

CHAPTER 26

STUDY PLAN

INTERVIEWING SKILLS

OBJECTIVE

To develop interviewing skills, in order to build rapport and effectively work with veterans.

SUMMARY

The interview with the veteran is the means to establish a good working relationship, get the necessary information to identify issues and make a preliminary assessment, inform the veteran of what needs to happen in order to submit a claim that has a chance of success, and make a decision with the client on how to proceed. Conducting a successful interview requires skill that may take time to develop.

FIRST INTERVIEW

At the beginning of an interview, the VSR greets the veteran. This is a good time to start building rapport. You will want to create a comfortable atmosphere. You don't have to offer a cup of coffee or glass of water to help the veteran feel at ease, showing interest in the veteran by asking about his or her day or engaging in casual conversation serves the same purpose. The VSR should at all times demonstrate that he or she is interested in the veteran and sensitive to the veteran's needs.

Once the veteran is settled in a chair across from you, establish that all information the veteran provides will be kept **confidential**, that is, not shared with anyone except when necessary and only with other accredited representatives in the office. Next, begin the conversation by asking what the veteran came in for or what help he or she was seeking. An

open-ended question can get the conversation going, but the veteran may not understand how best to convey the information so guide the conversation with specific questions (e.g. "What brings you in today?", "Can you tell me more about that?", "What happened after that?").

DETERMINING BENEFITS ELIGIBILITY

The veteran may or may not know what benefit he or she is seeking at the start of the interview. Questions should be devised to determine eligibility for various benefits. The most common benefit sought is service-connected disability compensation, so questions can first be designed to determine whether there was an in-service injury, illness, aggravation of pre-

existing condition or traumatic event. Once that is established, ask questions designed to determine what current disabilities the veteran has, and then what connection exists between the in-service injury and the present disability. To determine eligibility for pension, VSRs must ascertain whether the veteran served during wartime, whether he or she is totally and permanently disabled or age 65 or over, and whether the veteran's income is below the pension threshold.



ADVOCACY TIP

Be **real** with veterans. If there is no way the veteran has a viable claim, let him or her know. Similarly, be **realistic** about what you can and cannot do for the veteran. Don't promise to do something that you are unable to do.

EXPLAINING BENEFITS



Once the VSR has identified the benefit and the disabilities, he or she should **explain the rules** to the veteran. For example, if the veteran is seeking compensation for an in-service knee injury, explain the three prongs of service connection (in-service injury, current disability, nexus between

the two). If the veteran appears to have a good claim, go forward with ordering records, filling out application forms, and filing forms. If the veteran appears to have a weak claim, it is important to discuss any weaknesses in the case and how they might be overcome. Many times, a veteran needs to go to the doctor to obtain a current diagnosis before he or she will have any chance of winning a claim. **Advise** the veteran what next steps he or she needs to take in order to prevail in the benefits claim. If the veteran does not qualify for a benefit, explain to exactly why they are not eligible, and what, if anything, could make them eligible, i.e. a favorable character of discharge determination.

BUILDING RAPPORT

As the veteran answers questions, the VSR must engage in **active listening**. This means keeping the focus on the veteran and never taking over the conversation with remarks about oneself. Make appropriate, supportive comments that demonstrate the veteran is

To help establish trust and rapport with a veteran, first ask their permission before taking notes or entering information in the computer during an interview.

being listened to. For example, if the veteran is revealing some experience that he or she feels is embarrassing or painful, simply respond with phrases of reassurance (e.g. "That must have been very difficult" or, "I would feel upset too if that happened"). It is also good to reiterate what the client has said to demonstrate engagement. Active listening can also involve **non-verbal signals** of attention, such as head nodding, eye contact, or phrases of reassurance.

Important things that a VSR should **never do** during an interview include acting preoccupied or bored by the conversation, demonstrating impatience or looking repeatedly at the time, interrupting the client or finishing their sentences, changing the subject, or drawing or otherwise fiddling around while the veteran is talking. By simply empathizing and engaging with the veteran, the VSR can begin to establish the rapport necessary to effectively work with and advocate for the veteran.

NOTE-TAKING

Given the nature of this work, a VSR will be asking probing and personal questions at times. To help establish trust and rapport with a veteran, first ask their permission before taking notes or entering information in the computer during an interview. To put them at ease, explain to the veteran that you are taking notes in order to accurately remember the details of the interview later and that the notes will be kept confidential.

BEING PATIENT

Allow veterans the space and time to tell their story. Veterans who have endured traumatic events may require a longer amount of time to complete their thoughts. Some may experience difficulty maintaining chronological order when recounting what happened to them. Resist the urge to fill that space, be patient with veteran, and allow pauses to occur during the interview.

