Ask The Question (ATQ)
Education & Outreach Initiative

Vignettes

Part - 3

Easter Seals NH
Military & Veterans Services
March 2015 – June 2016

An Initiative of the NH Department of Health and Human Services
Supported by the NH Commission on PTSD and TBI
H ave you ever served in the military?
One question can make a big difference.

Aging & Senior Services
Ensure a Widow is Well Taken Care Of

Muriel was panicking. A widow for the past 10 years, she had recently depleted the savings from her late husband's retirement account and was having trouble making ends meet. Her own health was dwindling and she felt she would soon need some extra help around the house. She had always been very self-sufficient, but realized it was time to get some help figuring out her options.

She went to her local Senior Center and met with a social worker there. The social worker was very attentive, listening actively as Muriel detailed her struggles. The social worker then explored various state and local benefits and assistance options with Muriel. Muriel was happy to have someone to talk to and gathered some good information, but she still had some concerns.

What the social worker didn't know was that Muriel's late husband served in the Korean War and because of that, Muriel was entitled to a survivor benefit through the Veterans Administration. The addition of another, little-known, benefit would have made all the difference.

Had the social worker asked the question: “Have you (or a family member) ever served in the military?” that would have opened the door to other VA-related resources and benefits and saved Muriel additional hardship.

A SK THE QUESTION:
“Have you or a family member ever served in the military?”
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Billy’s behavior was changing. A second-grader, he had always been an engaged and well-adjusted student, but recently he had become more withdrawn at school. He appeared angry at times and was getting in fights at recess. His teacher had not yet reached out to his parents to discuss the problem but was planning to.

One day in art, the assignment was to draw a picture of something you love. Billy drew a man with a BIG GUN in his hand. His teacher was very concerned and made a mental note to email his mom after school. That day in recess, Billy chased his buddies on the playground while “shooting” at them with an imaginary gun. The school has a zero-tolerance policy for violence and weapons, and the recess teacher shouted at Billy and whisked him off to the principal’s office. The staff lectured Billy as he cried, and rattled him with questions.

But, there was ONE QUESTION NO ONE EVER ASKED – not then, and not when Billy’s parents enrolled him in the school a year earlier. Billy’s father served in the National Guard. It turned out that a month earlier, Billy’s father, an infantry soldier, had left for a 10-month deployment to the Middle East. Billy’s parents helped prepare Billy by reminding him that Daddy was a hero, his job was to keep America safe, and sometimes he needed to go far away. Billy was very proud of his father and missed him very much. No wonder he was withdrawn in school and no wonder he proudly drew a picture of his father in art!

Just think how Billy could have been supported by his school had someone simply “Asked the Question”!

ASK THE QUESTION:

“How have you or a family member ever served in the military?”

One question can make a big difference!
HAVE YOU EVER SERVED IN THE MILITARY?
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Employment & Vocational Services
Help a Veteran Establish a Civilian Career

Christina was a National Guardsman who returned from her 2nd deployment three years ago, where she was a Sergeant overseeing Military Police activities in the Middle East. In her previous deployment, she held an administrative position managing supply requisitions for a large transportation unit. Christina completed her enlistment with the Army National Guard shortly after returning from her 2nd deployment. She then got married and became pregnant with her 1st child.

After a year at home with the baby, Christina was ready to return to the workforce, and started looking for a stable civilian job. Christina's past civilian work was limited to part-time retail positions – changing jobs frequently to accommodate her schedule of military drills, training, and deployments. Now she was looking for a “career job,” something rewarding with room to grow. She did not know where to begin. She wrote a resume highlighting her background in retail work, and started applying online for supervisory and management positions in retail settings. She was not getting any interviews. She sought assistance at the local Employment Security office. She spoke with an employment rep and talked about her many jobs at several different store chains in the area.

When the employment rep asked the question, “Have you ever served in the military?” Christina told the rep about her service in the Guard and her two deployments. At that point, the rep referred her to the Veteran Representative at the Employment Security office. In her first meeting with the Vet Rep, they were able to tease out all the skills Christina developed through her military service, including security, leadership, supervising others, and supply acquisitions and management. They created a new resume, highlighting Christina's leadership and administrative abilities. Additionally, the Vet Rep connected Christina to employers who had a strong track record for hiring veterans. She landed several interviews and ultimately accepted a supervisor position in the inventory department of an auto-supply chain – a position that tapped into her leadership, supply/acquisition, and transportation expertise.

