

MILITARY IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS
IN POST-MILITARY LIFE



DUANE K. L. FRANCE, LPC

Military in the Rear
View Mirror:
Mental Health and
Wellness
in Post-Military Life

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Duane K. L. France, MA, MBA, LPC

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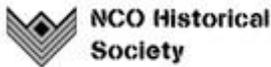
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The author of this book is a Mental Health Counselor licensed to practice in the state of Colorado. The thoughts, ideas, musings, and posts in this book come from his military experience, professional experience, and personal opinions. They do NOT, however, represent professional advice. While he is a Mental Health Counselor, he is not YOUR Mental Health Counselor, and the guidance in this work should not be considered a substitute for working with a licensed clinical mental health provider. The opinions expressed here are his own, and in no way should be seen as reflection of his agency, his profession, or any professional associations that he is connected with.

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Military in the Rear View Mirror

To those who sacrifice:

Service Members,

Veterans,

Their Families,

And those who dedicate their life's work

to helping those who have the military in the rear view mirror

CONTENTS

Foreword.....	viii
Introduction: Why Veteran Mental Health.....	9
Part 1: Honest Discussions about Veteran Suicide.....	12
A Serious Look at a Serious Subject: Veteran Suicide.....	13
The Boots Left Behind.....	16
Part 2: Who We Were: The Past Impacting the Present	18
The Once and Future Warrior.....	19
Why Would Veterans Want to Go Back to Combat?	22
Fear and the Fading of a Hardcore Soldier	24
Veterans are Masters and Creators of Chaos	27
On Courage, Vulnerability, and Radical Honesty	30
The Dangerous Trap of the Comparison Game	33
Arrogance and Humility, Entitlement and Invalidation - Post-Military Mindsets Holding You Back.....	35
Letting Go of Unfinished Business.....	38
The Myth of Invincibility	41
Public Perception of Veterans and Veteran Mental Health.....	43
The Benefits and Detriments of the Mission Focused Mindset.....	46
Emotional Detachment in Combat and Coming Home.....	49
Preparation, Surprise, and Emotion Regulation	52
Weighed Down by Past and Future	55
When the Cure Becomes the Curse	57
Insomnia and Veteran Mental Health.....	60
Does Time Heal the Psychological Impact of War?.....	63
The Minefield of Painful Memories	66
Avoiding Pain Because of the Fear of Suffering.....	68
Sharing Painful Stories.....	71
The Post-9/11 Veteran Divide: Success or Struggle.....	73

Part 3: Who We Are: Transformation and Change	77
Veterans: Who You Are Is Not Who You Were...	78
Awareness without Action Does Not Lead to Change	81
How We View The World Impacts Veteran Mental Health	83
Veterans: Strangers in a Strange Land?	85
Prepare for the Storm While the Sky is Blue	88
Isolation, Solitude, and Veteran Mental Health.....	91
Veterans, Do We Accept Limitations or Acknowledge Limitations?.....	96
Protecting Your Core Self from the Arrows of Malevolence	99
For Every Mile of Darkness, We Need an Equal Distance of Light.....	102
Bridging the Gap Between Beautiful Lies and Ugly Truth.....	105
Ambiguity and Lack of Feedback in Post-Military Life.....	108
Seeking Serendipity: Paying Attention to Beneficial Chance.....	110
Thankfulness for Transition and Change.....	113
Avoiding Avoidance Leads to Success in Post-Military Life.....	116
Veterans and the Zone of Emotional Effectiveness.....	118
The Myth of Limited Resources of Support for Veterans	121
Ten Reasons for Veterans (Not) To Avoid Mental Health Counseling	124
The Healing Power of a Stranger's Ear	128
The Misconception of the All-Knowing Therapist.....	131
We Can't Change What We Don't Talk About	134
Hey, Veterans: Why So Serious?	136
Part 4: Who We Will Become: Moving Forward in Post-Military Life	139
After the Military, Finding Your What Is As Important as Finding Your Why.....	140
Getting Perspective in Post-Military Life.....	143
On Hope and Veteran Mental Health	146
Finding Flow in Post-Military Life.....	148
Veterans Can Find Meaning and Purpose through Service.....	151

