

## PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

### Improving health and adjustment after military service: Findings from the Australian Military Transition Study

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#### Why is this research needed?

Around 6000 service members transition from the Australian Defence Force each year<sup>1</sup>.

Transitioning service members are more likely than the general Australian population to experience a number of physical and mental health conditions, including depression, pain, and PTSD<sup>2,3</sup>.

Activities such as work, physical exercise, and art can positively influence health and adjustment to civilian life.

Some activities may also facilitate recovery from stressful or traumatic service experiences.

However, it is not known which activities are most effective in improving health and adjustment during the transition.

#### What was the aim of the research?

In this research, we wanted to explore whether participation in different types of activities influenced health and adjustment for service members who were transitioning from military service.

#### How was information obtained?

198 former Australian Defence Force members who transitioned on or after January 01, 2004 completed an anonymous, online survey that was advertised by ex-service organisations throughout Australia.

The survey was available between April 22 and August 14, 2019.

The survey contained questions about:

- Personal and service information
- Physical and mental health
- Adjustment to civilian life
- Activities that were considered to be important for health and wellbeing



#### What were the results of the study?

Following is a summary of the results for all of the participants combined.

- Most of the participants (57.5%) experienced a difficult or very difficult transition.
- Just under half (45%) reported fair or poor physical health.
- 56% reported moderate to severe emotional distress.
- Most experienced at least one stressful or traumatic event while deployed on operational, peacekeeping, or humanitarian service.
- 38 (19.2%) reported experiencing sexual harassment or assault.
- 22% (1 in 5) reported current thoughts about suicide.

#### Results (continued)

- Physical and mental health was worse among former service members who had higher exposure to stressful or traumatic service experiences.
- Physical and mental health did not differ according to age, gender, or relationship status.
- Medical or involuntary discharge predicted poorer health outcomes.

Activities that were related to **better physical health** included:

- Employment or education related activities
- Home maintenance
- High intensity exercise

Activities that were related to **better mental health** included:

- Employment or education related activities
- Gardening
- Home maintenance
- High intensity exercise

Activities that were related to an **easier adjustment** included:

- Employment or education related activities
- Voluntary work
- Home maintenance
- Social and community interaction

Other activities that participants described completing to improve their health and wellbeing included walking, outdoor activities, hobbies (e.g. restoring cars), art, sport, listening to music, watching TV, and interacting with pets.

#### Take home message

The results from this study indicate that former service members should participate in employment or further education, home maintenance, physical exercise, and voluntary work activities to improve their health during the transition from military service.

Other activities such as hobbies, outdoor activities, walking, and art may be of further benefit to health and should also be considered.

#### References

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2. Van Hooff, M., Forbes, D., Lawrence-Wood, E., Hodson, S., Sadler, N., Benassi, H., . . . McFarlane, A. (2018). *Mental health prevalence, Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Study*. Canberra: Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs.
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