



Veteran's Care Card for Clinicians

A guide for clinicians containing questions, best practice tips, and resources to help better assess and understand the unique service-related health needs of veterans.

Ask the Question

Have you or someone close to you ever served in the military?

If the answer is yes, begin the conversation with the following general questions:

- When and where did you serve in the military?
- What was your occupation in the military?
- Were you ever assigned to a hostile or combat area?

Best practice tip: Not all veterans will answer “yes” when asked “Are you a veteran?” People will interpret the word “veteran” in different ways. For example, those who did not serve on active duty or in combat zones, those discharged with other than honorable status, or people who served on active duty, but not in combat may not consider themselves veterans.



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Assess for Mental and Emotional Well-Being

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Have you ever experienced a traumatic or stressful event that caused you to believe your life or the lives of those around you were in danger?

Have you experienced any of the following?

- Withdrawn from family and friends—feeling numb and detached from others
- Flashbacks—reliving past traumatic events with no control over when the memory presents itself
- Hypervigilance—feeling anxious or paranoid, easily irritated or angry
- Insomnia, and/or nightmares
- Substance use disorder and/or alcohol abuse

Traumatic Brain/Blast Injury

During your service, did you experience trauma to the head (e.g. struck in the head by debris, concussion, heavy artillery fire, improvised explosive devices, rocket-propelled grenades, or land mines)?

If so, did you experience a loss of consciousness, headaches, or migraines? Were you diagnosed with a concussion?

Moral Injury

Moral injury in the military describes psychological, social, and spiritual effects stemming from experiences that challenge a service member's moral principles. In contrast to PTSD, which is typically associated with fear responses, moral injury may result from perceptions of betrayal, guilt, or shame related to actions that conflict with an individual's ethical standards.

Do you experience any feelings of betrayal, shame, or guilt related to the following?

- Combat decisions, witnessing an immoral act and failing to stop it, and/or betrayal by leadership
- Survivors guilt
- Harming a noncombatant
- Ending a life even within the Rules of Engagement

Best practice tip: PTSD and moral injury symptoms such as withdrawal, anger, or negative beliefs may overlap; however, moral injury's existential and spiritual nature sets it apart, requiring tailored interventions that address moral identity and community integration.

Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

- Did anyone ever use force or threat of force to have sexual contact with you against your will?
- During military service, did you receive uninvited or unwanted sexual attention, such as touching, pressure for sexual favors, or sexual remarks?

Best practice tip: MST impacts women and men. It can affect individuals of any age, sexual orientation, racial or ethnic background, or branch of service. While the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides MST resources, veterans may also access local sexual support services, which are available in every state by county.

Resources:

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

Traumatic Brain/Blast Injury: <https://www.research.va.gov/currents/1022-Primary-Blast-Injury-of-the-Brain.cfm>

Moral Injury: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp; <https://www.voanne.org/moral-injury-support/>

Military Sexual Trauma: <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome/index.asp>

Assess for Suicide Risk

Depression and suicide screening for veterans is crucial because military service members face unique stressors and higher suicide risk compared to the general population. Effective screening enables early identification and intervention, which is essential for connecting at-risk veterans to life-saving support and resources.

Risk Factors:

- Feelings of hopelessness or withdrawing from loved ones
- Access to lethal means
- Alcohol/substance use disorder
- Previous suicide attempt
- Cancer and terminal illness diagnosis
- Transitions (e.g., separation from military service, employment, relationships)

The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) is a widely used screening tool for depression. It is not a diagnostic tool, and a clinical evaluation by a healthcare professional is necessary for an accurate diagnosis. <https://www.apa.org/depression-guideline/patient-health-questionnaire.pdf>

Suicide Screening

If the PHQ-9 screen is positive or if a veteran answers yes to question 9, it is recommended that the clinician consult with a behavioral health expert. If one is not immediately available, the clinician should screen the veteran for suicide risk. The VA recommends that clinicians use the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS) for suicide screening. <https://cssrs.columbia.edu/>

Best practice tip: If the patient displays any thoughts of self-harm or suicide, it is crucial to seek immediate professional help regardless of the score.

Resources:

VA/DOD Clinical Practice Guideline: Assessment and Management of Patients at Risk for Suicide
<https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/mh/srb/>

Maine Veteran Suicide Prevention Toolkit: <https://qclearinglab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/SSG-Fox-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Toolkit-MMA-COI-March-2024.pdf>

Assess for Military-Associated Exposure Risks

Were you exposed to any toxins while serving in the Armed Forces?

- Open burn pits
- Airborne hazards
- Gulf War-related exposure
- Agent Orange
- Radiation
- Hepatitis C
- Contaminated water at Camp Lejeune
- Other

Are you experiencing any of the following symptoms?

- Respiratory disorders
- Skin irritation
- Cancer
- Headaches/migraines
- Diabetes
- Heart disease
- Fibromyalgia or chronic fatigue syndrome
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Cognitive impairment
- Chronic pain

Best practice tip: It is important to understand when and where the veteran served. All veterans enrolled in VA healthcare are eligible to undergo a toxic exposure screen at the VA (<https://www.va.gov/milwaukee-health-care/programs/pact-act-toxic-exposure-screening-and-your-va-benefits/>).

Resource:

Provider Resources on Military Exposures: <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/PUBLICHEALTH/exposures/coordinators.asp>

Assess Social Needs and Well-Being

- Are you connected to the VA or veterans' benefits in your state?
- Are you currently employed?
- Describe your current housing situation.
- Are you experiencing any difficulties with transportation?

Questions for a Caregiver, Family, or Friend of a Veteran:

- Are you currently a caregiver for a veteran?
- Do you feel like you have the support you need to adequately care for them?
- Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by this responsibility, and would you like connections to resources?

Best practice tip: Take the time to share the veteran safety plan with the veteran and their family. This plan will help them to consider strategies and tools for ongoing wellness and to determine how the veteran wants the situation to be handled if they are in crisis at a later date. Many resources are available at both the state and national level.

National Resources:

VA Caregiver Support Program: <https://www.caregiver.va.gov/>

VA Safety Plan Quick Guide: <https://www.va.gov/nursing/docs/research/VASafetyPlan.pdf>

VA Safety Plan Worksheet: https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/MH/srb/Patient_Safety_Planfillable-508.pdf

Veterans Crisis Line: Dial 988 then press 1 or <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>

State and Local Resources:

Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services: 207-287-7020 or <https://www.maine.gov/veterans/>

VA Maine Healthcare System: 207-623-8411 or <https://www.va.gov/maine-health-care/>

Togus VA Regional Benefit Office: 207-621-6938 or <https://www.va.gov/toqus-va-regional-benefit-office-at-toqus-va-medical-center/>

Maine Career Center Veterans Services: <https://www.mainecareercenter.com/employment/veterans.shtml>

DAV Vans: Transportation for Veterans: <https://www.va.gov/maine-health-care/dav-vans-transportation-for-veterans/>