

The Combat Stress Training Programme

**UNDERSTANDING
WHY VETERANS MAY BE
VULNERABLE TO POOR
MENTAL HEALTH**

Module 2 of 4



WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

- *Your facilitators are Dr Naomi Wilson, Lead Clinical Psychologist and Jolandi du Preez, Lead Occupational Therapist.*
- *The webinar will be recorded and the recording shared on our 'on-demand' training webpage: <https://www.combatstress.org.uk/CombatStressTrainingForOrganisations>*
- *We will be taking questions, please do submit these in the Q&A box and we will have a Q&A session at the end of the webinar.*



THE COMBAT STRESS TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR VETERANS' WELLBEING

Module 4:

Building trauma informed organisations

Module 3:

*Understanding & responding to veterans
who may be struggling with poor mental
health*

Module 2:

*Understanding why veterans
may be vulnerable to
poor mental health*

Module 1:

*Understanding wellbeing & resilience
and how to foster it*

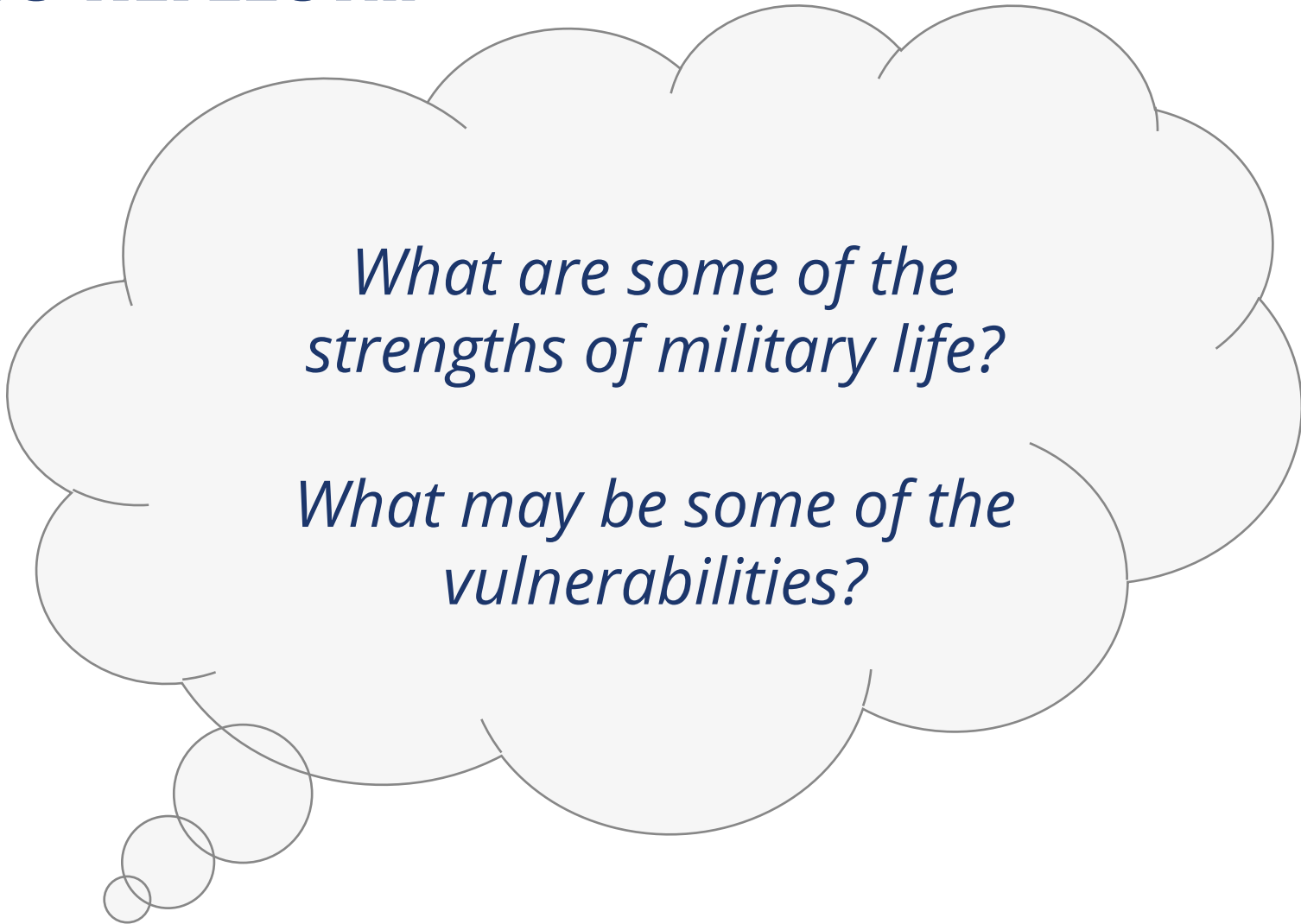
OUTLINE OF TODAY'S TRAINING

Module 2: Understanding Why Veterans May be Vulnerable to Poor Mental Health

- 1. The unique culture of military and veteran life*
- 2. Encountering trauma during service and early life*
- 3. Supporting transition from military to civilian life*

PART 1: THE UNIQUE CULTURE OF MILITARY & VETERAN LIFE

A MOMENT TO REFLECT...



*What are some of the
strengths of military life?*

*What may be some of the
vulnerabilities?*

PAUL SHARES HIS STORY...

Paul joined the RAF in 1989, aged 20. He served for 23 years, undertaking operations in the Middle East, North Africa and Afghanistan within the military intelligence arena.



"I'd always had a fascination with aviation and aircraft. I wanted to get on a formal career path and to travel the world. I'd left school with only a handful of O-level qualifications, but the RAF spotted that I had an aptitude for learning languages. I was subsequently taught three target languages over my career to a very high level, as well as completing several masters degrees.

