

+ TALKING TIPS

Military veterans

Service members return from an experience that most of us can't even imagine. They, and their family members, have lived with extraordinary amounts of stress. Being home doesn't make it magically disappear. Whether you are interacting with a vet at work or in the community, it can be helpful to follow a few basic "do's and don't's."

For friends, family, and coworkers

Thanking a service member for their service is a polite acknowledgement of the magnitude of the job and their role in keeping our country safe. However, understand that service members don't consider themselves to be heroes. It is alright to believe that and value their service and sacrifice, but avoid using "hero" language as it can trigger feelings of guilt or shame for some service members.

Be aware that they do not see themselves as victims, even if they have sustained injuries or are struggling psychologically. Rather, most service members consider themselves to be strong warriors. This is a source of strength for them, but recognize that it can make it very hard for them to reach out for help.

Be ready to communicate the support that is available. It may be something that you could offer on a personal level – taking the kids for a weekend to give them some R & R time with their partner, for example. Or, you may be in a position to share information on company benefits or services available to them. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is one such supportive service. Available 24/7, the EAP can put a vet or family member in touch with resources, practical help, and emotional support services.

Sharing political views about the conflicts is not helpful. Political views vary widely among service members. Please don't assume they are for or against the war. No matter what their opinion is about the war, they can't say anything negative about their Commander-in-Chief. Their role is to execute their orders.

Understand that many want to go back to the war zone. This may be hard to understand. Many feel a sense of duty to finish the mission and to support their buddies. Some miss the intensity and clear sense of purpose. They may also feel like they don't fit in back home. Try to see through their eyes.

Don't try to "talk the talk." Civilians can't imagine or truly understand the experience of a service member. Using the "lingo" and aligning with their experience in other ways is not a way to earn their respect. It is helpful to have an understanding of the wars, the geography and some of the common military shorthand.

Stay away from insensitive or intrusive questions or comments. For example, "Did you kill someone?" Some wish they had; others wish they hadn't. If they did, maybe it was on purpose, maybe it was an accident. No one takes killing lightly. This is not a topic for casual conversation. Making comments like, "You're lucky that you made it out alive" can also bring up painful emotions like survivor's guilt.

Each individual will be different in terms of wanting or not wanting to discuss their experiences. Take your cue from them. It is also important to know that for newly returned vets, a reluctance to talk may be due to profound exhaustion. Most service members are deeply weary when they get home and may not have energy to speak for long periods of time. Communicate your support, but give them time.

When you do talk, don't press for details, but listen if they are offered. Listen with empathy and without judgment. As you listen, be alert for cues that they may need more help.

Understand that nothing is the same after a deployment. A veteran and their family members are going through an adjustment that touches all aspects of their lives. While this can present daily challenges, many service members also say they have returned with a greater sense of gratitude, purpose, and confidence, as well as improved problem-solving skills. The bottom line is: treat them with respect and dignity. Be understanding of the magnitude of this transition. Help them identify their strengths, build resilience, and set new goals in their new normal.

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