Employment is key to veteran well-being, finds new study

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For veterans with mental illness, employment is key to emotional well-being, a new study shows. The study was published in the June issue of
the journal *Stress & Health*, and led by two researchers at The University of Texas at El Paso's College of Health Sciences.

"VA data indicates that over 1.7 million veterans received mental health care services last year due to transition-related stressors and mental health conditions," said Emre Umucu, Ph.D., the study's principal investigator, and an associate professor in the Department of Public Health Sciences. "For these veterans, employment is not just a means of financial support; it can also serve as a critical public health intervention that can significantly enhance the emotional well-being and quality of life for veterans with disabilities."

To conduct the study, the researchers focused on 517 veterans from three different samples. Participants were all experiencing a mental health condition or psychiatric disability like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder or substance-use disorder. Most of the veterans were men in their late 20s or 30s, but the study incorporated veterans from all different gender, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Using an emotion toolbox approach developed by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Umucu and the study's co-principal investigator Beatrice Lee, Ph.D., surveyed the veterans about their mental health, sense of well-being and employment status, whether full-time, part-time or self-employed.

The team found that employment was strongly associated with positive social and emotional well-being in veterans suffering from mental illness or psychiatric disabilities. The team found, for example, that unemployed veterans, on average, were twice as likely to experience depression than employed veterans. Veterans who were employed also experienced lower levels of stress, higher levels of positive emotion, a sense of meaning in life and stronger social relationships.
"Employment outcomes play a crucial role in improving the health and mental health of veterans," Lee explained.

While similar employment research has been conducted on the general population (non-veterans), the team emphasized that veterans may be more susceptible to mental illness because of combat experiences and challenges transitioning back to civilian life.

"It can be difficult for veterans to identify transferable skills they can apply to the job market once they are back in civilian life," Umucu said. "Amid an effort by the Veterans Administration to emphasize quality employment for veterans with competitive wages, this study shows why this can be so significant to overall well-being."

William Robertson, Ph.D., dean of the College of Health Sciences, added, "The importance of the work done by Drs. Umucu and Lee is that it emphasizes factors impacting the well-being of our veterans, many of whom live within the Paso del Norte community. The practical implications of this research speaks to the fundamental goals in the College of Health Sciences of addressing health disparities and responding to the social determinants of health."


Provided by University of Texas at El Paso

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