

# **Military Culture: Core Competencies for Healthcare Professionals**

## **Module 3: Stressors and Resources**

### **Culturally Competent Behaviors**

Culturally Competent Behaviors (CCBs) are behaviors that show patients you are thoughtful and respectful towards military culture before, during and after your encounters with them. This module included the following CCBs for you to consider as you work with Service members and Veterans.

#### **Stressors and Their Impact**

There is an extremely broad range of potential stressors, reactions, and resources that each patient will bring into the appointment with you. Recognize and accept that your patient's unique experiences, including background, length of time in service, and quality of experience while serving, may have a significant influence on their level of stress, appraisal of stressors and resources, and response to the stressors inherent in military life.

Make efforts to:

- Determine the patient's level of identity with military culture and ethos.
- Accept and respect that age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, and gender, religion, and other values and beliefs may have significant influence on military cultural identity.
- Discover other elements that factor into the patient's self-identification (i.e., ethnicity, gender, age, upbringing, family tree, religion, values and beliefs).
- Ask about the patient's unique military experiences before making comments or assumptions about their experiences, values, or goals.
- Differentiate the influence of military culture on behaviors, before concluding that they are psychiatric symptoms (i.e., difficulty trusting, high standards contributing to frequent frustration and anger with civilians, military ethos contributing to heightened guilt or sense of betrayal when values are breached by self or others).
- Attempt to gather information from other sources about the patient's particular experiences in the military (i.e., the unique ramifications of their particular job, their branch of service, their years in the service and locations of service), as possible.

#### **Services and Support Systems for Service members, Veterans, and their Families**

The military culture encourages Service members to build up and be proud of their ability to overcome any challenge. Your patients are likely to have been exposed to a number of messages about the spectrum of functioning from resilience to mental health conditions. Even though the intention of the programs is to recognize that seeking care when needed is a form of resilience, they may in fact inadvertently contribute to stigma by suggesting to some Service members that seeking care means that they are not resilient.

Be aware that military cultural influences may make it difficult for some Service members to transition to a VA or civilian culture, where the focus in healthcare can sometimes seem like it is entirely on problems, rather than strengths. And keep in mind that Service members or Veterans may have a whole range of reactions to behavioral health programs or trainings designed to build skills towards resilience. They may have considered the programs very valuable, or alternatively may have negative or mixed feelings regarding these programs, or the programs may have unintentionally contributed to the Service member or Veteran feeling worse about having stress reactions and symptoms.

Take time to discuss individual experiences with these programs, and how they have affected your patient, as it seems appropriate, and use the information you gather to improve your practice in the following ways:

- Focus on identifying both problems that need treatment, as well as the strengths of your patient. Help them realize that they don't have to give up a sense of self-efficacy and strength when they move from a military culture to VA or civilian cultures.
- Learn more effective ways to bolster the resilience training components your patient holds in high regard, and determine if those components can contribute to treatment success.
- Empower your patient to seek help, and to stand on and be proud of their strengths.
- Help your patient to connect with resources in their community.
- Assess for your patient's interpretation of what it means to "recover" from mental illness and to be "resilient." The way a Service member or Veteran has interpreted messages about health and well-being might interfere with help-seeking and treatment success. For instance, your patient may have interpreted that "resilient" means that no matter what, being a "good soldier" means overcoming your problems on your own and returning to duty.
- As appropriate, support your patient to create an adaptive definition of resilience.
  - Help them use their own language to define what recovery and resilience can mean in their current situation, and moving forward. For them, that might be "taking care of tie-downs" (physical, social, etc.), or "shoring up their defenses" with the help of others. Military culture language can be a strong part of this process.
  - Ideally, you can move them towards defining resilience as being able to identify when something isn't going right, and addressing it actively by seeking support or healthcare. For instance, in the VA, the messages are that anyone can have problems, and there are solutions. Help them see the path to recovery.
  - Empower them to work in conjunction with a team of healthcare professionals to solve complex problems, and help link the patient with the right team to solve their problems