

Transcript

Short Takes on Suicide Prevention Podcast

Episode 135: Student Veterans and Meaning in Life

Host: Dr. Edgar Villarreal, PhD

Guests: U.S. Army Veteran, Jeff Moe, LCSW and Dr. Adam Kinney, PhD

00:00:04:17 - 00:00:23:06

Announcer

You're listening to a Short Takes on Suicide Prevention, where experts talk to each other about how research is shaping suicide prevention. This podcast is brought to you by the VA Rocky Mountain MIRECC.. And now onto today's conversation.

00:00:24:24 - 00:00:48:24

Edgar Villareal

Hi, I'm your host, Dr. Edgar Villarreal. Today, we're going to talk about student Veterans and the meaning of life. I'm excited to introduce our guests. We're joined by U.S. Army Veteran Jeff Moe, a VA Social Worker who ran the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership program, VITAL, at the University of Texas at Austin and Austin Community College. Welcome, Jeff.

00:00:49:12 - 00:00:51:00

Jeff Moe

Thank you so much. Happy to be here.

00:00:51:11 - 00:01:04:20

Edgar Villareal

We're also joined by a researcher and occupational therapist, Dr. Adam Kinney who has recently done research with student Veterans to study how their military experiences shape meaning and life. Welcome, Adam.

00:01:05:03 - 00:01:07:16

Adam Kinney

Thanks so much. I'm looking forward to this conversation.

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Edgar Villareal

Same here. One of the reasons I wanted to bring you together today is because you both to suicide prevention work with Veterans and student Veterans. It's a really important topic and I'm glad to have you both here on the show. We're going to get started with Adam's research in just a moment. Very interesting. But I really wanted to jump in and bring Jeff into the conversation.

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Edgar Villareal

Jeff, as a social worker with the VA, what's your experience with student Veterans? Tell us about the program you've been involved with.

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Jeff Moe

Yeah, so I was a student Veteran outreach coordinator with the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership Program. It's a program that was started by the VA back in 2011, and really they saw how many Veterans were going back and using their GI Bill after getting out of

the military, going back to school. And it was the perfect point to really meet Veterans where they were at, to be able to engage them and really bring mental health services, get people enrolled in VA health care, and really provide some advising to colleges and universities on how to serve Veterans more effectively.

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Jeff Moe

And Vital still continues to work in a wide range of activities in that regard.

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Edgar Villareal

It really sounds like the mission and the purpose of the program really kind of capture know that the word vital there. It sounds like it provides some really great support to transitioning Veterans. Why are Student Veterans Services important to you personally and professionally? What got you into the work?

00:02:40:02 - 00:03:00:16

Jeff Moe

Well, you know, as a student Veteran, I got out of the Army in 2009, and I came right to graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin. And I was so excited to get to come to Austin and attend college. And once I got there, I mean, I discovered the transition was really tough. And I'll talk about that more in a little bit.

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Jeff Moe

But really that that sense of meaning and purpose in my life that I had had so strongly in the military suddenly was kind of more in flux. The social relationships that I had and developed, you know, over my years in the military, really, I had left that behind. And even though I was still in contact with them, there was just a new way of making friends and everything coming into that, into the college environment.

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Jeff Moe

And so the transition was was kind of rough for me. I mean, it, it I made it successfully, in my opinion. But really, this opportunity came up to join the vital team when I graduated from school. And so I immediately began working with student Veterans. And I just saw what an important transition point that was for Veterans and how much we could help empower Veterans in that environment to really transition and to really own their transition through and to also connect them with important services and really help them connect socially, really reconnect with that sense of purpose and really connect with health care services that they needed.

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Jeff Moe

And so I think it's just a huge point where Veterans are coming through, where we can really meet them, where they're at.

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Edgar Villareal

Sounds like a really meaningful experience, Jeff. And it sounds like for you the mission really was personal, that you went through your own moment of transition where you were looking for

meaning and looking for purpose. And it sounds like being in an academic setting gave you that experience and you were able to really step into this program.

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Edgar Villareal

So what was it like for you to go from the military to civilian life?

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Jeff Moe

It was a lot more difficult than I anticipated. I'd come out of the military and I was proud of my experiences and ready to move on to that next phase in my life. I was excited to come to Austin, like I said, and I didn't realize what I was in for. So I was wounded in Iraq in 2007, and I really thought I had dealt with a lot of that before I got out.

