

Considerations for Veterans

Dementia-friendly communities are vital in helping people live well with dementia and remain a part of their community. Many Veterans live with unique risk factors for dementia. In addition, the causes of dementia that affect Veterans can vary from the general population. There are important considerations to create supportive, dementia-friendly environments for Veterans.



What is Dementia?

Dementia is an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or other thinking skills severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. Dementia has many causes. Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia, is a disease of the brain that leads to problems with memory, thinking, and behavior. Alzheimer's and other dementias are not a normal part of aging.

Early signs of Dementia

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood and personality

Considerations for Veterans Living with Dementia

- Age is the number one risk factor for dementia, and that risk increases greatly after age 65. While 15% of the general population is age 65 and older, nearly 49% of Veterans are age 65 or older.
- The U.S Department of Veteran's Affairs estimates that greater than 750,000 veterans are living with some form of dementia.
- Veterans may face risk factors for dementia as a result of their service, including: Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS), Depression and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).
- Many Veterans live with insomnia as a symptom of PTS. There is a correlation between poor sleep and increased presence of Alzheimer's-like symptoms.

Considerations for Veterans Living with Dementia

- Veterans with injuries such as hearing loss, TBI and PTS are at an increased risk of developing dementia in older adults than those who are not Veterans.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define a traumatic brain injury (TBI) as “a disruption in the normal function of the brain that can be caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head, or penetrating head injury.” In addition, service members and Veterans potentially have the additional exposures to blast, both from combat and from training.

Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS)

PTS can occur after a traumatic event such as combat, an assault, or a natural disaster. While stress is common after a trauma, for those with PTS reactions such as reliving an event in their mind and feeling distant or angry do not go away over time, and can even get worse. While PTS can affect people who have experienced a wide range of life-threatening events, in Veterans the condition is commonly associated with combat trauma. It has taken a significant toll on many war Veterans, including Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans. Military sexual assault or harassment can also lead to PTS.

Depression

Depression is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease your ability to function at work and at home. Depression symptoms can vary from mild to severe.

Dementia-Friendly Communication

Consider these tips when communicating with a Veteran who is living with dementia.

- Treat the Veteran with dignity and respect.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Use a gentle and relaxed tone.
- Use shorter simple sentences, and ask one question at a time.
- Address the Veteran by their preferred name if known or use “Sir”, “Ma’am”, “Mr.” or “Ms.”
- Use discretion when asking about military service or experience in combat. Consider - could this question bring up unpleasant memories? If so, consider leaving it alone. However, if the Veteran initiates such conversation, actively listen and offer support.
- Reduce distractions. Busy, noisy environments are confusing and can be overwhelming.
- Approach the Veteran slowly and from the front, never from behind so they are less likely to be surprised or startled.
- Avoid arguing with or embarrassing the Veteran.
- Be aware of your body language: smile and make eye contact at eye-level.
- Encourage nonverbal communication.
- Patiently wait for a response while the Veteran takes time to process what you said, about 20 seconds.
- Seek to understand the Veteran's reality and feelings.
- Apologize and redirect to another environment or topic as needed.

Resources

- Dementia Friends Pennsylvania - <https://www.dementiafriendspa.org/>
- Dementia Friendly America - <https://www.dfamerica.org/>
- Alzheimer's Association - <https://www.alz.org/>
- US Department of Veterans Affairs - https://www.va.gov/GERIATRICS/pages/Alzheimers_and_Dementia_Care.asp
- Pennsylvania Veterans Affairs - <https://www.dmva.pa.gov/veteransaffairs/Pages/default.aspx>
- VeteransAgainstAlzheimer's - <https://www.usagainstalzheimer.org/networks/veterans>