

Resiliency important in overcoming self stigma

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FORTPOLK, La. — After more than 17 years of war there is little argument that the number of Soldiers who use behavioral health services has increased. In addition, the number of Soldiers who join the Army and have experienced family violence while young, sexual assaults, relationship issues, parents who abused drugs or alcohol, lack coping skills, and exhibit other high risk behaviors have increased the number of Soldiers who regularly use the services of the Behavioral Health Department at Bayne-Jones Army Community Hospital.

However, a 2004 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* by C.W. Hoge, "Combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mental Health Problems, and Barriers to Care," found that only a fraction of Soldiers report receiving professional treatment, and few Soldiers are interested in receiving help because of perceived stigma.

Despite the Army's efforts to reduce the stigma associated with seeking behavioral health services, it seems there is a large population within the military community who choose not to seek help. This stigma is normally defined by public beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes that, when internalized, may damage self-esteem and

impede treatment-seeking behavior.

Many studies have been used by the military to reduce stigma and organizational barriers to increase treatment-seeking behaviors. However, a new study in October 2018, "The Impact of Stigma on Behavioral Health Care Utilization Among Active Duty Service Members," by Andrew J. Seidman, published in *Military Psychology* magazine, sheds new light on the potential reasons for not seeking services.

The results of the study indicate that whereas greater self-stigma (negative self-judgments for seeking psychological help) was associated with attending fewer behavioral health care sessions, public stigma (perceptions of public attitudes towards people who seek psychological help) was not associated with use of services. These findings support the need for addressing the self-stigma associated with seeking behavioral health care. In layman's terms, Soldiers are more hesitant to seek help because of their own internal feelings rather than what other's perceptions might be.

This study can help unit leadership understand it is a Soldier's own feelings that need to be addressed and not general societal pressures. Resiliency training, suicide prevention training and the use of risk reduction tools like the Unit Risk Inventory and Commander's Risk Reduction Dashboard can be tailored to meet individual



Soldier's needs that may encourage them to seek behavioral health services.

If internal embarrassment is acute among at-risk Soldiers, then the use of outside resources can be another alternative, such as the Veterans Center located at 1705 East Texas St. in Alexandria that provides outpatient services for a variety of issues, from PTSD to marital counseling. The center can be reached at (318) 473-0010.

Resiliency is an important trait for Soldiers and they must be encouraged to seek help. A healthy Army is one that has the strength to acknowledge its own issues and seeks help. Suicide should never be considered an option because where there is help there is hope for a brighter future.