

Date: July 2008

Publication: Employee Assistance
Program Management Letter
Circulation: N/A

**EMPLOYEE
ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM
MANAGEMENT LETTER**

Employers Should Reach Out To PTSD Veterans

Work environments and office behavior should adapt to help returning soldiers transition back into home life, according to clinical psychologist Dr. Stephen Sideroff of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences.

The recommendations come in conjunction with reports of increased mental health issues in returning soldiers. One such study, "Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences and Services to Assist Recovery," by the RAND Corporation, found that 14 percent of returning soldiers suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) while another 14 percent suffered from depression.

"Any group returning from war needs as much support as they can get. They've been in a war zone where their lives were in danger. The impact on the nervous system is to either be over-sensitized or to go numb," Sideroff told **Employee Assistance Program Management Letter**.

Employers of veterans that may be suffering from PTSD should work to create a comfortable environment with open dialogue about experiences and hardships, said Sideroff.

Certain physical actions can be helpful as well, he noted, such as maintaining eye contact, avoiding sudden movements and loud sounds and using calm physical contact to help soothe a person's nervous system.

"Help create a safe and comfortable environment for them. Have them feel like they can talk about their experiences," he said.

For employees that seem to be struggling inwardly with effects of PTSD, Sideroff recommended employers seek out support groups and make them available to the veterans.

“There are more and more support groups in the VA [U.S. Department of Veteran’s Affairs] to support veterans with PTSD. A very good idea is for an employer to research the nearest VA and get the contact information of a support group leader and then hand that to the employee. It demonstrates a level of concern that will be reassuring,” said Sideroff, who researches stress management therapies for his patients at Moonview Sanctuary, an emotional-therapy center in California.

Understanding PTSD can help employers and peers offer support to veterans, Sideroff explained.

“In our own development, we try to learn how the world works and we get to a place where we have basic expectations about life. When we encounter a traumatic event, it shakes up that basic sense of security about how the world works,” he said.

Sideroff explained that people respond to traumatic events in two fundamental ways, by either becoming over-sensitized to the world around them or by pushing down emotions and becoming numb to the world.

“People with flashbacks hear sounds and see images that relate to their experiences and will recognize that it has to do with previous events. But a lot of people tend to deal with the experience by pushing down emotions. A lot of people show a lack of motivation or interest,” Sideroff said.

Stress management, including the neuron feedback therapy that Sideroff researches, can be helpful for dealing with both reactions to PTSD. Such practices, known as cognitive behavior therapies, can help patients shift short-term, jarring memories into long-term, calmer ones, he said.

“Much of what happens in therapy has the potential to re-traumatize a person, so they will tend to shut down and avoid it because it is so uncomfortable. But with stress management and neuron feedback, patients can learn to monitor and shift brainwaves on their own. It retrains them to go a place of calm, and if images of trauma come up, they can stay with them calmly and shift the memory so that it no longer causes brain trauma,” said Sideroff.

Sideroff explained that increased attention on veterans’ mental health has helped bolster the support services offered by the VA. Now, he said, the VA offers accessible peer therapy, counseling and other support for returning soldiers throughout the country.

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