"During my time with the UN, I saw horrific events linked to children - it threw my world upside down. I was a new dad at the time and on return home it became apparent to me that I wasn't the same person. However, I kept my concerns bottled up and just carried on without talking to anyone.

We'll catch up with Paul's story a bit later...

SOME KEY ASPECTS OF MILITARY CULTURE

- Identity
- Belonging
- Collective Purpose
- Shared Values
- Stoicism
- Humour
- Camaraderie
- Unit cohesion
- Courage
- Respect
- Commitment



A CAREER, AN ADVENTURE

- *The Armed Forces provide a career for a wide and diverse group of people and recognises the wide range of skills individuals, regardless of background, have to offer*
- *The Armed Forces provide qualifications and apprenticeships, facilitating the learning of new skills and trades.*
- *The Armed Forces provide opportunities for high-adrenaline sport and adventure*

A NEW IDENTITY, A CULTURE SHOCK

- *Assimilation into military culture is a process often described as experiencing a culture shock.*
- *During training, recruits are socialised by stripping them of their civilian identity and replacing it with a military identity.*
- *A military identity that is infused with the values of duty, honour, courage, integrity, loyalty, and selfless commitment to comrades, unit and nation, with a reliance on 'family', 'camaraderie' and 'teamwork'.*
- *This reliance is necessary when considering the high risk situations and the roles military personnel carry out.*
- *The new recruit has to make sense of the language, banter, pecking order and traditions.*
- *Breaking down of individualism to form the collective.*

CRITICAL TO SURVIVING THE REALITIES OF WAR



COMBATSTRESS
FOR VETERANS' MENTAL HEALTH

THE MILITARY FAMILY

- *A 'Family' that can always be relied upon for support in time of need.*
- *The family that provides a home, food, a salary, healthcare, leisure pursuits, pastoral care and socialisation.*
- *This is all achieved within a fixed routine – with someone instructing on what to wear, where to go and what to do.*
- *Most military personnel and their families live on base – living, working, playing and socialising together.*