Had the employment representative not inquired about military service, Christina likely would not have connected to the Vet Rep and might not have ever sought positions that highlight her military experience.

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**Faith-Based Groups Help a Family When a Member is Deployed**

After Steve Robinson completed a 6-year enlistment in the Air Force, his family returned to their home state of New Hampshire, enrolled their kids in school, and joined a local church. Steve continued his military service in the Air National Guard. After a year, Steve left on a 3-month deployment as part of a refueling crew. Shortly after, the family’s youngest child became ill and Mrs. Robinson missed work to care for him. The older child missed his father and acted out in school. Home maintenance, bills, and other demands kept piling up, and the family was struggling.

Mrs. Robinson was exhausted, lonely, and depressed. She started withdrawing from the community. It was all she could do to get through the day. The family stopped going to church and did not participate in neighborhood activities. Mrs. Robinson had weathered many deployments when Steve was in the Air Force, but the family had lived on base, where there was a lot of camaraderie and support among families who were in it together. In their new community, many neighbors didn’t know Steve served in the Air Guard and that he had just left for a few months. This included their church community. When they first joined the congregation, they never mentioned that Steve served in the Air National Guard, so the leaders and members of the church community did not immediately notice when the Robinsons stopped appearing at services. Then Mrs. Robinson ran into another member of the church at the supermarket and mentioned that Steve was deployed and things were pretty hectic at home.

The church member let the church leadership know and a group of people from the church came together to support the family. They offered babysitting services, helped with yard work, and offered camaraderie and support to Mrs. Robinson so she didn’t feel like she was “going it alone” with her husband away. This made all the difference, bringing the Robinsons back into the fold and surrounding them with people who cared. Based on this experience, the church leadership decided to always ask new members if they serve in the military so they can be clued in to the family’s challenges and, as a congregation, provide fellowship and support.

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Health Care & Medical Services
Identify the Invisible Wounds of War

Jacob was having bad headaches, felt dizzy often, had a decreased appetite, and lacked energy. He had quit his job, was frustrated and couldn’t control his temper. Most of all, his head pounded – especially at night and it was only getting worse. One night the pain was so intense that he went to urgent care. He met with a triage nurse who asked him a series of questions about his current medications, symptoms, past diagnoses and overall health. She did not, however, ask Jacob if he had ever served in the military. And he didn’t tell. But he had served – in fact, Jacob was a former Marine who had served with an infantry unit in Afghanistan. A stoic man, he did not like to discuss his military history, such as the fact that he was exposed to multiple traumas during his deployment, including brain-rattling explosions.

He was discharged from the Marines without a medical diagnosis, never sought treatment/evaluation through the VA or other healthcare provider, and assumed his current problems were not related to anything that happened in Afghanistan.

Without this information, the urgent care staff were at a loss. They sent Jacob home with extra-strength ibuprofen and told him to get a good night’s rest. The pills didn’t help. He returned a few nights later and they provided stronger medications. The pills still didn’t help. This went on for several visits. Jacob became increasingly depressed and debilitated by the headaches and pain medications that didn’t help. He was seriously considering ending his life, when his girlfriend took him one more time to urgent care to try and get relief for the headaches which were now excruciating.

They ran blood tests, and the phlebotomist – also a Marine – noticed a “Semper Fi” tattoo on Jacob’s arm. The phlebotomist and Jacob began talking about their military experiences. It came out that not only had Jacob deployed to a war zone but that he had been exposed to large blasts from IED’s (improvised explosive devices). The phlebotomist told the nurse and doctor. Eventually, Jacob was screened for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). With new, accurate diagnoses he was able to get the treatment he needed to control his headaches and also address other emotional and physical problems that had developed as a result of the TBI and PTSD. He was linked to the VA to establish a claim for service-connected disability compensation. Jacob has said that he does not know how long he would have lasted had he not gotten the help he needed. The triage nurse now always inquires about military service.

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Pete had just started classes at the local community college. He was excited to be enrolled and working toward a new career after spending six years of his young adult life as a weapons specialist in the armed forces. He made sure to arrive early to every class, feeling anxious and ensuring he got a seat in the back of the room where he could keep an eye on everything.