Being Grateful for the Least of Things.....	154
Stepping Out in Spite of Doubt	156
The Role of Shared Background Knowledge in Post-Military Life	158
The Importance of Social Connection in Veteran Mental Health	161
Public Support for Veterans and Veteran Mental Health	164
National Vietnam War Veterans Day - Until They All Come Home	167
The Silent Plea of Monuments	170
If the War is Done, Is the Work Done?	173
Mental Health Professionals Must Be Included in Conversations about Veteran Mental Health	175
As Our Veterans Go, So Goes Our Nation	178
Acknowledgements	181
Notes	182

Foreword

Duane France's newest book, *Military in the Rear-View Mirror*, spins on the axis of this statement: "*The only veteran whose life you can save tomorrow is yours.*" This may seem like an odd statement for a combat veteran who has since become a licensed mental health provider...even more interesting perhaps given that Duane is my co-host for the nationally disseminated podcast "Seeking the Military Suicide Solution." Yet, as fellow healers, and thought leaders in the suicide prevention field, Duane and I agree on this principle.

We empower people by putting them in the driver's seat. I've found that veterans and first responders are often concerned that therapy will be disempowering. To some, this concern becomes a substantial barrier to engaging in care. Duane and I agree that patients (or clients as you prefer) should neither put their therapists on a pedestal, nor see us as "wizards" (in any sense of the word). Licensed, professional healers have expertise to lend to the process of growth, but the individual who seeks to grow must remain in the driver's seat.

For many years, along with a deeply trusted veteran peer, I co-hosted a "new patient briefing group" when I worked at the VA. The goal of the group was to create the conditions for full engagement and successful outcomes in treatment. To help new patients see that they hold the power and the ultimate responsibility to make changes in their lives, I told them this:

Let's say that I was a body building coach – not a psychologist – and you came to me and told me that you wanted to compete in a professional body building contest. So, I gave you recipes to make, probably with lots of raw eggs and muscle milk in them – and gave you a workout regimen. You showed up week after week and told me that you were frustrated with your progress. I asked if you had done the workouts or made the lifestyle changes between our sessions and you said, "well no." In the same way, in therapy, we might reach some insights, and put our heads together to come up with a plan for change, but you need to invest the time and energy between sessions to bring about the changes you want for yourself."

This simple analogy helped them understand their responsibility in therapy, which both empowered them and helped them to see therapists in a different light, as strategic advisors to the growth process, not saviors.

Military in the Rear-View Mirror is a thoughtful series of reflections on concepts that are critical for us to better understand – insights that can help veterans grow in positive directions. At times, it's hilarious (For example, as Duane recalls, "When I was in the Army, I literally had meetings to plan for meetings that would plan for future meetings. It's like staring down the hall

Introduction

of mirrors.”) The overall tone of Duane’s writing is realistic and challenging in the right ways. For instance, he says, “We didn’t always love what we did in the military. We sucked it up then, we can suck it up now.” This runs interference against the hindsight “glow” of “life in the military.”

How many of us, in a generally adaptive way, screen out the negatives and bring a rosy glow to a previous period in our lives? Perhaps this is human nature – many of us idealize our “glory days,” whether this golden period occurred during high school, college, or some other phase of life. It’s even universally observed that many mothers and fathers recall childbirth and initial the transition to parenthood in glowing terms, even though this transition may have included terrifying and painful components, as well as peak life experiences. The implication in Duane’s writing, echoed in my own writing on military transition, is that life is full of challenges. At many points in our journey, we need to dig deep and tolerate things that are difficult if we want to create a life that is aligned with our deeper purpose.

In his characteristically thoughtful way, Duane evaluates concepts with nuanced thinking. For example, in one passage, he takes us through an analysis of the benefits and costs of the “mission focused mindset.” There are clearly several benefits to this mindset – among them, a “mission focused mindset” helps us set and achieve goals, helps others see us as trustworthy and reliable, and confers a feeling of pride in a job well done. However, there are some serious drawbacks to over-applying a “mission focused mindset.” These may include “black and white/all or none thinking,” and the tendency to foreclose options outside the range of what we initially perceive as aligned with the goals of our mission. In other words, if we keep our eyes rigidly fixed on one objective, we may miss out on other more valuable experiences and alternative pathways that may move us in a positive direction. This analysis is one of several in the book that shows Duane’s thoughtful approach.