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Jeff Moe

And then when I got into college, all of a sudden that stuff started to come back. You know, when I started to learn, I really delved in like I pursued Middle Eastern studies. I was deployed to the Middle East and I really started to delve into the history and the political situation and really understand it. And things started to change.

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Jeff Moe

I think I would call it more of like a post moral injury, things that seemed very clear to me going in. I started to question a little bit, you know, coming out, and I'm still very proud of what I was doing, but it became much more complex the more I learned and the more I delved into the topic.

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Jeff Moe

And so, you know, stuff started to come back for me, plus that whole support network. I mean, when you come into the army and you make a permanent change of station and you move to a new base, you become very tight knit very quickly. You're making you're making friends. You're figuring out who you like for you hanging out with them.

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Jeff Moe

You're working together. You're playing together. A lot of times you're living together, you know, and so you make fast friends and it becomes like family very quickly, especially when you do really intense training. I was jumping out of planes with these folks. We were doing very intense training and then we deployed together. And so it really bonds you together in a way where it becomes much slower once you come back into the civilian life, where in the military you could be like, hey, do you want to grab some lunch?

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Jeff Moe

And people would be readily available in civilian life. It became a more slow process of getting to know people. And so that social support that I was so used to having, you know, and was still available to phone calls and distant places, but that in-person support was really much more slow to come by. And so that was difficult.

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Jeff Moe

And then really assessing that sense of meaning as I was learning and really what my life direction was. And so that accompanied with, you know, what I was going through like just kind of with my experiences from Iraq just made it a difficult time. Thankfully, I connected with a faith community. I connected with different folks that really walked with me through that.

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Jeff Moe

But it was it was a difficult process. And so when I came in, there was no student Veterans services at the University of Texas. And that started to change as I got closer to graduation. And thankfully, I got to become a part of that.

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Edgar Villareal

Wow. Jeff So it sounds like really kind of entering this period of rebuilding relationships and connections and reevaluating. So thank you really for sharing that with us. And I know every Veteran's experience is unique, but I'm curious, how does your experience align with other student Veterans now that you've been on the other side and have been able to work with Veterans and what you do?

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Jeff Moe

I think that social piece is huge. And in my counseling with Veterans, that theme would come up time and time again. I feel like I can't relate with people around me. I feel really outside of the community. I had one Veteran, that it just stands out to me to this day, said, I may go to college, but I'll never be in college.

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Jeff Moe

So there is this feeling of not connecting and not being a part of that community. And so I think there's that that search for relationship. And then that search for purpose and really being a part of things, really feeling like you're a part of the mission when you're in the military and then coming out and maybe wondering where you're at, you know, and really searching those things.

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Jeff Moe

And some people I found had an idea of what they wanted and they went through a similar transition as me to maybe finding another sense of purpose in life. So I think those things really align.

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Edgar Villareal

Yeah, absolutely. I don't think I'm going to forget that I may go to college, but I may not be in college. I think that kind of really captures what you were just saying in terms of people searching for meaning and being able to kind of really search for that connection, which I think is a really good segue way for us to bring Adam into the conversation and talk a little bit about the research that he's been a part of.

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Edgar Villareal

So thanks for sharing that story. Jeff. Adam, you recently published an article titled "Protective factors that mitigate the indirect risk of combat exposure upon meaning in life: A longitudinal study of student Veterans". I want you to tell us about this work and how did you come to this work? Why student Veteran research is important to you.

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Adam Kinney

So I was fortunate enough to be supported for my Ph.D. at the Department of Occupational Therapy at Colorado State University by the New Start for Student Veterans Program. It's a supported education program for student Veterans with service-related disability and other challenges that make going back to school difficult. So I conducted my dissertation, I collaborated with this program.

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Adam Kinney

And in terms of why this kind of research is important to me, I would just echo what Jeff said in terms of this being a really important transition period or kind of an inflection point where we can make a lot of difference in terms of the long-term trajectory of the Veterans return to the community. I think it's more than just, you know, supporting educational success.

