

Combat-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: The Battle to Return to Civilian Life

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BACKGROUND

Studies suggest that approximately 300,000 military personnel deployed during the Iraqi War currently experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Amaker, Woods, & Gerardi, 2009). Military personnel are experiencing PTSD signs and symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, memory loss, insomnia, depression, avoidance of social interaction, fear, decreased energy, drug and alcohol use, and the inability to concentrate (APA, 2013), which can adversely affect the person, their environment, and the daily life activities they engage in. The Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model (Strong et al., 1999) can assist in explaining the impact of PTSD on the individual's ability to experience full participation in life situations. This decreased PEO fit due to posttraumatic stress disorder results in decreased performance which becomes more evident during engagement in complex daily life activities that require advanced skills such as higher education. This decline in performance can potentially explain the estimated 88% dropout rate of military veterans from college education during the first year, with an estimated only 3% graduating (Betar, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to describe the breakdown between the person, their environment, and education-related activities and identify compensatory strategies designed to maximize performance in higher education for individuals with PTSD.

METHODS

The PEO model consists of three components – the person (P), their environment (E), and the occupations (O) or daily activities in which they engage in – and provides a framework for a systematic interactional analysis. The person (P) has a unique set of attributes, skills, knowledge,

and experience. For the individual with PTSD, behaviors related to the disorder affecting the person component may include interference with cognitive skills, judgments, memory, concentration, organization skills, and motivation; difficulty performing tasks with time pressures and prioritizing tasks; side effects from medication such as fatigue, drowsiness, slow response time; difficulty retaining verbal directions; difficulty interacting with others and responding appropriately to social cues; problems communicating with authority figures and interpreting criticism; difficulty adjusting to unexpected changes or dealing with interruptions and transitions; frightening thoughts and flashbacks; possible social withdrawal; and sleep difficulties (Church, 2009). The environment (E) is defined as the context within which performance takes place and includes cultural, socioeconomic, institutional, physical, and social elements. The environment of higher education includes the closed space of the classroom with limited entrances/exits which typically has a theater style design; unfamiliar people (classmates and instructors); public spaces which can be noisy and crowded; a perceived stigmatization; poorly lit campus areas; and overcrowded parking lots. The occupation (O) component not only includes the activities the person engages in but also the characteristics, degree of structure, duration, and complexity of the activities. Activities relevant to engagement in higher education include not only class attendance but also expectations of active engagement during class; retention of course content; timed tests; interpretation of instructions for assignments; individual and group work; socially appropriate in-person and electronic communication; driving to, from, and around campus; becoming active members of campus organizations; assuming extra-curricular responsibilities; and balancing part-time employment with school attendance.

RESULTS

Optimal performance results from a good fit between the Person, Environment, and Occupations (activities). For the individual with PTSD in higher education, modifying the environment (E)

and activities (O) can minimize the adverse effects the symptoms of PTSD have on the person (P) and in turn maximize success in higher education. Modifications to the college environment (E) include educating instructors and students about PTSD; self-selection of classroom seating; meet with instructors prior to term starting; small class sizes (< 20 students); scheduled meetings with instructors; tutoring program; signs and announcements welcoming students who are veterans; acknowledging and celebrating veteran-related holidays; designated area for veterans to study and socialize; designated accessible parking for veterans; well-lighted campus walkways and areas (Washington DVA, 2009). Modifications to activities or occupations (O) required in higher education include: in-class use of computers; breaks (5-10 minute) during testing; extended and flexible timeframes for testing and assignments; flexible class attendance policies; videotaped lectures; and online learning options (Washington DVA, 2009). Additionally, higher education institutions can employ programmatic strategies and accommodations to maximize the PEO fit for students with PTSD. Examples include a peer mentoring program, first-year veteran-only courses, and designated veteran housing to facilitate the transition to college.

DISCUSSION

Use of the PEO model facilitates a person-centered approach which is essential as no two people with PTSD experience the disorder or life situations in the same way. Both environmental and occupation-based adaptations assist veterans in successfully participating in complex daily life activities, such as higher education. A combination of strategies not only maximizes performance in education-related activities, but also empowers the individual with skills requisite in decision-making for career and life choices.

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