To wrap up this preamble, one of the greatest gifts we can give our warriors is to operate from the understanding that they can heal and grow when they are empowered with the right insights and resourced with the right team of support. In this vein, *Military in the Rear-View Mirror* holds important insights for service members, veterans, and those who care for them (whether as professional healers or those in other supportive roles).

“Doc” Shauna Springer, Ph.D.

Best-selling Author of *Beyond the Military: A Leader’s Handbook for Warrior Reintegration* and co-host of Military Times’ “Seeking the Military Suicide Solution” Podcast

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PART 1

Honest Discussions About Veteran Suicide

The impact of suicide in the veteran population is widely known. Many of us who have served have “a number;” the number of fellow service members that we have lost to suicide. For many of us, even most of us, that number is greater than the number of those we lost in combat.

There have been, and needs to continue to be, entire books written about how to end suicide in the military population. Not enough is being talked about it, because it’s still happening. Until suicidal self-injury no longer becomes an option, more must be done. One of the first things is to have honest discussions about the topic; it’s a taboo subject, one that we don’t like to think about. There are tons of myths surrounding it and people doing things that we think are effective, but they’re really not.

The following short section includes a couple of thoughts on the topic. We need to learn how to have real and honest conversations about something that most don’t like to talk about, but is a very real and persistent danger in the veteran community.

A Serious Look at a Serious Subject: Veteran Suicide

There is an epidemic of veteran suicide in our nation, and around the world. As has been identified by several different studies, the rate of veteran suicide compared to those who have never served in the military is significant. There are a lot of discussions about it, attempts to overcome it, and studies to understand it. Unfortunately, however, it continues to happen.

The significant challenge, however, is that veteran suicide is not the problem we should be focusing on. Yes, of course, it is a huge problem, and one that has personally impacted my life. I have had family members consider and contemplate taking their own life, and I have lost more of my former battle buddies to suicide since returning from combat than I did in actual combat. So yes, while it is a huge problem to be solved, it's not the main one that, in my opinion, we should be focusing on. We, as a nation, as a community, need to solve the underlying problem that leads to each individual veteran suicide. Identifying that problem is a challenge in and of itself, of course.

A veteran does not commit suicide just because they have PTSD. Studies have shown that a service member who takes their own life doesn't do so because they have been in combat; a 2014 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association¹ did not see combat deployments as a risk factor, but instead a service member is at greater risk if they were 1) Male, 2) had a substance use disorder, and 3) had a preexisting mental health condition. And the greatest number of veterans who took their own life in 2014, according to a VA study, were ages 50 and older...cold war veterans, and perhaps gulf war and Vietnam veterans, but those who had not experienced combat recently.

Take a look at the veteran mental health boot camp; in that series, we looked at many of the different aspects of veteran mental health beyond just PTSD and TBI. Veteran suicide is a very real danger if any or all of these problems are not addressed. Besides just PTSD and TBI, a veteran with a significant substance use disorder may get to the point where taking their own life is an option for them. If they are struggling with depression or anxiety, it may have nothing to do with PTSD, but still dangerous. A lack of purpose and meaning, hopelessness about the future, is a significant contributor to the negative thoughts that surround veteran suicide. Moral injury, with it's impact of guilt and shame around things that were done or seen, can lead to struggle and inner turmoil. Not being able to meet our needs after the service...whether economically, stability in housing or employment...can lead to hopelessness and despair, or a lack of stable and fulfilling relationships...any one of these can take a veteran to the brink of

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Honest Discussions About Veteran Suicide

taking their own life.

Suicide is simply an extreme manifestation of a veteran's inability to manage these challenges in their life. The problem, then, becomes not "how do we keep veterans from taking their own life" to "how do we help veterans become aware of the challenges that they are experiencing, and help them reduce the impact of these challenges." Then suicide takes care of itself.

Suicide Happens on a Continuum

The thought of someone taking their own life is not an on or off switch, it's not that you're either suicidal or you're not. This is a significant misconception that a lot of people have. As you go from one end to the other, however, the danger increases. On the low end, a veteran can have some very vague thoughts, things like, "maybe it would be better if I just weren't here anymore" or "sometimes this sucks so bad, I can't deal with it." This is the first sign that our thoughts are heading down a dangerous path. Beyond these vague thoughts on the continuum are more specific thoughts: "I should just kill myself. Then all of this would go away." Again, heightened danger. If these thoughts are coming in and coming out of your mind, just in moments of stress, then something's up and you need to start talking to someone about.