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Adam Kinney

I think it has a broader impact on that transition. And what I mean by that is educational success, educational attainment can kind of both improve the material conditions for the Veteran, which is like a social determinants of health, and that can influence health related outcomes. But also, it's as Jeff was talking about, it's a period where Veterans can kind of bolster their psychologic resources.

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Adam Kinney

They can achieve a greater sense of meaning and purpose. It's more than an education in a lot of ways. It's a way to explore new ideas. You explore yourself what you're capable of, develop new relationships and things like that. But often, as Jeff pointed out, that transition is difficult. So it's important to to learn more about that transition so that we can better target supports.

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Edgar Villareal

Thanks, Adam. I can definitely see that that connection there with what Jeff was mentioning previously in terms of exploring yourself and making connections and learning about yourself. Now, what's interesting about your study is that you focus on this idea of meaning in life. What do you mean by that?

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Adam Kinney

Well, in the literature, meaning in life kind of refers to two different ideas. One is this idea that you interpret your existence as valuable. So your life is meaningful, and also that it's purposeful that your daily activities are kind of organized around some goal or some coveted future that you have. You're working towards something.

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Edgar Villareal

And how does that relate to that being a central part of well-being for people?

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Adam Kinney

Well, I think in order for people to appraise their lives as meaningful and purposeful, they have certain life experiences that serve as sources of meaning. And those life experiences reflect psychological well-being. So a positive sense of yourself in your relationship with the world. So things like self-esteem and self-efficacy, you have the sense that you're able to overcome obstacles and achieve goals.

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Adam Kinney

Also, your ability to engage in activities that align with your values and interests, whether that's leisure activities or activities with others. And as Jeff was pointing out, having positive relationships with others, having relationships with people where you are able to support them and you feel supported by them. All of those things are really important sources of meaning that contribute to psychological well-being and your appraisal of your life as meaningful and purposeful.

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Edgar Villareal

That's really interesting to hear, Adam. And, you know, one of the things you mentioned was that people's experiences really shape what this looks like and how they experience this and how they appraise this. Now, your research was looking specifically at the experience of Veterans that have been exposed to combat. And I was curious to hear from you about, you know, how did challenges such as combat exposure impact the perspectives on the meaning of life?

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Adam Kinney

You know, there's this idea of post-traumatic growth. So some would say that many people who undergo traumatic circumstances, such as combat exposure, actually come through those experiences with a greater sense of meaning, a kind of clarifies your your values or it kind of makes you appreciate life more. But in addition, it can also have a negative effect on your meaning in life or your sense of meaning in life.

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Adam Kinney

So often, what accompanies combat exposure? Those often reflect physically and psychologically traumatic circumstances for some. So as a result, Veterans may come through those experiences with service-related conditions like mild traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic pain. So those conditions can both make it difficult for you to think and have a positive appraisal of your life.

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Adam Kinney

It kind of affects your belief system in a way that may make it difficult to look upon your life and and come away with a positive perspective on it. But also, it kind of undermines your ability to have those meaningful life experiences that were we were just talking about. It affects your ability to have positive relationships in some cases, disabling conditions can make it difficult for

you to successfully complete activities that you find meaningful, like, you know, playing with your kids, for instance, things like that.

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Adam Kinney

So all of that can have a negative impact on your sense of meaning and purpose in life.

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Edgar Villareal

Now it truly sounds like it can have a widespread, rippling effect on people's perspectives and experiences. And I wanted to ask that same question of you, Jeff. You know, having worked with students and having had your own experience, you know, how do challenges such as combat exposure impact perspectives on the meaning of life?

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Jeff Moe

Now that's a great question, and I love this conversation because I think is, as Adam referred to, it can be so complex. I mean, you can have this post-traumatic growth and these things that do impact, you know, your meaning of life in a negative way. And they can coexist in some ways. And so it can often be kind of complex to tease out.

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Jeff Moe

But I've just kind of I've seen it as far as like it mostly in avoidance of relationships and experiences that can really help bring some of their strengths to the game. And so really I've seen, you know, as far as people working through trauma and their experiences and how their beliefs have shifted, maybe with a more negative outlook about the world really impacts maybe their future choices and where they're going and even their ability to connect with other people, maybe because for very good reasons from an experience, they felt like they couldn't trust people quite as fully as they could before.

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Jeff Moe

And so, you know, those have certainly impacted several domains that Adam has brought up.

