

# Perceived Barriers of Accessing Mental Healthcare to Student Veterans

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Research Question: What different types of perceived barriers affect student veterans' access to mental healthcare services?

## Introduction

Current military operations are involving veterans in dangerous combat situations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Hoge et. al., 2004). Veterans who return from combat and later attend universities are not receiving adequate mental healthcare for mental health problems, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Research is needed to assess and support student veterans by recognizing the barriers that they may encounter. This research will improve our understanding of the perceived barriers felt by student veterans on college campuses.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were recruited through a Qualtrics panel of U.S. veterans and active duty military personnel who were enrolled in college. The target sample was one thousand student Veterans.

### Materials

Participants completed several online surveys through Qualtrics including Hoge's measure of perceived barriers to seeking mental health services among soldiers and marines and the SPRINT PTSD scale (Connor & Davidson, 2001). The study was approved by an IRB and participants consented prior to participating.

### Analysis

For the PTSD scale, we used a cutoff score of 11 as suggested by Connor & Davidson (2001).

For perceived barriers, participants recorded responses to indicate how much they agreed based on a 5-point scale: strongly disagree (1), somewhat disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), somewhat agree (4), and strongly agree (5). Consistent with Hoge et al. (2004), scores were then combined to fit into two categories: does not agree (1-3), and agrees (4-5).

A chi-square test was run for each barrier to analyze the relationship between the perceived barrier and whether the respondent had met screening criteria for PTSD.

## Results

Figure 1. Present Study; National Student Veteran Collected Data

Perceived Barrier	Total Sample (N=131)	Respondents Who Met Screening Criteria for PTSD	Respondents Who Did Not Meet Screening Criteria for PTSD
*I don't trust mental health professionals	18/77 (23)	9/54 (17)	9/22 (41)
**I don't know where to get help	25/76 (33)	11/52 (21)	13/22 (59)
**I don't have adequate transportation	18/77 (23)	8/54 (15)	10/22 (45)
*It is difficult to schedule an appointment	35/76 (46)	19/53 (36)	15/22 (68)
**There would be difficulty getting time off work or school for treatment	39/76 (51)	21/53 (40)	17/22 (77)
*Mental health care costs too much money	32/75 (43)	17/52 (33)	14/22 (64)
It would be too embarrassing	30/75 (40)	18/52 (35)	11/22 (50)
**It would harm my career	26/72 (36)	11/49 (22)	14/22 (64)
*Other people might have had less confidence in me	26/72 (36)	13/49 (27)	12/22 (55)
Other people might treat me differently	32/73 (44)	18/50 (36)	13/22 (59)
*My leaders would have blamed me for the problem	24/72 (33)	12/49 (24)	12/22 (55)
**I would be seen as weak	36/72 (50)	18/49 (37)	17/22 (77)
Mental health care doesn't work	14/73 (19)	8/50 (16)	6/22 (27)

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

Figure 2. Hoge's Perceived Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Services among Soldiers and Marines

Perceived Barrier	Respondents Who Met Screening Criteria for a Mental Disorder (N=731)	Respondents Who Did Not Meet Screening Criteria for a Mental Disorder (N=5422)
I don't trust mental health professionals	241/641 (38)	813/4820 (17)
I don't know where to get help	143/639 (22)	303/4780 (6)
I don't have adequate transportation	117/638 (18)	279/4770 (6)
It is difficult to schedule an appointment	288/638 (45)	789/4748 (17)
There would be difficulty getting time off work or school for treatment	354/643 (55)	1061/4743 (22)
Mental health care costs too much money	159/638 (25)	456/4736 (10)
It would be too embarrassing	260/641 (41)	852/4752 (18)
It would harm my career	319/640 (50)	1134/4738 (24)
Other people might have had less confidence in me	377/642 (59)	1472/4763 (31)
Other people might treat me differently	403/637 (63)	1562/4744 (33)
My leaders would have blamed me for the problem	328/642 (51)	928/4769 (20)
I would be seen as weak	413/640 (65)	1486/4732 (31)
Mental health care doesn't work	158/638 (25)	444/4748 (9)

## Discussion

This study shows the relationship of mental health among student veterans on college campuses. Our findings indicate that student veterans are at an increased risk of mental health problems due to challenges in the perception of time and cost as opposed to social stigma, which was thought to be the largest barrier as to why students do not seek mental healthcare. If the perceived barriers of time and money are true, then the accessibility of mental healthcare may be limited to factors such as insurance, free sessions available per year, geographic location, inflexible work schedule, and the inability to excuse students from classes for attending appointments. If students are perceiving these barriers, then universities should focus on promoting their hours, how to make appointments, and the total cost of services.

Limitations of this study include having no demographics, a lack of complete responses from some participants, and the possibility of responses from e-campus students or community college students who do not have access to university campus resources.

## Implications

Applying perceived barriers to mental healthcare could help:

- Alter the focus of university mental healthcare outreach
- Education on trauma-informed care
- Better meet students' need for assistance in attaining mental healthcare

Furthermore, if the perceived barriers are "real," then universities must alter their system to make mental healthcare more accessible to students, and if the barriers are only "perceived" barriers, then, universities must alter their outreach focus to address cost and availability.

## References

- Hoge, C.W., Castro, C.A., Messer, S.C., McGurk, D., Cotting, D.I., Koffman, R.L., (2004). Combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, mental health problems, and barriers to care. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 351(1), 13-22.
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