The problem is, sometimes, these thoughts progress beyond just coming in and coming out of your mind, and a veteran can start to dwell on them. Think about them more often, and more intensely. Moving along the continuum, a veteran might actually start to move beyond the *if* they could take their own life, to *how* they could do it. A plan starts to come into focus, consideration of the method of them taking their own life. After this, the danger intensifies as preparations are being made: acquiring the method to put the plan in action, writing a note, making plans for after they are gone. Beyond making the plan and preparation is actually the attempt to take one's own life, and beyond that death by suicide.

So, here's the continuum again: vague thoughts, specific thoughts, dwelling on these thoughts, contemplating a plan, making a plan, preparing to carry out the plan, carrying out the plan, and death by suicide. The heartbreaking problem is, intervention is possible at any and every step in this continuum, all the way up to the final one. It is literally not too late until it is too late.

Some of the challenge, though, is that a veteran, or anyone considering taking their own life, can progress through these steps at their own pace and at their own time. It can be a long, slow-burning fuse, in which a veteran will remain in a stage of constant consideration or rumination for weeks, months, or even years...and then progress through the final stages in a matter of minutes. Or, it can be a short, quick-burning fuse, in which

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Honest Discussions About Veteran Suicide

someone can progress from vague thoughts to putting a plan into action in the space of an hour.

There could also be many signs, or no signs at all. This is the danger in suicide, that it has the potential to shock and surprise those who are left behind, and along with the shock and surprise comes guilt, pain, and grief. The one individual who knows exactly what is going on is also the one who might have the least ability to keep it from happening: the veteran in crisis themselves. This is where honest discussions of safety come in, that there is a network of trust in place so that the veteran can reach out to a trusted, nonjudgmental source of support.

The Resources are Out There

I could talk about veteran suicide all day. Not because I want to, but because we have to. We have to have these honest discussions around the topic of suicide. If you're looking for more resources, you can find them here². They include infographics that I've created that highlight the key points of some of the research that is done, or posts talking about the complicated nature of suicide. They include an impactful blog post and video that I put together to raise awareness about veteran suicide, *We Lost Another Veteran Yesterday*. You can see that here:

I also recommend that you go back to listen to my conversation with Tony Williams³, a fellow veteran and mental health counselor. He says something on that episode that has stuck with me: suicide is a national problem with a local solution. And that's the truth: we can make speeches about it, and write novels about it, but nothing will happen unless it happens in our household, our neighborhoods, our community. You can also listen to blogs on the topic, like Stacy Fredenthal's www.speakingofsuicide.com⁴, and a recent podcast with more information and resources which you can find here⁵.

And finally, I want all veterans to hear this very clearly: the life you save tomorrow can and should be your own. The only veteran I can make absolutely sure will see the sun come up tomorrow is me. The only veteran whose life you can save tomorrow is yours. I desperately want to save every veteran's life, and I know that I can't. The responsibility is on each of us to have a real and frank conversation with those that love us, to make sure that we know: we're not alone.

PART 2

Who We Were: The Past Impacting the Present

One of the most significant parts of post-military life is an identity as a former service member. There are those of us who someone sees and they can immediately identify as a veteran: we wear the hat, the clothes, we have the gear, we keep the stuff on our desk or hanging on our wall. If you walk into my office when I'm no there, you will look around and be certain that this person served in the military.

There are others of us who you think may have served, but aren't sure. Maybe it's the way we talk, or carry ourselves. Our demeanor. These snap judgements aren't always accurate; often, people think that I may be a high school wrestling coach or a local college football team's D-line coach. I didn't wrestle or play football in high school, but I guess I have that look about me. There is something that others pick up about a veteran, though, especially other veterans.

Then there are those of us who you would have no clue that we had ever served. Consider famous actors or industry leaders who served in the military; it had become part of their past, maybe an important part, but it informs who they are today. It doesn't still have a current day-to-day impact.