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Edgar Villareal

Yeah. And I really appreciate what you said, Jeff, there about kind of that undercurrent of avoidance that keeps people from activities, really gets in the way of being able to allow people to tap into that the strengths. Right. I think you said bring the strengths to the game. So I think that brings up the next question I had for you, Adam, in terms of resilience, you know, those those strengths, those protective factors, how do they facilitate resilience?

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Adam Kinney

Yeah. So to take a step back, resilience is there's not really a consensus on what it is. The concept of resilience that I'm most convinced by is viewing resilience as this ongoing and complex process rather than an inherent trait or ability that an individual has. So it's the process by which humans can achieve positive outcomes. However, you consider those outcomes, whether it's educational attainment or meaning in life, and it can achieve those

outcomes despite exposure to adverse circumstances that would otherwise undermine success.

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Adam Kinney

And it's also important to note that this process is, like I said, very complex and affected by things at multiple levels, including like the individual on the interpersonal level. So your relationships and broader societal forces, social structures and things of that nature. So when I see that the factors that influence this process, one of the really important concepts in resilient is are protective factors, which are forces that kind of mitigate the negative influence of these adverse circumstances, or what's called risk factors in the literature and help you achieve positive outcomes.

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Edgar Villareal

I really appreciate you kind of breaking it down for us because I think sometimes, you know, resilience is such a broad topic. You know, there's a lot of definitions out there. You know, people think that sometimes it's something that either you have, or you don't. And I think to really hear it from you about there's just so much that goes into it that it is a process that can be built over time, I think is a really important point.

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Edgar Villareal

Now, Jeff, I wanted to turn back to you to see if you could talk to us a little bit about your perspective as a student Veteran and as an advocate. Give us a sense of the student Veteran life from your perspective. What are some unique needs and experiences of Veterans and higher?

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Jeff Moe

Ed I think, you know, one thing that's important to note is that there's a huge overlap between Veterans and what are called nontraditional students, which are students who don't typically fit in that 18 to 22 year old age range. And so what I mean by that is there's just different roles they have, you know, there's a role, like many of our student Veterans are married and they had children.

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Jeff Moe

And so maybe sometimes they were trying to maintain some kind of work, you know, and so there were, you know, that's very much shared in common with nontraditional students. And we really saw a connection between nontraditional students and Veterans. And they had a lot more in common than that than they would think. And so there's a lot of factors considering those things as far as that impacts the student life experience.

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Jeff Moe

And are there social opportunities for people that fit in that nontraditional age bracket? But I think some of the unique needs and experiences of Veterans and higher education Veterans have a lot of strengths to bring. As I had mentioned before, they come in in this unique spot where they've gone through a lot of training, they've had responsibility for oftentimes million

dollars of equipment as a 20-year-old, you know, and they're coming in in this place where they're not quite a student, perhaps, but not quite a professor.

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Jeff Moe

Maybe they feel like they socially connect more with people that are older, perhaps more like their professor. And so considering that those social needs we talked about before, you know, is the school offering a student Veteran association or something for nontraditional students where they can connect? And I think that that experience, though, is, you know, do I fit in here?

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Jeff Moe

You know, do I belong here? And that's what we would try to emphasize, is that you have so much to learn from these other students around you, even though you have tons to give them as well. From your experience, there is so much to learn because coming in, I mean, I came in with seven years of experience as an Arabic linguist in Special Operations, you know, and I would come in with this attitude like, well, you know, I have a lot, you know, but I just learned so much that that these students have so much to offer and so much that I can learn from them from their experiences.

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Edgar Villareal

Student Veterans bring a lot of unique strengths. So I'm wondering if you could talk to us about what are the ways that we can acknowledge some of the struggles of being a Veteran in higher ed to help us dispel some of the stigma and overcome maybe some of the stereotypes that people bring.

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Jeff Moe

Yeah. So it was really amazing. There was this Ph.D. student that was an assistant in our student Veteran office that did research on communications concerning Veterans, and she did this huge, broad study of news communications and who speaks about Veteran issues. And Veterans were surprisingly low on the list. As far as who had a voice in the conversation.

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Jeff Moe

And it was often mental health professionals and politicians and other folks that really had a much stronger voice in the public sphere as far as what's going on with Veterans. And so we sat together with my coworkers at the University of Texas and Veterans, and we just made it a strong point to include Veterans in everything we did.