It bothered Pete that most of his classmates talked too much in class, challenged the professor, and acted as if they were kids in high school. Pete realized that he was sometimes unable to focus, as he was constantly scanning the room and alert to noises in the hallway. He struggled on his first exam and felt his bubble of hope burst.

One day in class, one of his classmates made a flip comment. Everything that was bubbling under the surface came to a head. Pete felt angry that anyone would take the privilege of higher education for granted. He made a comment back to the classmate and things escalated to the point where Pete got angry and stormed out of the classroom to avoid getting into a fight. He decided that college – with all the immaturity and lack of respect – was not for him. He decided to drop out and went to his advisor to tell her so.

It was at that point that the advisor *asked the question:* “Have you ever served in the military?” Although he had included this information on his initial application, and was using the GI bill, the information was never provided to his advisor or instructor. Once she knew about Pete’s background, the advisor was able to link Pete to the Student Veteran group and support him in finding ways that he can feel more comfortable in the classroom. He decided to stay in school after all. If his advisor had not identified Pete’s military background, he may have dropped out and passed by the opportunity to further his education.

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Housing & Homelessness Services
Give Homeless Veterans Every Chance to Succeed

After being evicted, Rodney was in despair. A Vietnam veteran with some health problems, he had not been able to keep up with the rent after being laid off from his job a few months ago. Even worse, he had temporary custody of his daughter's young children and was worried sick about their safety.

He had called NH 2-1-1 and checked in with the shelters, but was told there was no space for at least a week. Rodney ended up sleeping with the kids in his car for a few nights before a friend invited them to stay with her for a month. When Rodney called one of the shelters for an update on bed availability, the homeless outreach worker asked Rodney “Have you ever served in the military?”

When Rodney informed her of his four years in the Army in the late 60s, including a tour in Vietnam, the outreach worker referred Rodney to the VA's Homeless Outreach services. He was quickly linked to a local non-profit that managed a veteran-specific housing program which provided both case management and financial assistance. Rodney was immediately assigned a case manager who helped Rodney find suitable housing and accessed financial assistance to help with a security deposit and first month's rent. Concurrently, the case manager linked Rodney to employment supports and vocational rehabilitation services to help ensure Rodney could get his life back on track and maintain stable housing.

If the housing worker had not asked about Rodney's military status, he would not have been connected to veteran-specific housing programs that his military service had earned him the right to access then he and his children might still be living in a car, in and out of shelters, or on a friend's couch.
Law Enforcement & First Responders
*Ensuring Safety for Veterans*

Richard joined the Army right after 9-11 and deployed multiple times. He drove a tank in Iraq and Afghanistan.

After returning home from a deployment, he was driving home from work when he was pulled over by a police officer for speeding and driving too close to the center of the road. He was tired, was not paying attention, and was still experiencing “battlemind,” a condition where a returning warrior has difficulty shedding behaviors that are necessary at war but inappropriate in the civilian world. He had been driving aggressively – just as he was trained to do in Afghanistan.

The police officer did not know about Richard’s recent deployment and began talking to Richard about the dangers of driving aggressively. Richard became agitated and he and the police officer began arguing. He was eventually arrested. Throughout the interchange, the police officer never asked Richard if he had served in the military. When that information was finally shared, the police department knew more about the circumstances for Richard’s driving habits.

They linked him to the local Vet Center for counseling to facilitate a smoother transition to civilian life. The Police Chief discussed this in a meeting with highway patrol the next day and they agreed that they would inquire – whenever safely possible – about military status and recent deployments in order to best understand a situation.

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Clarence served in the Army for eight years until his discharge five years ago. During his service he deployed four times, including a grueling combat deployment. He struggled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which he tried to deal with by consuming excessive amounts of alcohol. Clarence was arrested for DUI and resisting arrest. He already had several speeding tickets so he was facing potential jail time.

He was assigned a public defender. As they reviewed his case, Clarence expressed a strong desire to confront his drinking problem and get his life on track. He and his lawyer asked the court if Clarence's sentencing could be modified to involve court-approved treatment and community service, rather than jail time.