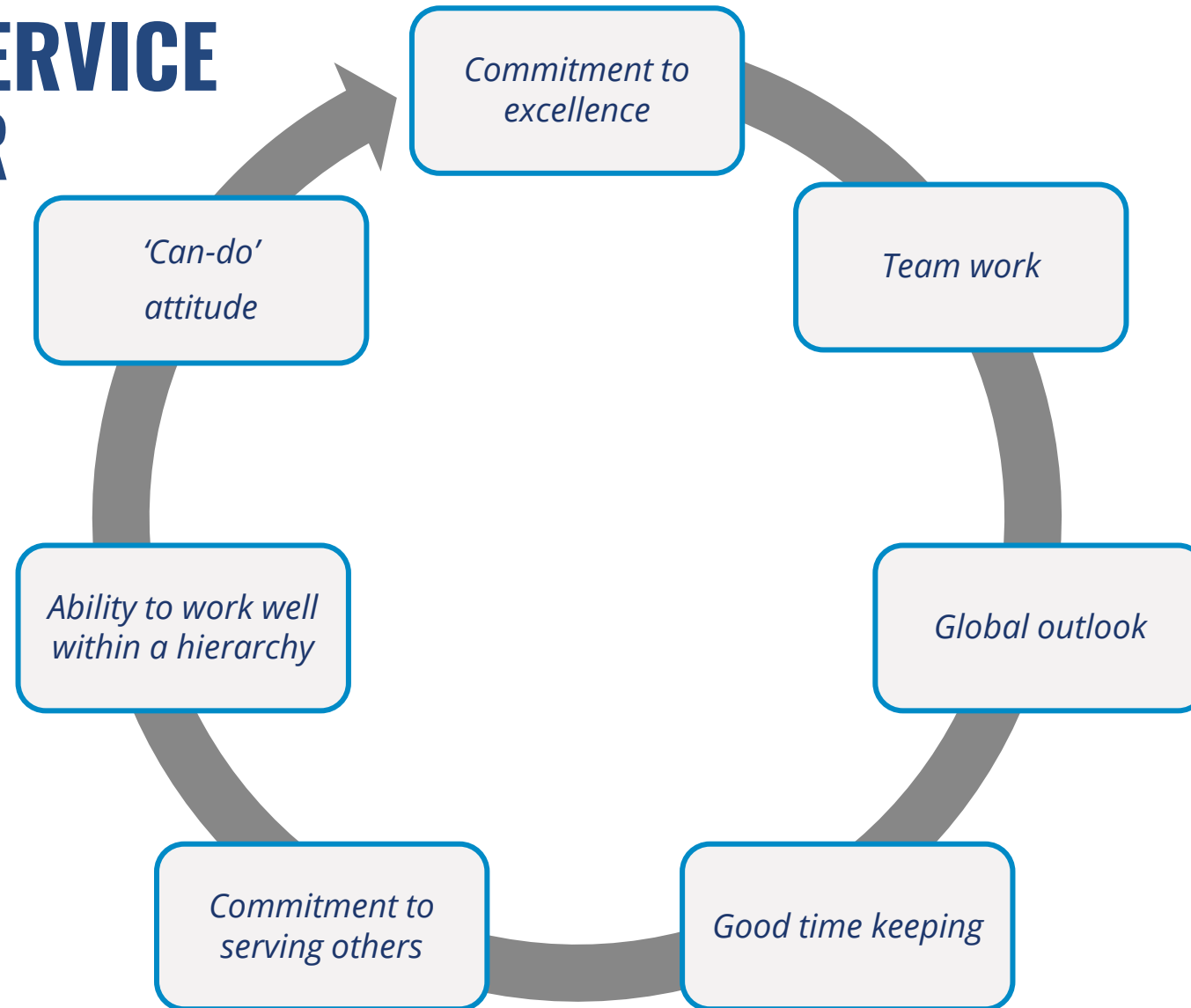
OCCUPATIONAL IMBALANCE: PROS & CONS

- *Military life and its expectations and responsibilities, lead to occupational imbalance which is mainly productive with little time/resources for self-care or leisure.*
- *There are the expectations to replace usual occupations with productive roles of duties in service.*
- *It is heavily focused on teamwork and occupations are completed collectively (meals, living, protection, patrols, socialising, etc.)*
- *Due to training and tours there can be limited family life/contact and they are not able to undertake normalised occupations.*
- *Due to the system most recruits do not learn basic life skills such as budgeting, cooking, how to rent accommodation, register with a GP or write a CV.*
- *Military training facilitates the creation of loyal teams - recruits develop a 'bond that transcends all others, even the marriage and family bonds we forge in civilian life'.*

OCCUPATIONAL IMBALANCE: PROS & CONS

- *However, military culture also offers a sense of belonging, a higher status, increases expectations of oneself and instil high moral values.*
- *Servicemen and women become very skilled at specific tasks/jobs and develop leadership and problem-solving abilities.*

STRENGTHS THAT MILITARY SERVICE MAY FOSTER



*There are
many more...
what strengths
would you add
to this list?*

STRENGTHS MAY ALSO TRIP US UP....