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Jeff Moe

Oftentimes, you know, we can view them as service recipients. Coming from my angle as a social worker. And sometimes it's very appropriate, right? Like involving them in mental health services and providing those. But there's so much in that transition where I think we can build on those strengths they have and leadership and that desire to serve to serve each other in the greater college community that maybe aren't tapped into.

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Jeff Moe

And so we really wanted to bring them together. We used to present, and we did present when appropriate about mental health issues, TBI, which are important, and there was a part that was missing about that transition in that Veteran experience. And so we got together this group of student Veterans to speak to call it the conversation, and they would have a conversation with faculty and staff about their experience.

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Jeff Moe

And so much was about the way they were perceived and so much and they would try to drive it toward their strengths. And people really wanted to focus on PTSD and TBI, which are important, but it didn't capture their complete experience. And so they were talking about these strengths and what they wanted to contribute, and people would try to bring it back to the more deficit stuff, you know.

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Jeff Moe

And so it was just an interesting process to watch. And so but I think the more that we can include them in all the processes they have so much to give and really empower them and give them that space to lead and serve each other. I think it really can serve the greater college community. I think it really can help in that that transition and that college experience.

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Edgar Villareal

I'm wondering if you could share with us what are some aspects of the military experience that help student Veterans succeed?

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Jeff Moe

So, I mean, from my perspective, when I was in college, before I was in the military, I turned in assignments very, very much close to the deadline. And I'm still but I found myself after that after I came back really backwards planning, we call it, you know, and really plotting out my papers ahead of time, I think really helping other people out and drawing on that desire to serve.

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Jeff Moe

You know, I think that experience and that leadership experience can really be perhaps built upon in the in the classroom through class projects. And so I just think there's so many strengths. I mean, even helping them, you know, mentor other students, you know, getting them involved in mentorship opportunities for younger students. I mean, there's just tons of opportunities where they can get involved and use those strengths.

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Edgar Villareal

I think you're already kind of hitting at some of those pieces of really kind of what creates that experience and maybe feeds into some of the work that, you know, Adam has been doing about the meaning of life. So, Adam, I wanted to talk to you a little bit more about your research study. Tell us more about the study.

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Adam Kinney

So we surveyed 153 Veterans enrolled at Colorado State University who self-report a deployment to a combat zone. And a portion of that sample participated in the supported education program. I mentioned New Start for Student Veterans. What's unique about that is typically samples of student Veterans don't really capture a wide variety of service-related challenges. Using participants in the supported education program allowed us to capture more of that diversity in.

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Adam Kinney

So what we were looking at was whether combat exposure indirectly influenced Veterans sense of meaning and purpose in life through mental health and physical symptoms. So, in other words, do Veterans who have more severe combat exposure report more symptoms of things like PTSD and depression and pain? And in turn, do Veterans who report more of those symptoms report a lesser sense of meaning and purpose in life?

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Adam Kinney

And importantly, what are some of the protective factors that kind of lessen potentially negative impact of combat exposure on Veterans meaning and purpose in life?

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Edgar Villareal

It sounds like you were looking at the impact combat and also how protective factors may mitigate that. Can you tell us, what did you learn about the impact of combat from your study?

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Adam Kinney

It was, as we hypothesized, those with more combat exposure. And what I mean by that is those who had more exposure to events that are common in warfare, including like being fired upon, also the subjective experience of combat. So like fearing for one's safety and well-being and being exposed to the aftermath of the consequences of war. All of those kinds of experiences were captured in combat.

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Adam Kinney

And what we found was, as expected and this is well documented in the literature, that those with more severe combat exposure reported, more severe symptoms of mental health and physical conditions like PTSD, depression, pain. What was unique about the study was we provided evidence that it has a ripple effect on Veterans' sense of meaning and purpose in life.

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Adam Kinney

So not only was it associated with these mental health symptoms and related to what Jeff was saying, kind of this like deficit approach, like this is what we tend to emphasize, right? You know, more severe exposure to combat, you're more likely to report PTSD symptoms and then we kind of stop there. So what the study did was provide evidence that, okay, yes, we have these PTSD symptoms.

