

Welcoming Service Members and Veterans Home

A young man who had recently returned from Iraq told a focus group of veterans and non-veterans that civilians sometimes looked at him as if he were from Mars and spoke to him carefully, as if he might break or “lose it.” He said this with a wry smile, but also with a hint of loneliness.

Perhaps the best way for civilians to honor and support service members and veterans is to start by recognizing our common humanness, and to let it unfold from there. This list of suggestions combines ideas from many sources—service members, veterans, and people who live and work with them. It’s no substitute for listening to and learning about an individual, but it might be a place to start.

Say “Thank you for your service”:

- **It’s a simple and straightforward statement.** It doesn’t require any explanation. You can make this statement honestly no matter how you feel about the wars in which service members and veterans have fought or the branches of the military in which they’ve served.

If you knew the veteran before deployment:

- **Understand that people change during military service.** They gain some very important strengths; they live through very difficult experiences, and their stress systems may have changed to meet the demands of the war zone. Coming home can be difficult, and people will need time and space to work through their challenges and find out how their new strengths translate to civilian life.
- **Understand that the people at home have changed, too.** Everyone may have some expectations that won’t be met, and relationships may take different forms. Talking to others who have made or are making the same adjustments can be helpful.
- **Meet people where they are.** Many returning veterans and service members just want things to get back to “normal,” even if they’ve changed in ways that may make their old perception of normal hard or impossible to find. Respect their wishes, and be a friend while they’re going through the process of finding the “new normal.”

If this is someone new to you:

- **Recognize all the things you have in common.** Even if you don’t know much about the military culture or the experience of war, you do know what it’s like to be a human being in a world that’s sometimes easy and sometimes difficult. You have common traits, goals, and values. Start from there.
- **See individuals as individuals.** This particular veteran is not necessarily like another veteran you know, or like an image or description of veterans you’ve seen or heard about. Take the time to listen and learn who this individual person is.

- **Learn about the military.** Just doing a computer search on the words “military culture” will bring up tons of information. Find out about the branches of military service, military rank, and which terms are accurate and inaccurate (for example, a “Soldier” is just someone serving in the Army, but a “service member” can be a member of any branch).
- **Come to know and appreciate military values.** Military training and life in the military are designed to teach a number of important values, including loyalty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, excellence, commitment, personal courage, and devotion to duty. These values can be important in families, organizations, and friendship, too.

Handling communication:

- **Know the limits of your understanding.** If you’ve never been to war, you can’t understand what it’s like, no matter how smart you are or how well you know someone who’s served. You’ve had hard experiences, and you may have survived heavy stress and threat, but it’s not the same. Respect the fact that you don’t understand their experience at war, just like they don’t understand the kinds of experiences you’ve had that they haven’t shared.
- **Be respectful and direct.** In the military, rules, direction, and communication are often straightforward. Back in the civilian culture, veterans are often frustrated with the many subtle demands, hidden agendas, and silent expectations. It helps if you just say what you want and need, and trust the veteran to tell you if he or she can’t go along with it.
- **Respect privacy and personal experiences.** One of the most common mistakes civilians make is to ask service members or veterans about their war-time experiences, or whether or not they’ve killed anyone. These are intensely personal experiences, and you probably have personal experiences you wouldn’t want anyone asking about, too. Just don’t ask, no matter how curious you are.
- **Don’t make conversation by asking questions about the war.** When people feel awkward or don’t know what to say, they sometimes ask questions whose answers are too complex or difficult to fit into the conversation. If service members or veterans want to tell you about conditions in the war zone, they’ll tell you. In the meantime, look for what you have in common, and talk about that.
- **Be open to what they want to tell you.** If you’re close to someone who wants to tell you about his or her war experiences, and you can handle it, just listen without judging or offering opinions. It’s up to the individual to make meaning of what has happened. You don’t want to distort that process or add to the guilt, grief, or anger that he or she may already be feeling. Just honor the individual’s experience.
- **Respect your own needs and boundaries.** If someone wants to tell you about his or her war experiences and you can’t handle it, communicate that fact calmly and respectfully. Not everyone can absorb difficult information at all times. That doesn’t mean you’re weak, and it doesn’t mean that his or her war experiences are shameful. It just means you’re not the one to be listening to their story right now.

Handling the politics:

- **Separate people from the wars in which they’ve served.** You don’t have to approve of a war to appreciate the people who’ve fought in it. A human being is a human being, and not a symbol for national policy. Military service requires a great deal of sacrifice, and that sacrifice deserves recognition and respect.

- **Don't use service members or veterans as sounding boards for your opinions.** Whether you're for or against a particular war, it's not fair to try to get service members or veterans to confirm or argue with your opinions. That's not their job.

Post-deployment stress:

- **Let go of the media hype.** Television, movies, and the news media love to paint dramatic and exaggerated pictures of the symptoms of combat stress effects. It increases their sales if they portray service members and veterans as unstable or violent. Look at service members and veterans as they really are, human beings just like you, and works in progress who have endured stress and learned to cope.
- **Become a myth-buster.** When you hear others speak in those media-driven stereotypes, correct them. Learn about the stress system that we all share, so you can help people understand the ways in which service members and veterans—even those who are experiencing post-deployment effects—are just like anyone else.
- **Keep your own stress system in balance.** One of the best ways to help someone else stay in balance is to keep yourself in balance. When we don't take care of our own stress systems, it's harder to be reasonable and respectful, and easier to trigger stress responses in others. Stress is contagious, and so is staying calm.
- **Don't startle people.** It's not just service members or veterans: Many people tend to startle easily. You don't have to "walk on egg shells," just do what you can to avoid startling people. You can walk up in front of them rather than behind them, announce your presence from a distance rather than waiting until you're right there, avoid making loud noises, etc. Everybody will appreciate it. And if you startle someone by mistake, just apologize.