'Can-Do' Attitude

- *Perfectionism*
- *Tendency towards overwork / workaholism*

Commitment to Excellence

- *Drive to give 110% when 80% is ok*
- *Frustration with others who are happy with ok*

Ability to work well within a hierarchy

- *Uncertainty when hierarchy isn't obvious or relevant*
- *Frustration when others don't respect lines of authority*

PART 2.1:

ENCOUNTERING TRAUMA

DURING EARLY LIFE & SERVICE

- **Trauma / adversity encountered during early life**
- Trauma encountered during service

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ARE COMMONLY REPORTED

- *International researchers, over 10+ years, have demonstrated that 67% of the population have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE).*
- *Our own research (Ross, Armour & Murphy, 2020) into childhood adversities in UK treatment-seeking military veterans.*
- *97% of veterans in the study reported experiencing at least one ACE (n=386 veterans).*

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Traumatic events that can have negative, lasting effects on health and wellbeing



People with 6+ ACEs can die

20 yrs

earlier than those who have none



1/8 of the population have more than 4 ACEs



www.70-30.org.uk
@7030Campaign

4 or more ACEs

3x the levels of lung disease
and adult smoking



11x the level of intravenous
drug abuse



14x the number of suicide
attempts



4x as likely to have begun
intercourse by age 15

4.5x

more likely to
develop depression



2x

the level of liver disease



“

**Adverse childhood experiences are the
single greatest unaddressed public health
threat facing our nation today**

”

Dr. Robert Block, the former President of the American Academy of
Pediatrics

Relationship between early childhood trauma and health and well-being problems later in life.

Source: World Health
Organization



A MOMENT TO REFLECT...

*What are your thoughts about the
role of Adverse Childhood
Experiences?*

*Is this body of research familiar or
new to you?*

A LIFE DEFINING DECISION

- *The military can be an attractive opportunity for many*
- *The Armed Forces often recruit young people living in socially disadvantaged areas*
- *There are various factors that can influence the decision to join:*
 - *A desire to break free from current circumstances*
 - *Lack of employment opportunities*
 - *The desire to make a positive change to life pathways*
 - *Wanting to find structure*
 - *There may also be some 'unvoiced' motivations....*

UNVOICED MOTIVATIONS

*Get away from
difficult family
dynamics*

*Wanting to work through
or conquer the difficulties
from the past*



*Want to step into a
hero or rescuer's
identity*

*An emotional
desire to belong
to a supportive
group / family*

*Repairing the past;
wanting to prove
self-worth and value*

PART 2.2:

