

# Military veterans with PTSD face an agonizing choice: The stigma of declaring it to employers or being denied support

September 2 2024, by Richard O'Quinn, Emma Knight, Justin P. Brienza, Laura J. Ferris and Tarli Young

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Australia is home to almost [half a million](#) military veterans, most of

whom are in the workforce.

But most—[around 60%](#)—live with long-term health problems.

About [half of these](#) face enduring [mental health challenges](#), including [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), anxiety, depression and an increased risk of suicide.

Disclosing these conditions could allow sufferers to get workplace support, but many keep quiet, in part because of fear of stigma.

And keeping quiet can build on itself.

Where full disclosure is required, particularly for Australian government positions requiring security clearances, veterans who keep quiet can find it necessary to stay quiet and even seek private, external assistance without disclosing it.

## **Keeping quiet has consequences**

The result can be [self-harm](#) or a mental health crisis in workplaces in which their employers are unaware of their conditions and unable to offer help.

Our team at the University of Queensland has conducted a [study](#) of the circumstances in which veterans disclose in order to understand how they juggle the competing needs to reach out and fit in.

The project is funded by the university and an apprentice placement group [East Coast Apprenticeships](#).

Although it is too early to share results, our surveys and interviews point to a spectrum of approaches to disclosure.

At one end of the spectrum, veterans tell us they won't reveal their medical concerns to anyone, sometimes including their spouses.

This can be because veterans feel no one is capable of understanding or relating to their situations and any disclosure might harm relationships.

## **Being publicly 'outed' can be humiliating**

At the other end of the spectrum, veterans face official demands for repeated disclosure, sometimes every six months.

They feel as if their private lives are constantly on display to their supervisors and an unknown number of human resource managers.

One talked about being publicly "outed" when applying for government positions.

In a room with hundreds of applicants, he said, veterans were asked to raise their hands if they had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. They were then given multi-page booklets to fill out detailing their conditions, treatment and medication regimes long after fellow applicants had departed.

## **For many, it's a complicated juggle**

Another veteran described having to perform a complex decision-making process each time a contract was up for renewal or a new contract was offered.

The veteran took into account the length of the contract, the contracting firm's health policies and reporting requirements and what the firm said it offered for mental health support.

Importantly, this veteran also researched what the contracting firm actually did by asking around among fellow veterans.

Only when the veteran felt capable of calculating their own understanding of the risk of disclosure would they consider proceeding with the contract.

Many, many employers have their employees' best interests at heart but are unable to convincingly make that known.

One [business owner](#) (a veteran himself) said the best way to gain veterans' trust was to first disclose some aspect of his own health condition. It was a way of meeting the applicant halfway.

Our study has some way to run. There's a chance its findings could save lives by making it easier for veterans to disclose their conditions and gain support.

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