There's nothing wrong with any of these styles. As I often tell my clients, if you are happy with the way you are, and you're not hurting yourself, your family, violating someone else's rights, or doing anything illegal, then go for it. It's not up to me or anyone else to judge someone else.

The difficulty comes when our past impacts our present in a negative way. A current or former service member is psychologically impacted by the military, in the same way that a teacher or a construction worker is psychologically impacted by their career choice. It's a hard job, like many, and it's dangerous; that changes people. This section looks at how the past impacts the present, and what action can be taken after awareness.

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The Once and Future Warrior

There are many obstacles for a veteran seeking mental health counseling. One is that veterans believe that they have to admit that they are weak or broken before they get up the courage to go talk to a therapist. That they are somehow deficient, less than what they were, or lacking in some critical way. In my experience, mostly everyone wants to have a positive image of themselves. Service members see themselves as capable, confident, able to get the job done. The challenge, though, is that the veteran sometimes forgets where they came from...they seem to forget that they are a warrior.

When I see a veteran for the first time, I don't see them as broken. I don't see them as weak or in any other way deficient. I see them as someone who, at one point in their life, was able to overcome significant obstacles. To thrive under considerable stress. To do something that few others have done or are willing to do. Raising your right hand to volunteer isn't enough, of course. Anyone can do that. I can tell you, the first time I did that in 1992, I had very little idea what it would be like. Of course, once I got to basic training, I found out pretty quick.

Deploying Does Not Make You a Warrior, Overcoming Adversity Does

The word "warrior" was not really in the Army's vocabulary for much of my military career. This may be hard to imagine for many of the younger veterans, but the Soldier's Creed² (and the Warrior Ethos that it contains) was not developed until 2003, after the nation had been at war for over a year. Before that, us crusty non-coms used to refer to our soldiers as "troops" or "hero" or any other of a number of names. But the idea of Warrior was not common. Sure, we screamed about "blood, red, red blood" during bayonet training in boot camp, but Warrior? Not really.

Reflecting on the concept of warrior, though, I consider someone who has been battle-tested. Laying your life on the line, literally, and coming out the other side makes one a warrior. It can also be argued, however, that anyone that has overcome adversity of a significant measure can be described as a warrior. More than just the stressful boot camp, but actually being tested and found to be capable. Any adversity...a fire on the ship, an ambush, an improvised explosive device. Anything that leaves a scar, physically or psychologically, is adversity, and overcoming adversity and persevering makes one a warrior.

Veterans Were Once Warriors

Looking at things from that definition, veterans are warriors. It doesn't

Who We Were: The Past Impacting the Present

matter if the adversity was a running firefight through the alleys of Baqubah, or manning aircraft that escorted Russian jets out of NATO airspace during Cold War incursions. The military is an inherently dangerous occupation, and the stories that veterans have of the numerous adversities that we've faced would shock and surprise many who haven't served.

The vast majority of veterans I meet have overcome significant hardships in their life. Sometimes, the hardship began before they joined the military, and life in the service was a cakewalk compared to their childhood. The hardship was deployment, danger, combat, war. At some point in their military career, veterans overcame their own doubts, fears, and hesitation and conducted themselves like a warrior. Why they did it wasn't important; it might have been to get the glory, or impress the guys or gals back home, or to save their buddy and bring them back home. The reason is not important, but the result is: the scars remain. The proof of the Warrior, whether the warrior wants to admit it or not.

Adversity Impacts the Warrior

The problem often is, the adversity changes us in ways that we did not expect, and don't realize until after the change has occurred. Adversity, trauma, stress, combat, any of these things...veterans are no longer the way they were before they experienced them. "Older and Wiser," some might say, but no longer joyful and carefree. We know the darkness that lies in the hearts of our fellow man, and what lies in our own hearts...often because we've had to engage that darkness in order to overcome adversity. Scars aren't handed out like candy; whether they are psychological or physical, they are earned, through pain and stress, and are only healed with time and treatment.

Therefore, the one thing that makes one a Warrior...adversity...also has a high likelihood of changing the service member in a critical way. Sometimes in a detrimental way. That doesn't mean that the warrior is screwed up...but the situation certainly was. We will fight to get treatment for things in the environment that caused us physical illness, such as Agent Orange, Gulf War Syndrome, or toxic burn pits...and we recognize that it was the environment that caused this, not some personal weakness or deficiency. When it comes to the psychological impact of adversity, however...that's taken as an entirely personal weakness, and the environment had nothing to do with it.

