

TOP 10 TIPS FOR EMDR THERAPISTS

WORKING WITH VETERANS AND SERVICE MEMBERS

1

GET FAMILIAR WITH MILITARY CULTURE

The military is a culture with different service branches, ranks, and occupations that can influence the way a veteran or service member views the world and therapy. Know the branches of service in which your client has served. Learn about your client's job, duties, and responsibilities within their time in the service (i.e. a mechanic, pilot, programmer, and combat specialist will have different experiences).

2

VETERANS VS ACTIVE DUTY CLIENT NEEDS

The needs, available resources, hurdles for treatment, integration with civilian society, and limits of confidentiality may be quite different between someone in active service, a reserve member, and a veteran.

3

CONNECTING TO SOCIAL SUPPORT IS CRUCIAL

After returning home or being discharged from service, some service members may feel disconnected, misunderstood, and unable to relate to family and friends. Civilian interactions can lead to intrusive or triggering questions (e.g. 'Have you killed anybody?'), leading to further isolating behaviors and feelings of disconnection. What opportunities are there for connection with other veterans or service members in your area or online?

4

DO YOUR OWN WORK

Spend some time reflecting on where you stand regarding military issues. How will you react to the disturbing trauma details from a service members' experience? Expressions of shock, horror, or dismay may permanently damage the ability to trust a provider or validate negative cognitions. It is important to care for yourself as a therapist by monitoring yourself for secondary trauma. Consider self-care, peer consultation, or your own therapy.

5

DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

You never know what issue a veteran or service member will wish to work on in therapy. Military trauma may not be the EMDR target that is bringing a service member in for treatment. Listen and stay with the client.

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6

SURVIVAL MECHANISMS ARE HARD TO CHANGE

Survival behaviors learned in military training are designed to keep a service member safe when in service. These are not 'deprogrammed' upon discharge. A return to civilian life will require time to process these behavior changes. The following examples can affect relationships and daily life when the service member shifts from a military environment to a civilian environment.

- Never become too relaxed
- Indecision is dangerous
- Keep a mission focus
- Mistakes are deadly
- Don't get close to others
- Follow orders without questioning
- Be prepared for danger, scan for 'a way out'
- Respond quickly and forcefully to potential threat
- Emotions cloud judgment

7

MENTAL TOUGHNESS

A veteran or service member may be used to being defined by the ability to function and thrive. Asking for help may seem like admitting weakness or feeling broken, even if the need for help is recognized. This may lead to a struggle between the military-part and civilian-part of self in processing.

8

THE CONTEXT OF WAR

Service members may fear judgement from others who have not been in war and are unfamiliar with the context in which events happen.

9

TRUST, TRUST, TRUST

For veterans and service members, trust is huge and must be earned. These clients may have experienced negative feedback when sharing their experiences with others in the past, or confusion in whom it is safe to confide. This makes it especially important that a therapist can accept and handle what is shared in session.

10

REACHING OUT IS DIFFICULT

Admitting there is a problem and showing vulnerability opposes military norms of making sacrifices and enduring hardship without complaint. Service members generally seek EMDR treatment only after their situation has become impossible to ignore or they have been told by someone else that they must seek help.