veterans, retired military members, and military families in self-advocacy strategies.

Military Definitions

Military Employment

Twelve Types of Military Service include five Active Duty service branches and seven part-time service branches. Part-time duty includes five Reserve forces and two Guard branches.

Active Duty service branches refer to the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy.

Reserve Forces refers to the Air Force Reserve, Army Reserve, Coast Guard Reserve, Marine Corps Reserve, and Navy Reserve. Members of the Reserve are citizens who combine a military role or career with a civilian career. They are not normally kept under arms and their main role is to be available to fight when the nation mobilizes for war or to defend against invasion. Members of the Reserve forces are civilians who maintain military skills by training, typically one weekend a month and two weeks a year.

National Guard consists of two separate entities: the Air National Guard and the Army National Guard. The National Guard are Reserve components belonging to a particular state. State governors or territorial adjutant generals hold the authority to call National Guard members to Active Duty for state missions such as responding to natural disasters. However, during times of war or national emergencies the National Guard can be called to Active Duty at the behest of Congress, the President, or the Secretary of Defense, thus they are a dual state-federal force.

Reserve Components of the Armed Forces are the Reserve forces and National Guard entities collectively referenced.

Enlisted Service members are those who joined the service and signed a contract of enlistment for a specific period of time. They are assigned to specific occupations within their service branch and can be considered the “workforce” of the military. Enlisted service members follow the orders of officers and tend to have specific jobs within the projects assigned.

Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) are enlisted Service members who obtain their positions of authority by promotion. They are the primary leaders for most of the military personnel. They are in charge or control as opposed to command their units. They insure their subordinates are properly trained and cared for and can do their assigned jobs proficiently.

Warrant Officers (WOs) are initially appointed to the rank of officer by a warrant from the Secretary of a Service as opposed to by a commission from the President of the United States. Warrant officers are technical experts in specific, critical fields such as pilot or imagery interpretation. Warrant officers are higher ranking than enlisted members, but lower ranking than the lowest commissioned officer rank. The Air Force no longer uses the warrant officer grade.

Commissioned Officers (Cos) hold commissions from the President of the United States and are confirmed by the Senate. They have completed a college bachelor’s degree and have either completed Officer Candidate School (OCS), Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), graduated from a service academy for their branch of service, or received a direct commission. Commissioned officers are considered leaders of those who have enlisted status and may be viewed as managers of projects.

Pay grade is an administrative organization system to create standards for salary compensation, in which higher pay grade numbers represent higher pay.

Rank is an organization system that denotes the level of responsibility or authority of the individual. Rank corresponds with pay grade; therefore, also follows the ascending order in which a higher pay grade number indicates a ranking with more responsibility. (See Appendices A and B for rank structures.)

Military Occupation Specialty code (MOS) references the specific job a service member is assigned to in the Army and Marines. In the Navy and Coast Guard the term is *rate* and the Air Force uses the term *specialty*.

Military Discharge denotes the way in which Service members are released from their obligation to the military. Many, but not all, discharged individuals may be eligible for benefits. Eligibility for benefits is assessed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. For example, Service members with a service-related injury may be entitled to a degree of disability pay.

DD214 is a Report of Separation issued by the Department of Defense upon a Service member's discharge, separation, or retirement. The DD214 provides information needed to verify benefits, retirement, and employment.

Honorable discharge indicates that a Service member has met or exceeded conduct or performance standards and will be eligible for all benefits upon discharge.

General discharge under honorable conditions indicates that a Service member is considered to have satisfactorily met conduct or performance standards and will be eligible for most benefits upon discharge.

General discharge under other than honorable conditions indicates that a Service member is considered to have fallen below conduct or performance standards and will be eligible for benefits pending review from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Dishonorable discharge is a punitive discharge which indicates that a Service member has been convicted by a court-martial conducted by the military and is not eligible for benefits upon sentencing.

Honorable retired indicates that a Service member has met or exceeded conduct or performance standards and will retire after more than 20 qualifying years of service. These individuals are eligible for all benefits and retirement pay.

Retired service-connected disability discharge indicates that a Service member developed a disability due to injury or illness incurred or aggravated during active military service and is unable to continue to serve. These individuals are eligible for benefits, but also additional disability pay.

Military Lifestyle

Base refers to a Department of Defense installation, also known as a camp, post, station, yard, center, or homeport where military members and their families may live, train, or conduct service related duties.

Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is a standardized amount of the money distributed to Service members for housing costs. The allowance is based on several factors including geographical location, pay grade, and number of dependents. The allowance is subject to increases each year, similar to a cost of living raise.

Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS) is a standardized amount of money distributed to assist Service members for partial food costs. The allowance is based on the cost of food by geographical location. Adjustments are made annually based on the average cost of food.

Commissary is the grocery store located on base. **Exchanges** are the base department store. Service members, dependents, and retirees are allowed to shop at these facilities.