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Adam Kinney

Those symptoms also lessened. Veterans sense of meaning and purpose in life. So that that was what we found in terms of the negative effects of combat exposure.

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Edgar Villareal

I really appreciate we mentioned that the study takes it a step further. What did you find about protective factors and how did that influence the impact?

00:28:58:12 - 00:29:33:07

Adam Kinney

Yeah. So to take a step back, we looked at whether protective factors operated in two different ways that tend to be tend to show up in the literature. First, it's called a like a compensatory model of resilience. So whether these protective factors improve positive outcomes, kind of completely taking combat exposure out of the picture. So whether you had combat exposure or not, these things kind of promote your ability to achieve positive outcomes.

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Adam Kinney

So what we found there was coping ability to your perceived ability to manage life stressors and meaningful activity. So the extent to which you engage in activities that are kind of aligned with your values and interests, those kind of promoted meaning and purpose in life, regardless of whether the extent to which you were exposed to combat and whether you had these symptoms.

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Adam Kinney

And in addition, we looked at what's called a moderate or model of resilience. So these are one protective factors directly address the adverse circumstance. They mitigate the extent to which combat exposure influences these outcomes that you're interested in. So what we found, there were indicators of positive relationships, so we looked at social support and instructor autonomy and support.

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Adam Kinney

So whether student Veterans kind of perceived that their instructors kind of helped foster a sense of control over what they were doing in the classroom among Veterans who reported high social support, high instructor autonomy support, this negative effect of combat that we were talking about moments ago was significantly lessened. It kind of kind of dampened the impact of combat.

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Adam Kinney

And we saw a similar thing with academic self-efficacy and coping ability. So academic self-efficacy is the extent to which you consider yourself someone that can persist through academic challenges, can do the things that you want to do in the classroom that also weaken this effect of of combat.

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Jeff Moe

You know, and Adam, I just love to speak to that. And I really see that instructor autonomy and that social support factor just as being really powerful things. I mean, and even just relating to

that ability to be a little bit or to be in that correct spot or to really be given that autonomy and maybe that potential to serve and to really lead in with that sense of purpose, you know, in what they're doing.

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Jeff Moe

We just we found when we partnered together with faculty and staff and that the Veterans felt like they're working more side by side with these folks on common objectives. Inside and outside the classroom is that I saw people that maybe were really impacted by combat really might not have gone into normal treatment otherwise, like really start to thrive because they were really being pulled out by those folks and really empowered by those faculty and really drawn out to where they were, you know, in a clinical sense, given exposure.

00:32:22:11 - 00:32:31:24

Jeff Moe

Right. But they were really able to have that sense of purpose and trust and support to be able to be drawn out and really to thrive. Yeah.

00:32:32:16 - 00:32:56:06

Adam Kinney

That's so cool. And that's kind of an implication for an intervention that I hadn't thought of when I wrote this study. And it kind of goes back to what you were saying about them being nontraditional students that I'm sure many faculty are used to, you know, the typical student didn't, as he said, manage millions of dollars in equipment.

00:32:56:14 - 00:33:07:08

Adam Kinney

So maybe they don't they don't foster the autonomy of the typical student in the way that they should for these Veterans who have these very unique experiences. And they can be a huge asset in the classroom.

00:33:08:00 - 00:33:38:05

Edgar Villareal

You see. There you go. I like the idea already of coming up with new innovative interventions through our conversations. And, you know, I wonder if we can continue on on this line of conversation, hearing all of the findings for the study, I'm curious to hear about the implications. What what do you both think we can learn about Veteran experiences to inform either mental health or suicide prevention efforts with this population?

00:33:38:22 - 00:34:12:14

Adam Kinney

My main takeaway I was in kind of relates to what Jeff and I have both been saying, that in addition to reducing the negative things like PTSD, traumatic brain injury, we need to build up the positive and target the positive. In this case, a sense of meaning and purpose in life. And not to say that things like PTSD are not important to address, you know, the experience of those conditions are I can't imagine what the experience of those conditions are.

00:34:13:23 - 00:34:51:05

Adam Kinney

They definitely deserve direct attention through clinical intervention. But in addition, I think it's important to find ways to offer meaningful life experiences for these Veterans despite the

experience of these conditions, like finding ways to compensate for them while you're directly addressing them but finding ways to compensate for them so that these Veterans can have these meaningful life experiences that improve psychological well-being and ultimately, I think, would play an important part in suicide prevention efforts.

