WHAT DO CIVILIANS KNOW ABOUT VETERANS?

Being a veteran can be hard and isolating. You are a minority. You may feel that civilians don’t understand you or that they don’t want to understand you. You may only want to interact with other veterans. Veterans have shared experiences, challenges and future aspirations. With civilians, on the other hand, it can be difficult to feel any connection, and it can be difficult to remember that at one point in time, you were not a veteran.

The fact is, many civilians have very little understanding of military culture. Unless they have a close family member or friend who served, they have no reason to know, as military life was never on their radar. It is a military-civilian divide. To make matters more difficult, what many civilians do “know” about the military or veterans is shaped from movies, tv, video games or other media. Over simplified, over dramatized, not real.

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One might think that civilians don’t know about veterans because they don’t care. Actually, in most cases, they don’t know simply because they don’t know. And even though every veteran was a civilian at some point, you’ve been out of the game for a while. If you joined after high school, you have lived in the military culture through all those years when civilians were navigating adult life. And now you are in the civilian world and have to adapt to civilian culture.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

It matters for a lot of reasons: for making friends, for dating, for getting a job, for building strong relationships with your spouse and children. Sometimes, even for staying out of trouble. Consider some of the factors reviewed in Battlemind. In the military or with your veteran friends, if you act aggressively, swear constantly, and use military lingo, no one blinks an eye. But civilians may not understand. If you act aggressively, they may think you are dangerous. If you use the F- word as a noun, verb and adjective, they may be offended. And if you use military jargon, they just won’t know what you are talking about.
Consider that when interviewing for a job, it’s important to make a good impression. This will often mean that you have to learn how to conduct yourself differently than you would have done in the military. For example, in the military you talk about accomplishments as something “we” did, what the unit did. In a civilian interview, the hiring manager wants to hear about you, your skill sets, your experience, your accomplishments. Think about the language you are using.

Another example is the habit of providing brief answers, like “yes sir, no ma’am,” in an interview. The hiring manager wants to get as much information about you, your professional experience, how you work with others, your style and character in a short period of time. They also may view being addressed formally as too military.

Understanding how you will fit in as veterans requires that you adapt and adjust. Finding a balance between your veteran identity and your new civilian self is something you can adapt over time.

**TELL YOUR STORY**

Often veterans are inclined to keep things to themselves. This is precisely why veterans aren’t easily understood, because this story of the veteran experience is rarely told. Sharing your experience can help to improve relationships and break down the military-civilian divide.

Some civilians may not have direct experience, but that doesn’t mean they don’t know a veteran, or that they haven’t been affected by that experience. You may tell a civilian about your service who then tells you that her father was in the Navy during Vietnam.

An interconnected community of veterans and non-veterans creates a stable network of experience and support. Veterans and civilians must be each other’s allies. Our communities depend on it.

**FIND YOUR ALLIES**

Your allies in the past have been veterans or people you served with. As a veteran, you will have to rely upon the assistance of civilians. In fact, some of the best advocates for veterans are civilians.
RESOURCES

FIND A VA FACILITY
Use the facility locator or call 1-877-222-VETS (8387).

CONTACT YOUR COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE
CalVet strongly recommends you work with the CVSO nearest you. Your CVSO can guide you through the benefits and services available as well as help connect you with other local resources.

The County Veterans Service Offices (CVSO) are locally funded agencies established to assist veterans and their families in obtaining benefits and services accrued through military service. These County Veteran Service Offices promote the interest and welfare of veterans, their dependents, and their survivors by enhancing their quality of life through counseling, education, benefits assistance, and advocacy. They connect veterans to their benefits by assisting in their interactions with the VA.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Visit the CalVet website for more information, OR
Find the CVSO closest to you.

VA HOTLINES
Veterans Crisis Line
- 800-273-TALK (8255), or
- Text: 838255

Combat Call Center
- 877-WAR-VETS (927-8387)

Women Veterans Call Center
- 855-VA-WOMEN (829-6636)