Invisible Minority: Veterans on our Campus

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Texas A&M University – Commerce like countless other institutions of higher learning is home to a unique invisible minority. These women and men are actively in the process of transition from military service to civilian life. Nearing 850 in number on our campus, these veterans may sit beside you in a class, serve as a peer on a group project, or seem just a few years older than you if you are a traditional student. Most, may never tell you that they are a returning warrior or veteran with combat experience. The formula the military uses to create these soldiers is one that stripped them of their individual identities; pushed them to their limits physically, mentally, and emotionally; and built them up with a new identity, based on obedience to authority and loyalty to their fellow soldiers.

Arriving on the college campus often provides a strong contrast to life as they knew it while serving their country. Research indicates that combat exposure has emerged as the most significant predictor of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). With that statistic in mind, one can see why veterans often prefer to keep their military service private due to fear of being stigmatized. According to research by Bernard-Brak et al., these veteran students “will contribute to the diversity of higher education as both students with their unique experiences as veterans and as students with possibly disabilities, either physical or psychological.”

Student veterans may be dealing with strong feelings as a result of recent service in a combat or war zone. They may feel sad, angry, scared or numb and these isolated or clusters of feelings are called “combat stress.” While unlikely, combat stress can lead to depression, alcohol or drug use, or feelings of irritation or anger that doesn’t go away or may be out of proportion to a given situation. The important thing for our campus community to remember is two-fold. These men and women sacrificed much to protect our country and our way of life. Secondly, their reactions to stress and trauma are no different than many other non-military students, perhaps only intensified due to their military service.

Health Watch:

As a veteran:

Recognize transition for what it is. Life after military service is going to be different.

Accept that adjustment to civilian life may take some time. As a vet, you may have witnessed horrific events and it will take time and support to resolve some of these issues.

Reach out. Life in the military is about being a part of a well functioning team. Make sure you find and keep connections with a few close friends on campus.

Recognize when things are out of control. If you are experiencing challenges with dealing with thoughts, feelings or unwanted behaviors, reach out to a friend and seek professional help if needed.

Celebrate. As a vet, you sacrificed a period of your life to serve your country. Being a soldier is a noble calling and you can and should celebrate your service.