ENCOUNTERING TRAUMA

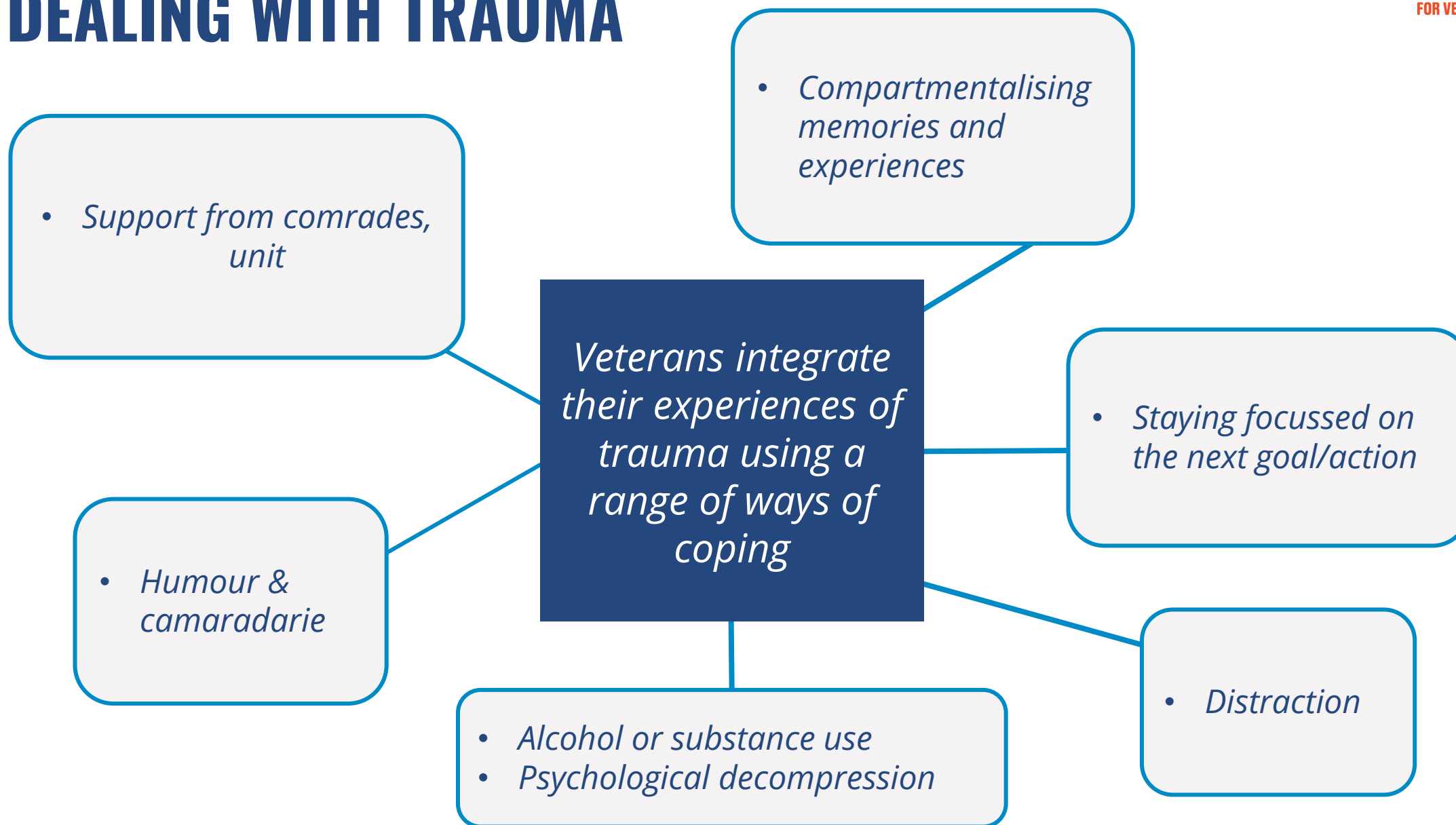
DURING EARLY LIFE & SERVICE

- Trauma / adversity experienced during early life
- **Trauma encountered during service**

TRAUMA EXPERIENCED DURING MILITARY SERVICE

- *It is a myth that all Armed Forces personnel suffer from mental health difficulties*
- *Those that encounter conflict are likely to be psychologically impacted by it; however the majority do not experience long-lasting mental health wounds as a result of their service.*
- *Most experience service and deployment as a highly positive experience*

DEALING WITH TRAUMA



TRAUMA EXPERIENCED DURING MILITARY SERVICE

*“It takes a second for something
To enter your head
But a lifetime for it to leave” Rich*



- *Multiple military traumas are frequent*
- *Hidden / unvoiced traumas*
- *Military families – intergenerational impact of trauma*

INCIDENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES

- *A small but significant proportion of veterans need mental health support*
- *For the first time, the rate of PTSD among veterans is higher than the rate of PTSD among serving personnel and the general public.*
- *PTSD is more prevalent than alcohol misuse among veterans who served in a combat role in Iraq and/or Afghanistan.*
- *The rate of PTSD among all UK veterans is 7.4%.*
- *The rate of common mental health conditions among all UK veterans is one in five (21.5%).*
- *Difficulties include depression, anxiety, alcohol / substance use, anger problems*

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF STIGMA

Veterans from more recent conflicts are seeking our help at a younger age



- *Our own research shows that veterans are coming forward sooner to access support for their mental health*
- *The Armed Forces are shifting the culture around mental health: TRIM assessments available and advertising mental health support through the welfare units.*
- *The UK is slowly moving towards a more open culture about the impact of mental health struggles amongst all*

“I didn’t want to show any weakness in front of the others”

Dean, served in the Army for seven years

PART 3: THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSITION FROM MILITARY TO CIVILIAN LIFE

SHARING SOME EXPERIENCES...