00:34:51:15 - 00:35:10:24

Jeff Moe

Yeah. And just agree, you know, I mean, we do need to focus on those those clinical aspects, the PTSD that the TBI different conditions, even readjustment, you know, coming out of the military. But there are so many in the student, especially in the student Veteran environment, there's so many ways we can engage student Veterans to continue that impulse to serve.

00:35:12:03 - 00:35:37:15

Jeff Moe

You know, we had you know, we saw this, you know, from our observation, seeing that lack of social support and that that sense of meaning, you know, we worked with the student Veterans to develop this orientation where we trained peer mentors and we would pair incoming students with those peer mentors. And those peer mentors would be people that often struggled with combat trauma, but they would come out to serve their brothers and sisters.

00:35:38:02 - 00:35:57:12

Jeff Moe

You know, and so they would come out and to be able to help people transition maybe better than they were transitioned. So they would come out with that sense of purpose. And then they we would connect them with folks at the same major so they could have a starting point to really connect and fight them, the Student Veteran Association events and really educate them.

00:35:57:15 - 00:36:22:16

Jeff Moe

You know, on, hey, this is this is school culture now. This is military culture. This is where it connects. Maybe this is where it doesn't, you know, and really, you know, it really builds on those strengths, you know, to really draw them out and get them engaged. And we'd find when people became engaged, then eventually they would connect with clinical services if they needed it because they developed that sense of trust in the community at the University of Texas at Austin Community College.

00:36:23:01 - 00:36:49:11

Jeff Moe

And so it's just a it's really a unique environment where you can really address different factors that are important for suicide prevention, both clinically and from a preventive kind of more community intervention standpoint. And so there's just so much that can be done. And I really love this study because I thought it really spoke to those things and those extra factors besides focusing on some of those more clinical aspects, stuff like social support and meeting.

00:36:50:00 - 00:36:54:18

Adam Kinney

I appreciate that. But now, now I have to rewrite it because we came up with a new Johnson.

00:36:57:11 - 00:37:19:08

Edgar Villareal

In really hearing you both. I mean, there's just so much there that we could be doing and that could really kind of shape people's experiences. I wonder if maybe you could share a story with us that maybe might inspire Veterans that might be listening to us and wondering whether they should be entering higher education.

00:37:19:21 - 00:37:39:18

Jeff Moe

I saw so many Veterans that came in to the university that really struggled in the beginning. Some were absolutely strong from the beginning. You know, there's all kinds of Veterans that came in, but the more they got engaged in, the more and they didn't have to get involved with student. The student Veteran Association or anything. They could have gotten involved somewhere else.

00:37:40:03 - 00:37:55:04

Jeff Moe

But when they got involved, they excelled. And so we saw Veterans that were really struggling in that transition and really trying to find their identity. And it is a place where you can find that new identity, that new sense of meaning to really move forward in life.

00:37:55:17 - 00:38:03:04

Edgar Villareal

And what ways can we acknowledge some of the struggles of being a Veteran in higher ed and overcome the stereotypes.

00:38:03:12 - 00:38:30:18

Jeff Moe

So I really think that, first of all, acknowledging there are many overlaps between that nontraditional student population and student Veterans, they share a lot more in common with other students than they might think that you might think. And student Veterans are so diverse from a real range of from, you know, different races and ethnicities. Women actually is a higher percentage of women that are student Veterans than actually serve in the military.

00:38:31:00 - 00:38:53:04

Jeff Moe

I remember a presentation we're giving where we were talking about stereotypes and student Veterans were sharing their experiences with feeling like they might have been stereotyped. And a woman Veteran had said, People never assume I'm a Veteran at all. And that really stuck out to me, you know, as far as what we might assume about Veterans. But many Veterans do struggle with PTSD.

00:38:53:12 - 00:39:23:08

Jeff Moe

We acknowledge that. But there's so much more that's just common to that student experience and treat them accordingly. Not overly fragile, as you know, we talked about this part where people would be afraid to maybe confront certain behaviors because they're they didn't want to disrespect and we're just like you can just treat students and handle students and student issues, you know, treat them equally, you know, with consideration for some of these things.