Veterans Can Be Warriors Again

The key about being a warrior...once you have come out the other side of the fire, you can do so again. You don't gain strength by avoiding adversity,

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Who We Were: The Past Impacting the Present

you gain strength by overcoming it. The person who has never lost, has never bled, has never failed has never been truly tested...and is, in reality, no warrior at all. The scars of a warrior remind us of three things: we are human, we have persevered, and we can heal. When we find ourselves at a point where we feel defeated, we can and should remember: we were a warrior once, and we can be a warrior again.

PART 3

Who We Are: Transformation and Change

I will never be a civilian. I was, once; I became a Soldier when I joined the military. Now that I've left the military, I have become a third thing, a mix of soldier and civilian: this thing called a Veteran. I will be a veteran at least twice as long as I was a soldier (God willing) but it will always be a significant part of my identity.

Change is difficult; it's uncomfortable to leave the familiar and try something new. The change from civilian to soldier was hard and demanding...but it was also required. It was a complete transformation: physically, behaviorally, psychologically, and emotionally. The change from soldier to veteran was demanding too, but for many of us, the transformation is not complete. We change physically (unfortunately) as we stop doing physical training, but also the other extrinsic factors of the military go away. We don't wear the uniform anymore, we can walk outside without our headgear on, those physical manifestations of the military are gone.

We also change behaviorally, to some extent. We don't march everywhere we go, we don't stand outside in the freezing rain for seemingly no reason. If we do continue to engage with firearms, it's as a hobby or for sport, not as a part of our job. Some behavior carries over; as of the writing of this book, it's been over five years since I retired, and I still get up before the sun comes up. Sleeping in, for me, is 5am. And I feel like I've lost half the day.

What some of us don't do is change psychologically or emotionally. It's not required; there's not some post-military drill sergeant demanding that we change the way we think and feel. Sometimes, we don't even know that it's necessary. It's only when it gets in the way and we find ourselves stuck in post-military life that we have to figure out how to make the transformation complete.

Veterans: Who You Are Is Not Who You Were...

...and who you are is not who you're going to be. When a veteran looks at themselves in a mirror, it's a toss-up about who they're going to see: who they were, the military service member? Who they are, just them as they are right now? Or them in the future, a competent professional? When I was in my primary leadership development course back in the '90s, one of the instructors told us a key principle of leadership: "We are three people. Who we think we are, who others see us as, and how we really are." For veterans in post-military life, these three perceptions can be wildly different.

We all have different personas, different roles that we play in our lives. If you sit for a minute and think of all the roles you play, you can probably easily come up with ten or more. Veteran, if you served; spouse, parent, cousin, child, grandchild. For me, therapist; writer; podcaster. Friend, enemy (although hopefully not too much of that). The challenge for many veterans I work with is that they want to be who they were, rather than who they are. These different roles don't agree with each other; I am veteran, but I want to be service member. The farther away each of these personas are from each other, the more challenging life can be.

When I talk to clients about this, I often explore these three personas, and I've found that we generally carry three separate ones: the service member/veteran, the person we present to the world, and who we really are. To illustrate this concept, I'll take a cue from a podcast recently discovered about the psychology of Batman, *The Arkham Sessions*¹. One of the co-hosts, Dr. Andrea Letamendi, describes the three personas in this way: there is Batman, the vigilante; Bruce Wayne, the playboy millionaire that is presented to the world; and there is Bruce, the real guy underneath both.

For veterans, I see this in a similar way. There is Sergeant First Class France, the military me, morphed into my identity as a Veteran. Then there is Mr. France, the post-military professional, who does all the meetings and networking and shaking hands and business cards and stuff like that. Then there's Duane, the guy underneath both of them. The problem arises when Duane identifies so heavily with the Veteran persona and is unable to transition to the professional persona.

Sometimes, the Veteran Wants To Be Who They Were

This is when the veteran longs for the glory days² of the past. They wish they never got out of the military. They want to be back where they were comfortable, where things made sense. If my identity is wrapped up in being a high school football player, then I never move on from it. If my identity is wrapped up in the service member I was, then I'm stuck in that

Who We Were: The Past Impacting the Present

persona. I relive my glory days, living in the past, becoming more disillusioned as time goes on, more frustrated because who I was is not who I am.

