STUDENTS WHO HAVE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

Service members and veterans transitioning from deployment to higher education bring with them a degree of maturity, experience with leadership, familiarity with diversity, and a mission-focused orientation that exceed those of nearly all of their peers (Dalton, 2010; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). They may be expected to emerge as campus leaders; to enrich any class focused on history, politics, or public policy; and to serve as an engine for innovation on their campuses (Branker, 2009). However, many veterans acquired these assets at great personal expense, including battlefield injuries (Barnhart, 2011).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychological health injury that can develop in response to exposure to an extreme traumatic event. These traumatic events may include military combat, violent personal assaults (e.g., rape, mugging), terrorist attacks, natural or man-made disasters, or serious accidents. The trauma can be directly experienced or witnessed in another person, and involves actual or threatened death, serious injury, or threat to one's physical integrity. The response to the event is intense fear or a feeling of helplessness and manifest in chemical and hormonal changes in the brain. For some the symptoms subside promptly; for others, they persist.

Individuals living with PTSD may experience flashback episodes, nightmares and anxiety attacks. A stress reaction may be provoked when individuals are exposed to events or situations that remind them of the traumatic event. PTSD symptoms usually emerge within a few months of the traumatic event; however, symptoms may appear many months or even years later.

PTSD diagnoses are based on the intensity and duration of these symptoms.

Consequently, to allow and encourage this transitioning population to realize the greatest gain from post-secondary education, campus faculty and staff must recognize the potential learning challenges associated with these invisible injuries and make adjustments or implement accommodations to help ensure their students’ academic success (Church, 2009; Madaus, Miller, & Vance 2009).

Some of the cognitive difficulties associated with Traumatic Brain Injury and PTSD, which may affect academic performance, include:

- Attention and concentration difficulty.
- Information processing challenges.
- Learning and memory deficits.
- Sluggish abstract reasoning.
- Slowed executive functions (problem solving, planning, insight/awareness, sequencing).

Other challenges often associated with difficulty in classroom performance may include the effect of additional stressors (home, work, unit, etc.), sleep disturbance, difficulty with time management, and panic attacks.

Unfortunately, veterans with disabilities are less likely than most students to access the accommodations they are entitled to for a host of reasons, including not seeing their problem as the kind of disability a school would deal with, fear that accessing Disability Service may reduce their chance of persisting to graduation, and not wanting to burden faculty with unexpected problems as they occur (Madaus, 2009).
Teacher Tips

- Create a positive and welcoming learning environment.
- Get to know your Disability Services and Veterans Affairs Office.
- Advanced planning to incorporate universal design for learning (UDL) into the curriculum.
- Provide handouts in a timely manner so that those needing to convert documents to an electronic format have time to do so.
- Plan ahead to ensure all audio clips, videos, and movies are captioned, as many veterans have experienced hearing loss. They can also benefit from captioning to keep them on track.
- Utilize electronic platforms to store lecture notes, so that students may access the information through alternative electronic formats, as needed.
- Permit the in-class use of tape recorders or other audio recording devices as memory aids.
- Allow student to use an index card with faculty-approved notes to build memory joggers into the exams.
- Allow students to use index cards, blank paper, or a ruler to help keep their place on exams.

Tip for Alleviating Panic Attacks/Stress

- Allow students the ability to take a short break when stressful situations arise.
- Permit flexibility in class session attendance schedules, as long as absences do not conflict with the core requirements of the class.

No matter what political views faculty and staff members have, they should honor a student veteran’s service and respect the student’s privacy. Faculty must recognize that student veterans provide a unique opportunity that may (positively) challenge how they teach and assess. As educators we must recognize the need to develop teaching methodology’s that are inclusive and more flexible in the way we teach and assess student learning. This not only benefits veterans, but also any other students who may appreciate having the same flexibility extended to them. In doing so, institutions may experience improved retention and graduation rates. And, more importantly, faculty and staff will have helped the student veterans achieve their mission to earn a degree.

Remember

All students satisfy the same standard for academic credit for your class. Standards should not be lowered, nor should the curriculum be “watered down.” Students with disabilities will simply be using accommodations in order to accomplish those standards.

References:


Church, T. E. (2009). Returning veterans on campus with war related injuries and the long road back home. Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, (22)1, 43–52.