“What am I supposed to do now?”

“I’ve spent my entire adult life planning for or actually participating in combat.”

“I can’t just turn around and start over...”

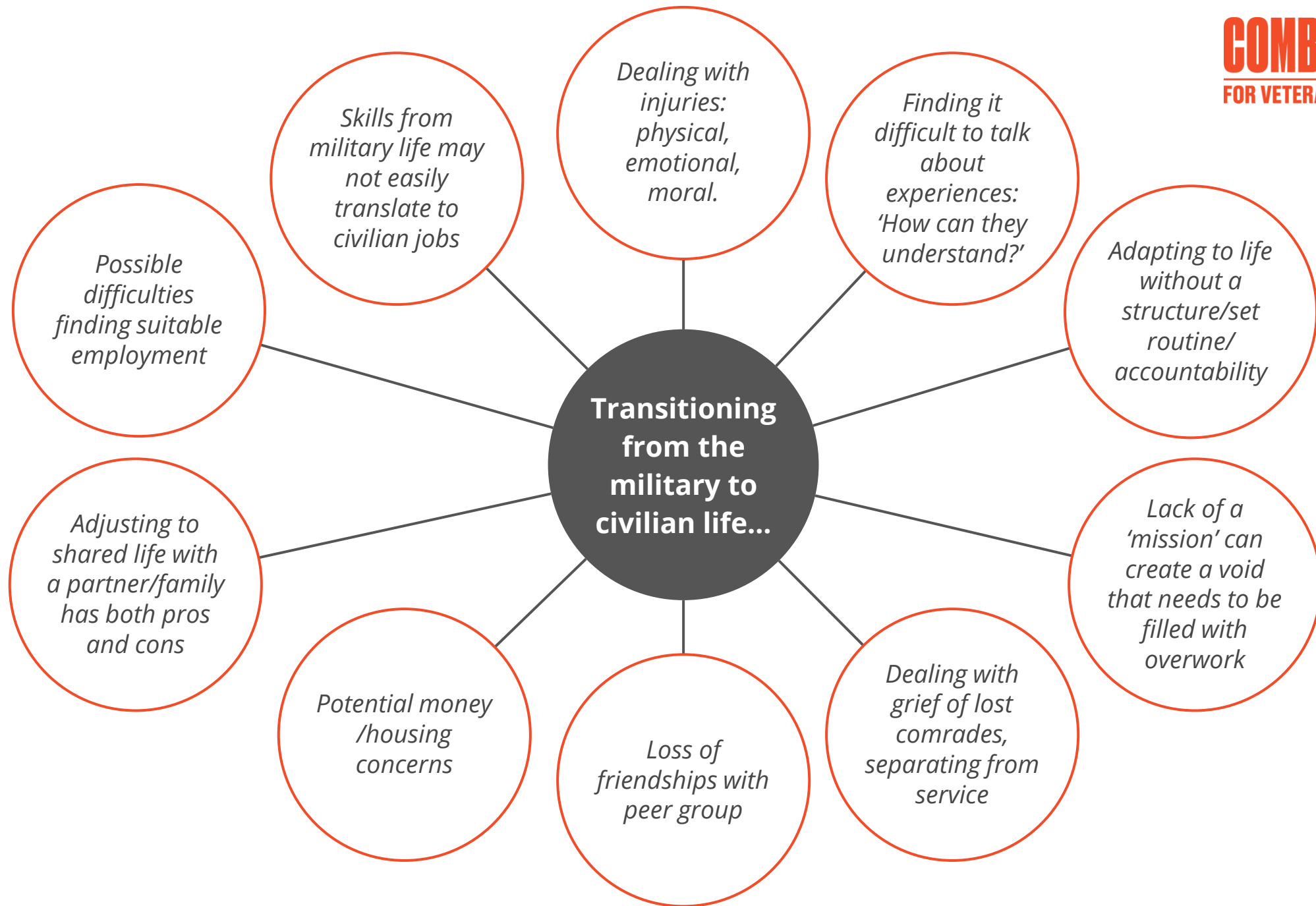
DIFFICULTIES TRANSITIONING FROM THE MILITARY



*Most veterans
leave the military
with good
psychological
health*

*A small but
significant
proportion
struggle*

*What kind of
difficulties may be
experienced?*



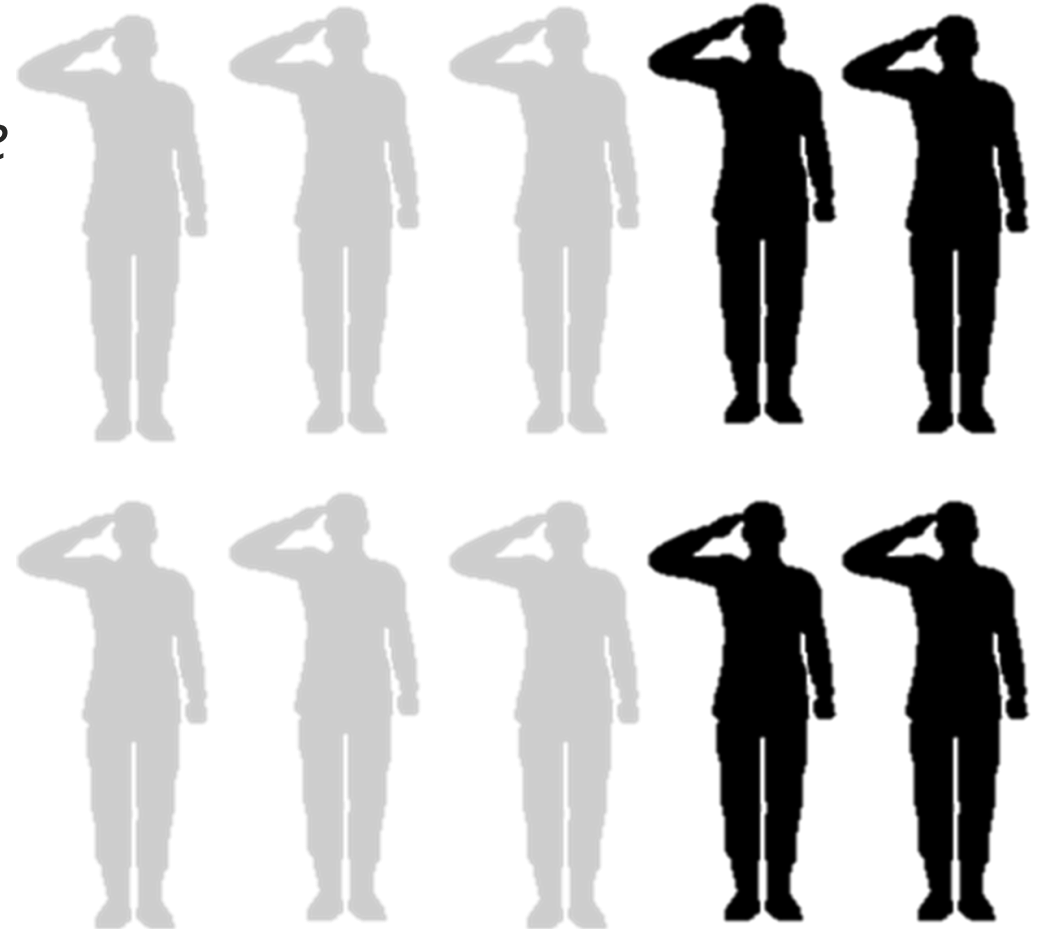
'A REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK'

'Service Life and Beyond – Institution or Culture?' Bergman, Greenberg et al (2014)

- *Moving from the military family to the civilian world may be experienced as a second culture shock*
- *It is estimated that 6% of veterans struggle to adjust to life as a civilian*
- *Life skills such as budgeting, cooking, organising accommodation, registering with a GP, writing a CV – each of these may be new skills to develop*

LIFE SKILLS, PREPAREDNESS & READINESS FOR CIVILIAN LIFE

- *As many as 6 out of 10 veterans disengage from support services*



WHAT FACTORS CAN INFLUENCE TRANSITION AND WELLBEING?