Sometimes, the Veteran Doesn't Want to be Who They Are

This can compound the problem of wanting to be who they were. Now, they're stuck. They're racked with guilt about the things that they did in combat, if they deployed, or angry about how they're treated upon their return. The real them behind the veteran persona, the one alone behind closed doors, is depressed, bitter, afraid, lonely. Unsatisfied with their current life, feeling unloved and unproductive. This can increase the pull of the military persona; we relive the days where we were not depressed, afraid, and unproductive. It makes us long even more for the time when we mattered, because we don't feel like we matter now.

Sometimes, the Veteran Doesn't Know How to Become Who They're Going to Be

So if Sergeant France is who I really want to be, and Duane is someone I don't like, it's going to be hard to develop into Mr. France. The professional persona, the post-military persona, becomes unobtainable...we just don't know how to get there from here. We don't know that that person looks like, and we don't want to know...because we want to be who we were. We want to be back in the service, we want to be comfortable. In some ways, we want to be stuck, even though it feels like crap.

The challenge is, some veterans don't realize that they have so much more to give to the world than their former military service. Many believe that their commitment to serve did not end when they took off the uniform, but their ability to do so did. As long as we believe that to be true, it is true; if we think that the best days of our lives are behind us, when we have decades of life in front of us, then hope is not on the horizon.

Balancing These Personas is Key to a Satisfied Post-Military Life

The more we want something, but can't have it, the more upset we become. A kid wants a cookie, can't have it: temper tantrum. I want to keep up with the neighbors, can't afford it: jealousy. I want to be who I was, and don't like who I am: depression. Reality is the fact that I'm no longer the 25 year old paratrooper. I'm no longer the leader I was in the military, the Platoon Sergeant or First Sergeant. Wanting to be that, and not being able to, is like me being jealous of my former self, and that's a losing battle. Instead, appreciating who I was, and incorporating that into who I am, which helps me develop into who I'm going to be, is a more balanced approach, and comes with much less distress.

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Who We Were: The Past Impacting the Present

Once we find balance between our military persona, our professional persona, and who we really are, post-military life becomes a whole lot easier.

PART 4

Who We Will Become: Moving Forward in Post-Military Life

Several years ago, a colleague working with me as part of our local veteran's court asked me, "how long have you been out?" He was a retired Army First Sergeant and a correctional officer with the El Paso County Sherriff's Office. At the time, it was something like three years or so; I told him and he said, "wow, it seems like it's been a great transition for you...you've done well for yourself." I was surprised and taken aback...it sure didn't feel like it was great from where I was standing.

In a similar exper3nce, I was have lunch with a mentor who asked me the same thing. He was a Navy veteran who had three tours in Vietnam...so he was definitely doing some hardcore stuff there...and then became, in succession, a police officer, a Presbyterian minister, and finally a couples counselor. When he asked me the question, I responded, "It's been two whole years!" He laughed and said, "kid, you still have sand behind your ears. Come talk to me when you've been out fifteen years."

The thing about the future is that we don't know what's out there. Maybe we want to cling on to the past because it's what we know, no matter how much it sucked. Maybe we're too overwhelmed with simply surviving in the present to think about what things will be like for us in twenty years. The fact is, however, that we will certainly be travelling down the Veteran road for a very long time.

As I write this, the WWII and Korean War generation is passing. There is not a Vietnam Veteran that is younger than 65; the service members who fought at the height of that war are in their seventies. The future is the unknown land where we're going to live, so we might as well start to get ready for it.

After the Military, Finding Your What Is As Important as Finding Your Why

March 1996. I was the lowest ranking guy in my platoon. My unit pushed south from our base in Hungary to Camp Angela, Bosnia. Being the lowest ranking guy in the platoon this didn't always mean that much, but this time, it meant I got the crap assignment. I was sent down early as a weapons guard to watch over our platoon's extra equipment: radios, extra weapons, stuff like that. They gave me a case of MREs, a case of water, and said, "see you in a few days." It was me, some other guys with the same crap detail, and about a hundred of my new Bosnian friends still building the camp around me. I remember, very clearly, sitting on the steps of my tent, looking at this huge hill across the quarry from me, wondering: "What the hell am I doing here?"

