

Veterans suffer from 'culture shock' when returning to university

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The study, based on interviews with 20 military veterans on a US college campus found that civilians' trivial concerns, inappropriate clothing, lack of respect for lecturers and willingness to criticise the President of the United States clashed with the conservative values instilled in ex service personnel. These cultural differences led to veterans arguing with other students, and becoming increasingly isolated and ostracized from their peers.

"Veterans are one and a half times more likely to commit suicide than civilians, and they're also at a greater risk of depression, suicide, and substance abuse," says William T. Howe Jr, the author of the study from the University of Oklahoma.

"The situation is so bad that veteran suicide has been classified as an epidemic, and a national call has gone out to researchers to try to address this issue."

As part of the effort, Howe interviewed 20 ex service personnel who attend the University of Oklahoma. His study, published in the *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* found that despite veterans being the same age as other [college students](#), [military service](#) had instilled them with vastly different cultural values, which meant they experienced 'cultural shock' when going from a military environment to a college campus. Interestingly this was true for both combat and non-combat veterans, suggesting that it is not combat that is making it difficult for veterans to return to civilian life, but [military training](#) and

an adoption of military culture.

"Veterans have been through tougher times, even in basic training alone, than many people may realise, therefore to them complaining about writing a paper is silly when they compare it to their past experiences of facing death," says Howe.

As well as being unable to relate to civilians feeling stress over 'trivial' matters like exams, ex military personnel were often upset by the way their classmates dressed, and their perceived lack of respect towards authority figures.

"In the military good hygiene, grooming, and making sure your clothes are clean and professional are of vital importance, so to a [veteran](#), students coming to class not groomed properly, or in clothes that they perceive as being too casual conflicts with their military values," says Howe.

"In addition, while lecturers at university often encourage open discussion, this is distinctly different from what veterans experienced in the military, where communication is top-down and upward dissent is discouraged. Veterans often got angry when other students talked during lectures."

Finally, while most students enjoyed talking about politics, veterans were very uncomfortable and unwilling to do this. "The United States Military has very conservative and strict rules that individuals must abide by. For example they are not allowed to criticise the President—doing so could result in forfeiture of pay, dishonorable discharge, and even imprisonment" says Howe.

The culture clash was often exacerbated by differences in the style of language used by veterans and civilians. For example veterans often used

military jargon and acronyms when interacting with civilians, and would grow frustrated when other students couldn't understand them. Veterans also felt that the profanities and dark humor they used was often misinterpreted by civilians and seen as crude and vulgar when, for the veterans, this was a normal way of speaking.

"Another issue was the directness of communication by veterans," says Howe. "In the army it is seen as natural to say "do this" and expect others to do it. However this sort of speech usually resulted in the veterans being disliked by others and ostracized from the group."

The study showed that veterans responded to this culture clash in three separate ways: by trying to see things from the perspective of the other students, by verbally lashing out and confronting the person, and finally by remaining silent.

By far the most commonly used strategy was silence: 100% of veterans interviewed said that they often kept quiet or refused to speak their mind in class. The reasons for this varied from not wanting to talk about politics to being afraid of getting in trouble for saying something others would perceive as inappropriate. However eventually some veterans erupted and had verbal conflicts with others.

"Many veterans entered a 'spiral of silence', and in doing so continued to feel more and more isolated," says Howe. "Any prolonged silence about a troubling issue is not good for an individual, and the worry is that this extreme isolation could lead to a feeling that life is not worth living and a decision to permanently silence themselves with suicide."

According to Howe the findings show that more needs to be done to help veterans and civilians understand one another, and to reintegrate veterans into society.

"The military takes 8-12 weeks to strip military members of their civilian culture and replace it with a military culture. To not spend the same time and effort to reverse the process at the end of a servicemember's time in uniform is irresponsible", says Howe.

More information: William T. Howe et al, From Military Member to Student: An Examination of the Communicative Challenges of Veterans to Perform Communication Accommodation in the University, *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/17475759.2019.1592770](https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2019.1592770)

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