00:39:23:08 - 00:39:28:09

Jeff Moe

But really treat them like other students. There's so many common issues.

00:39:28:22 - 00:39:38:12

Edgar Villareal

If we have Veterans that want to get involved and are seeking support, how would someone go about getting connected with the vital program?

00:39:39:00 - 00:39:51:03

Jeff Moe

That's a great question, Edgar. And there are so many good vital programs across the country. Look up VA College Toolkit. It has all the vital sites and contact numbers for each site.

00:39:51:15 - 00:39:55:00

Edgar Villareal

And what are some of the resources that they should consider.

00:39:55:11 - 00:40:19:23

Jeff Moe

Your local VA? I mean, really engaging with your local VA, your local transition case management program, your school mental health clinic, they will often have resources and many colleges have a student Veterans center now where they process your GI Bill benefits, and often they offer other services as well. If you have a student Veteran association, often they're connected with resources in the community.

00:40:20:13 - 00:40:32:17

Edgar Villareal

Both of you have given us a lot to think about. I think as we wrap up, I'm going to first start with you, Adam. Do you have any parting words to wrap up our conversation today for Veterans and others who might be listening?

00:40:33:01 - 00:40:54:11

Adam Kinney

I just want to say I really appreciate having this conversation with you and Jeff and in talking about how this research that can often seem abstract when you're typing away at your keyboard, you know, connecting it to the lived experiences of those going through this, trying to just transition. I've it's been super valuable to me. I really appreciate it.

00:40:54:21 - 00:41:26:21

Adam Kinney

And one of my main takeaways and I think about this often is regardless of what discipline you are or whether you're a psychologist, an occupational therapist, a social worker, if you really push a clinician what the ultimate goal of their services are, it would be something like helping people achieve a meaningful and satisfying life. And we do it in different ways.

00:41:26:21 - 00:41:51:05

Adam Kinney

But I think saying it out loud sometimes, saying it explicitly and as a researcher, I have the bias of maybe measuring it too, but really emphasizing that in organizing our services in pursuit of that goal specifically, I think might change our services in subtle ways that could ultimately be helpful.

00:41:51:21 - 00:42:12:07

Edgar Villareal

Yeah, really being intentional and thoughtful and thanks for really contributing to our understanding of that so we can learn how to be able to do that better serve our Veterans. Jeff, I wanted to close out with you. Any closing thoughts or advice you want to offer to student Veterans that you wish you had known?

00:42:13:07 - 00:42:40:17

Jeff Moe

Oh, man. Yeah. And so I really appreciate this conversation today as well. And I just think if you're a student Veteran right now get involved somewhere, really get involved in community, it takes a lot of work. But really finding that community for you, whether it be in the Veteran community or in volunteering somewhere or in a faith group or wherever, you know, just there's a chance to thrive and not just survive through college.

00:42:40:17 - 00:42:58:10

Jeff Moe

You know, you can be in college and have a really meaningful experience. Just get involved, get engaged with services, seek help early and often. For me, you know, I was really taught to really kind of carry my own load. I didn't want to share the load across rocks if I didn't need to use an army term.

00:42:58:10 - 00:43:17:20

Jeff Moe

And this is an absolutely a time to really engage and use those resources, reach out to your community, reach out to those peer mentors if you have them, reach out to the VA, reach out to your student Veterans services, use tutoring, seek help early and often. And really you will connect to that sense of meaning. I know I did.

00:43:18:02 - 00:43:29:16

Jeff Moe

It took a little bit of time and it took some process. It took some processing, it took a journey. But you will thrive, you will make it through. And so you have a lot to give.

00:43:30:18 - 00:43:53:04

Edgar Villareal

Thank you, Jeff. Really important words and really thank you both for the support and the services you provide to our Veterans. Make sure that they're succeeding and getting the services that they deserve. So that's all we have for today. Thank you again both for joining. It's been a pleasure to be able to have this conversation. And thank you all for what you do.

00:43:53:13 - 00:43:54:16

Adam Kinney

Thank you. This is awesome.

00:43:54:19 - 00:43:56:19

Jeff Moe

Thank you. I really enjoyed this.

00:44:01:14 - 00:44:30:01

Announcer

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00:44:30:15 - 00:44:55:08

Announcer

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