Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and Mental Health Care

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The authors of an article on a survey of veterans of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan suggested that publicizing the substantial rate of veterans seeking help for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression could motivate other veterans to seek care. The authors also suggested that stigma associated with mental health care may need to be addressed on the initial visit with a provider to increase the chances that a veteran will return for additional care, as veterans who receive mental health care are more likely to be concerned about this stigma than are veterans not receiving care.

Veterans with the most severe symptoms of PTSD or depression are more likely to seek mental health care than veterans with less severe symptoms. However, symptomatic veterans who also misuse alcohol are less likely to use mental health care than symptomatic veterans who do not misuse alcohol. Symptomatic veterans who misuse alcohol also make fewer visits to providers when they do access care and view mental health care less favorably than do symptomatic veterans who do not misuse alcohol.

Forty-three percent of the respondents screened positive for PTSD, major depression, or alcohol misuse. About 70 percent of veterans who screened positive for PTSD, 67 percent who screened positive for depression, and 45 percent who screened positive for alcohol misuse received psychiatric treatment in the past year. Veterans who did not access treatment even though they screened positive for either PTSD or depression “were more likely to believe that they had to solve problems themselves and that medications would not help.” Although most veterans who received care did so through VA facilities, women more often sought care from non-VA providers. The authors suggested that these results point to a need to better understand the barriers women face in the VA system, as well as for better outreach to women veterans.