Reasons for discharge

Age and length of service

Preparedness for Civilian Life

'SEPARATING' FROM SERVICE

"Separating from the military is a traumatic event. That doesn't mean it's negative; for most veterans, the separation event is a positive change. But the change disrupts almost every facet of life in some way, and the upcoming change and the change itself often causes anxiety, worry, pain/discomfort, and sadness or depression.... Difficulty in transition has nothing to do with how capable you are – and everything to do with how human you are."

*Eric Burleson, Author of
'Separating From Service.'*

MILITARY LIFE VS CIVILIAN LIFE

Negotiating the demands of civilian life often requires:

- *Identify the problem*
- *Identify the options*
- *Communicate the options*
- *Decide with others*
- *Implement solutions*

- *Depending on a veterans' service experience, they may have had little need or opportunity to undertake many of these tasks*
- *When they did have opportunities, there may have been only a narrow choice of pre-defined options*
- *For example, "Hey mate" is not an acceptable way to address an officer*
- *Civilian life is much more nuanced*

THE GOAL OF INTEGRATION

- *A notion of becoming part of the civilian communities in which a veteran lives.*
- *A noble goal, but seems to attempt to make veterans more like civilians, or at least less like service-members*
- *“To try and make us less like our former selves is an insult”*
- *“Goal is to take our histories in the military and make them a part of our whole self”*

SUPPORTING TRANSITION FROM MILITARY TO CIVILIAN LIFE

SUPPORTING TRANSITION

Your organisations are playing a vital role. Networking with your PPP colleagues can strengthen your existing network.

Relationships:
- with other veterans & civilians, for support & advocacy
- Buddy support

"The real-life skills we learn over a military career are priceless. The ability to turn up to a job on time, dressed correctly, with the right attitude and to go the extra mile. These are skills that do not get taught they are instilled in the life of a soldier." www.CTP.org.uk

Advocacy services – housing, finances, Criminal justice system.

Employment:

www.Cobseo.org.uk

Refer back to ideas from Module 1, e.g. the areas of resilience

Seek referral for mental health support Including NHS, Combat Stress etc

SERVICES THAT COMBAT STRESS PROVIDE:

24/7 Helpline:

*Free help and advice for
veterans and their
families*

0800 138 1619

Interdisciplinary support across the UK:

*(Occupational Therapy,
Nursing, Psychology,
Psychiatry)*

Psychological Therapy:

Online / phone

Digital and online support & education:

combatstress.org.uk

Buddy Buddy Support Service

Support for partners and family members

**Visit our website for self-help guides to support with a range of issues:
combatstress.org.uk/mental-health-support-during-covid-19**

PAUL SHARES HIS STORY...



"On that very first call, just talking to someone really helped. I was reassured it was OK to feel this way. I began weekly one-to-one therapy sessions. I learnt different techniques to cope with my feelings and experiences. It was an emotional roller coaster, but it was a very good and thorough process."

"Life has definitely changed for the better."

"It's taken 20 years for me to come to terms with my experience but I've made sense of it now. Before I got help from Combat Stress, if any event triggered my PTSD response the world would immediately become a very dark place, but that's no longer the case."

Thank you to Paul for sharing his story with us.

A MOMENT TO REFLECT...

*What is your top take-away
for yourself / your organisation?*

*What are your
1-3 actions/next steps for
yourself / your organisation?*

SUMMARY, QUESTIONS & NEXT STEPS

1

Question & Answer time

2

What's one takeaway or action step for yourself / your project?

3

This is module 2 of 4, we will build on these ideas in future modules

4

Self-assessment quiz and certificate of attendance

5

Evaluation and Feedback: <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/CSTandE2>

Thank you for your time, attention & commitment to support veterans in your organisation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1

What are some of the strengths of military life? What are some of the vulnerabilities?

2

What are your thoughts about the role of Adverse Childhood Experiences? Is this body of research familiar or new to you?

3

*What is your top take-away for yourself / your organisation?
What are your 1-3 actions/next steps for yourself / your organisation?*

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