



AMERICA'S HEROES AT WORK

SUPPORTING THE EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS OF
RETURNING SERVICE MEMBERS WITH TBI & PTSD

☆☆☆ Understanding PTSD

Dispelling the Myths About Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) & Other Psychological Health Issues

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop in response to a traumatic event. While exposure to a traumatic event is not uncommon (approximately half of all men and women experience this magnitude of trauma), about 8% of the U.S. population (approximately 24 million people) will develop PTSD at some point in their lives. Among military veterans, PTSD is quite common. Approximately 30% of Vietnam War veterans experience PTSD over the course of their lifetimes, and recent data compiled by the Rand Corporation suggest that approximately one in five service members who return from deployment operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have symptoms of PTSD or depression.

While many who experience PTSD and other psychological conditions may benefit from treatment and support, only about half seek it. For many, a common barrier to seeking care is the stigma associated with their psychological symptoms or condition—that is, the bias, embarrassment, shame or fear of negative reaction from others.

Employers are in a powerful position to debunk misperceptions about PTSD. After arming themselves with the facts, they can use their knowledge to educate others and to support the social inclusion and acceptance of people with PTSD and other psychological conditions. Understanding, support and a positive employment experience can make a real difference in the life of a person who needs them.

MYTH: PTSD is brought on by a weakness of character.

FACT: PTSD, like other mental disorders, is a product of the complex interaction of biological, psychological, historical and social factors. It is not the result of moral failing or weakness in character. Mental health conditions are common and studies suggest that about half of all Americans will meet the criteria for a diagnosable psychological condition sometime during their lives. Experiencing psychological symptoms or conditions should not be viewed any differently than experiencing physical symptoms or conditions.

MYTH: People with PTSD are violent and unpredictable.

FACT: Beliefs that violence and unpredictability are associated with serious mental problems are common, but untrue. This misguided fear is one of the most prominent barriers to acceptance and social inclusion. In reality, the presence of PTSD or a psychological condition does not make someone prone to violence. Therefore, someone with PTSD or some other psychological condition should not be viewed as a threat in the workplace.

MYTH: People with PTSD cannot tolerate the stress of holding down a job.

FACT: All jobs are stressful to some extent. Anyone is more productive when there's a good match between the employee's needs and the working conditions, regardless of whether the worker has a mental health problem. Work performance, for any individual, is determined by the balance of internal or external stressors and that individual's tolerance for stress. With many psychological conditions, including PTSD, the severity level and the course of recovery may vary widely. Taking this into consideration will help any employer improve their gauge of workload and performance.

★ ★ ★ Dispelling the Myths

MYTH: People with PTSD, even those who have recovered, tend to be second-rate workers.

FACT: Employers who have hired people with mental illnesses report good attendance and punctuality as well as motivation, good work and job tenure on par with or greater than other employees. Studies by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) show that there are no differences in productivity when people with mental illnesses are compared to other employees. (Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, 1999).

Myth: Once people develop PTSD, they will never recover.

FACT: Studies show that most people with PTSD and other mental illnesses get better, and many recover completely. Recovery refers to the process in which people are able to live, work, learn and participate fully in their communities. For some individuals, recovery is the ability to live a fulfilling and productive life. For others, recovery implies the reduction or complete remission of symptoms. Science has shown that hope plays an integral role in an individual's recovery.

Myth: Therapy and self-help are a waste of time. Why bother when you can just take a pill?

FACT: Treatment and supports vary depending on the individual. A lot of people work with therapists, counselors, friends, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses and social workers during the recovery process. They also use self-help strategies and community supports. Some choose medications in combination with other supports. The best approach is tailored to meet the specific needs and choices of the individual.

This fact sheet was developed in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Office of Disability Employment Policy, the Job Accommodation Network, the Veterans' Employment and Training Service, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, and the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center.

Myth: I can't do anything for a person with PTSD.

FACT: You can do a great deal, starting with how you act and speak. You can create an environment that builds on people's strengths and promotes understanding. For example:

- Don't label people with words like "crazy," "wacko" or "loony" or define them by their diagnosis. It's important to make a distinction between the person and the illness. Instead of saying someone is "mentally-ill," say he or she "has PTSD." Don't say "a mentally-ill person," say "a person with PTSD." This is called "people-first" language.
- Learn the facts about mental health and PTSD and share them with others, especially if you hear something that isn't true. If you employ people with PTSD in your workplace, consider hosting workshops to educate supervisors and co-workers on the facts.
- Treat people with PTSD and other mental illnesses with respect and dignity, just as you would anybody else.
- Respect the rights of people with PTSD and other mental illnesses and don't discriminate against them—especially when it comes to employment. Like other people with disabilities, people with mental health problems are protected under federal and state laws.

Additional information about PTSD and employment can be found on the America's Heroes at Work Web site: www.AmericasHeroesAtWork.gov. For personal assistance related to job accommodations for veterans with disabilities call the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), 800-526-7234 (voice) or 877-781-9403 (TTY).