It was at that time that the judge asked if Clarence had ever served in the military. Once his military service was revealed, the judge decided to utilize a new behavioral health track option that provided alternate sentencing for veterans with mental health and substance abuse challenges. Ultimately, Clarence got into a substance abuse treatment program and has maintained sobriety and a perfect driving/legal record since then.

It is a good thing the judge asked Clarence if he had served in the military—otherwise he may likely have gone to jail and not received the treatment he needed and deserved.
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**Mental Health & Substance Use Disorders Services**  
*Help a Veteran Get Accurate Diagnosis and Treatment*

Mike had his dream job. After serving in the Navy and completing his final tour to a war zone, he planned to get a job as a fire fighter. He was offered a job at his local fire department right away. He was so excited to start his job that he cut short his time-off period after his deployment and started the job early.

Only a few weeks went by before Mike started drinking pretty heavily after work. The stress of the job and the nature of the work took a toll on him and he was having nightmares about his deployment, and flashbacks on the job while responding to calls. His boss noticed his fatigue and also that he had missed a few days of work. When he talked with Mike, he recommended that he seek support at the local community mental health center.

At his intake interview, Mike didn’t want to appear as frightened or weak. As the therapist led him through the questions, Mike reported fatigue, trouble sleeping, and occasional drinking, but did not readily discuss flashbacks or his experiences in the Navy. It wasn’t until his next session that he revealed his recent service and that he was struggling with post-deployment stressors and challenges.

Once the therapist knew this, and with Mike’s permission, he was able to consult and collaborate with a local Vet Center therapist to provide more culturally competent care and get Mike the help he needed to address his substance abuse and other underlying issues. Mike continued his therapy at the CMHC and also participated in group therapy with other combat veterans at the Vet Center. Good thing Mike returned for the second session! The therapist discussed this at the next staff meeting and the director of the mental health center decided to Ask the Question about military service in the standard intake interview.

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Angela, a military spouse, was denied food stamps. Her family income was over the threshold, yet she struggled with making ends meet. Even with her husband's deployment income being a little higher than his civilian paycheck, she was spending more on childcare and home maintenance because he was overseas.

She had bought a lot of presents for Christmas because she wanted the kids to have a great holiday, especially with their dad deployed. Her credit card payments were higher than ever. The Welfare rep advised that she seek financial counseling and explore a debt management program through a local non-profit. Angela took the advice and met with a non-profit financial education center.

They reviewed her credit card bills, other monthly expenses, and sources of income, but were having trouble establishing a clear budget that would balance each month while also paying down the mounting debt.

When Angela mentioned that her husband was deployed, the financial counselor alerted her that credit card companies must provide a lower interest rate to service members during a deployment. This would make a difference for sure. The financial counselor also consulted with the National Guard which was able to identify additional benefits and programs for Angela and her family, including case management and emergency financial assistance. In all, these programs helped reduce childcare costs and interest rates, and allowed Angela and her family to thrive during and after her husband’s deployment.

The financial counselor realized that he likely had other clients for whom some of these benefits and programs would be available, so decided to Ask the Question of them and all new clients.

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Things were getting worse at home. Greg’s fuse was shorter than ever and then he shoved his wife Cathy, hard. He had never been physically violent before, but since returning from his deployment as a combat medic several years ago, he was much more volatile. He was even more impatient with their 12-year-old son. Cathy tried to convince Greg to get help, but he refused, insisting he just needed some peace and quiet.

One night he pushed Cathy again and she realized she needed help, fast. She did not feel safe and did not know what to do next. When Greg left for work the next morning, Cathy took her son and went to a local crisis center for assistance. They helped her establish a safety plan – to stay with her sister for the time being– and then discussed options. The crisis worker did not inquire about military service, and at first when Cathy was talking about her fear at home, she did not mention it herself.

Eventually, Cathy said “ever since he got back . . . “ and it came out that when Greg was deployed he had been involved in violent and gory situations overseas. This helped crisis center staff provide the best possible guidance and support. They urged Cathy to consult with her local Vet Center for family and spousal support, and also consulted with the Chaplain in Greg’s Reserves unit. The Chaplain was able to convince Greg to get help at the Vet Center, where he enrolled in individual counseling and an anger management group. They connected Cathy to a support group for military spouses.

Today, with counseling and support, Greg has his temper under control and Cathy and their son are safe at home. What might have happened had Greg’s military service not come up during that visit to the crisis center?

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