Dependents are the spouse and children of the Service member. Children can include step-children and adopted children.

Family Support Groups refers to a formalized network of spouses to provide support to other spouses and families in the service branch. The Army and Navy have the Family Readiness Group (FRG). The Air Force has the Key Spouse program, Marines have the Family Readiness program, and Coast Guard has the Work-Life program. All programs share similar purpose to relay information from the command to the families.

Permanent Change of Station (PCS) refers to the relocation or transfer of a Service member to a new geographical assignment (e.g., duty station, base). Service members usually have opportunity to rank preferences for the new assignments, often referred to as a *dream sheet*. The amount of years at each assignment varies based on the service branch.

Operational References

Combat Zone is an area the President has designated for combat or engagement by the armed forces through an Executive Order. Other terms used include *in theater* or *operation*. Examples of combat zones include, but are not limited to World War II (American, Asiatic-Pacific, and European–African–Middle East theaters), Korean War, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Deployment refers to the process of moving forces into an area of operation. Areas of operation include active-combat zones and regions identified in multinational partnerships.

Hazardous Duty Incentive Pay (HDIP) is paid to Service members who perform flight duties and meet operational requirements. Examples include demolition of explosives, parachute jumping, or experimental stress duty.

Hostile Fire/Imminent Danger Pay (HFP/IDP) is paid when commanders certify that Service members are subjected to hostile fire or explosions, or are at risk of being exposed to those dangers.

Operation is used to reference organized military action or a military mission, for example Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

Operational Tempo is used to reference the sequence and timeframe of a unit's training exercises and deployments.

Redeployment references the return of Service members from a deployment, it represents their reintegration. The term may also be used to reference the transfer of forces to a command.

Rest and Recuperation (R&R) describes leave time afforded to Service members in combat.

Appendix A. Uniformed Service Ranks: Enlisted

Pay Grade	Army	Marines	Air Force	Navy	Coast Guard
E-1	Private	Private	Airman Basic	Seaman Recruit	Seaman Recruit
E-2	Private	Private First Class	Airman	Seaman Apprentice	Seaman Apprentice
E-3	Private First Class	Lance Corporal	Airman First Class	Seaman	Seaman
E-4	Specialist/Corporal	Corporal	Senior Airman	Petty Officer Third Class	Petty Officer Third Class
E-5	Sergeant	Sergeant	Staff Sergeant	Petty Officer Second Class	Petty Officer Second Class
E-6	Staff Sergeant	Staff Sergeant	Technical Sergeant	Petty Officer First Class	Petty Officer First Class
E-7	Sergeant First Class	Gunnery Sergeant	Master Sergeant/First Sergeant	Chief Petty Officer	Chief Petty Officer
E-8	Master Sergeant/First Sergeant	Master Sergeant/First Sergeant	Senior Master Sergeant/First Sergeant	Senior Chief Petty Officer	Senior Chief Petty Officer
E-9	Sergeant Major/Command Sergeant Major	Master Gunnery Sergeant/Sergeant Major	Chief Master Sergeant/First Sergeant/Command Chief Master Sergeant	Master Chief Petty Officer/ /Fleet or Command Master Chief Petty Officer	Master Chief Petty Officer/Command Master Chief
Senior Enlisted Advisor	Sergeant Major of the Army	Sergeant Major	Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force	Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy	Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard

Appendix B. Uniformed Service Ranks: Officers

Pay Grade	Army	Marines	Air Force	Navy	Coast Guard
O-1	Second Lieutenant	Second Lieutenant	Second Lieutenant	Ensign	Ensign
O-2	First Lieutenant	First Lieutenant	First Lieutenant	Lieutenant (junior grade)	Lieutenant (junior grade)
O-3	Captain	Captain	Captain	Lieutenant	Lieutenant
O-4	Major	Major	Major	Lieutenant Commander	Lieutenant Commander
O-5	Lieutenant Colonel	Lieutenant Colonel	Lieutenant Colonel	Commander	Commander
O-6	Colonel	Colonel	Colonel	Captain	Captain
O-7¹	Brigadier General	Brigadier General	Brigadier General	Rear Admiral (lower half)	Rear Admiral (lower half)
O-8	Major General	Major General	Major General	Rear Admiral (upper half)	Rear Admiral (upper half)
O-9	Lieutenant General	Lieutenant General	Lieutenant General	Vice Admiral	Vice Admiral
O-10	General	General	General	Admiral	Admiral
Special²	General of the Army	N/A	General of the Air Force	Fleet Admiral	Fleet Admiral

Note. With the exception of the Air Force, there are also levels of warrant officers.

¹Starting with O-7, a star system is used. For example, a one-star general in the Army refers to a Brigadier General.

²The Special five-star rankings are rarely used and reserved for times of war.