In many ways, and in many different places, I've asked that question, and many of the veterans that I work with asked themselves that question. Looking out the door of a perfectly good airplane (although it wasn't always perfectly good), pulling guard on some featureless expanse of desert, engaging in some futile exercise. The same questions: what and why.

I hear it from them after they get out of the military, too. "What's my purpose? What am I supposed to do now?" As I've often said, finding meaning and purpose after leaving the military is significant to a successful transition. Even those who have had a "successful" transition, though, can run up against this question: what is the purpose of my actions? What, really, is the problem I'm trying to solve? I may think that I'm trying to solve one problem...putting food on the table and shoes on my kids' feet...but I might be trying to solve an entirely different problem.

Sometimes the "What" May Be Something You Don't Like

We all have to do what we have to do. The problem you're trying to solve right now, hopefully, won't be the problem that will exist in the future, because once you solve it, it's done! Often, however, the problem we are solving is not one that we might want, but it's the one we need to do. That week in Bosnia, the "what" I was doing was solving a problem, one that my leadership had: they needed to send extra equipment down to Bosnia and it couldn't be left unsecured. I was the solution to that problem. I didn't *want* to be the solution to that problem, because it created a problem for me, but I was the solution nevertheless. Really the worst of it was that I was bored out of my mind, but that's part of military life. After we leave the service, we may find a problem to solve that we may not enjoy; it doesn't have to be that way forever, but we didn't always love what we did in the military. We sucked it up then, we can suck it up now.

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Sometimes There Doesn't Have To Be an "What"

I've seen this at work in my own life; I enjoy problem solving. I'm good at it. I'm so good at it that, if there is no problem, I might just create a problem so I can solve it. If we're used to operating in a chaotic environment, we might be a bit uncomfortable in an environment of peace...so we create chaos around us, so we can be comfortable. We don't always have to find problems to solve, though. The problem we might need to solve, the "what" we are looking for, might be our incessant problem solving. Recognizing that not everything needs to be figured out, not everything needs to be fixed, can be the solution to the problem we didn't know we had.

Maybe you think you know the "What" but are completely wrong

Leaving the military, I know that I was really anxious: I had to find a job. I had to find a job. There were job fairs I attended even before I dropped my retirement packet. I was leaning so far forward in the foxhole that I was falling out of it. I did land a great job, working with an organization that was helping to house homeless veterans. To this day, I am grateful and appreciative of the time I spent with that organization; but the problem I was trying to solve (get a job) and the topic I wanted to focus on (veteran mental health) were nowhere near the same problem. I thought I knew the "what" I wanted to do: work with veterans. It turned out not to be the right "what." It was in the ballpark, and gave me valuable and appreciated experience, but it was someone else's "what" that I was trying to solve, not my own.

Find the "What" You Were Put On This Earth to Solve

Each of us has a unique set of experiences that gives us the ability to solve problems. To find our "what." The thing we did in the service doesn't need to be our "what," and in fact it rarely is. It is possible, and even necessary, to reinvent ourselves after the service. My father was a payroll clerk and courier in Vietnam. He became a cop after he left the service. I've known snipers who were really good at working with roofing companies, because scanning a roof for damage is pretty close to scanning your sector for something out of place. Maybe the problem you can solve is the lack of steady and reliable crew leaders for a moving company. Maybe it's in tech, or bioscience. Finding the problem you are uniquely qualified and able to solve can help you find that purpose and meaning we were talking about earlier.

Fall In Love With the "What," Not The "How"

This is a trap that we all fall into: being in love with our solution. The "How" is the solution, how we solve the "What" of our problem. If we are

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so stuck on the “how,” we’re going to use our comfortable old hammer to beat on everything because we think it’s a nail. This goes along with the idea of carrying on with what you did when you were in the military; you enjoyed what you did (mostly) and you were good at it. Why not take that to your post military life and apply the same solution to the problems out here? That creates problems in and of itself, of course, because not all solutions match every problem.

When looking at “what next,” take some time to consider what exactly the “what” is; you will be much more satisfied with what you’re doing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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