SENSITIVE TOPICS

Instead of asking a veteran “Why did you get an other than honorable discharge?” ask, “Could you tell me about the circumstances leading up to your discharge?”

These interviews can be very emotional for the veteran. Some veterans you interview may have “bad paper.” This can be a sensitive subject for some veterans. Instead of asking a veteran “Why did you get an other than honorable discharge?” ask, “Could you tell me about the circumstances

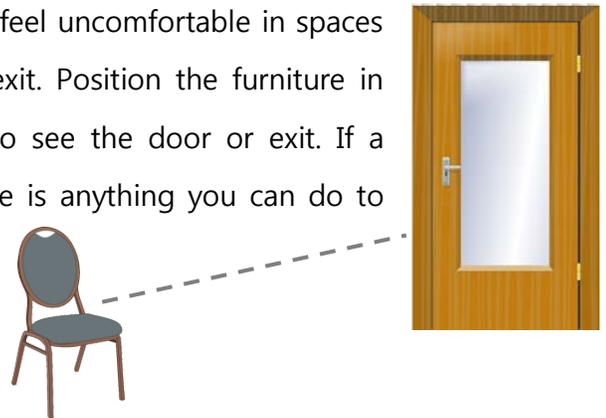
leading up to your discharge?” This information will be important to obtain when working on character of discharge determinations or discharge upgrades. For more on these topics, see Chapters 19 and 20.

Many veterans did not seek medical assistance at the time of their in-service injuries for fear of being judged by peers or superiors, told to stop acting like a baby or to suck it up, or even accused of malingering or punished for seeking help. Those that did seek assistance may still feel ashamed and may find it difficult to discuss. An **understanding response** will provide reassurance to the veteran that it is safe to share what happened.

VETERANS WITH PTSD

Many veterans seek assistance for PTSD resulting from combat or sexual assault. These are very emotional issues that are often painful to discuss. The veteran will not open up to the listener unless he or she feels that she can do so **without being judged** or subject to insensitive remarks.

Veterans experiencing symptoms of PTSD may feel uncomfortable in spaces or offices where they cannot clearly see the exit. Position the furniture in the office in a way that the veteran is able to see the door or exit. If a veteran seems agitated, ask him or her if there is anything you can do to make them more comfortable.



ADVOCACY TIP

It may take more than one meeting with a veteran for the veteran to feel comfortable enough to disclose details of a traumatic event, or even the fact that the event happened at all. A few shorter meetings might be easier for the veteran than one very long meeting.

When assisting a client with both mental health and physical health claims, begin by asking about the physical health issues first. Once you have established rapport and eased into the meeting, ask if the veteran feels comfortable discussing the events relating to his or her PTSD claim. Once the VSR has developed rapport with the veteran and most information has already been exchanged, it may be an appropriate time to ask the veteran, "Did anything ever happen to you in-service, like

harassment or assault or something like that?" For a MST survivor, a question like this may provoke a dramatic emotional response and a willingness to share what happened. It is also possible that something happened to the veteran but he or she just does not feel comfortable discussing it. In that case, there is nothing more you can do than continue to show kindness and sensitivity.

RECOGNIZING SYMPTOMS OF PTSD

To better understand veterans living with PTSD, it is helpful for a VSR to know the symptoms of the condition. Common symptoms include: avoiding eye contact; feeling emotionally numb; irritability and agitation, especially when discussing the trauma; and avoiding activities, places, thoughts, or feelings that evoke the trauma. A veteran who may appear annoyed or angry during an interview may simply be experiencing symptoms in that moment. When working with veterans with PTSD, it is important to not take that agitation or anger personally and to be patient and understanding with the veteran.

Empathy lowers distress.

If meeting with a veteran in crisis, empathize.

If a veteran cannot remember an aspect of their trauma, such as the date of their traumatic stressor or the name of the perpetrator of the sexual assault, this should not be misinterpreted as a lack of credibility. It is common for those

with PTSD to be unable to remember important parts of the traumatic event.

If a veteran is in crisis during the interview, remain calm and supportive. Be genuine. The VSR should have relevant contact information on hand for a crisis center if necessary.

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH TBI



Some people with TBI may have trouble concentrating, organizing their thoughts, and managing their mood and the tone and volume of their voice. It is important to be patient and not take these symptoms personally. It may be helpful to meet with the veteran in a private place with less distraction. Some veterans with TBI may benefit from working on short-term goals or being given one follow up task at a time to focus on. When

working with veterans with short-term memory deficits, a VSR may need to repeat him or herself during an interview and should **write down a summary** of what was discussed and the next steps for the veteran. Offer assistance and extra time in filling out forms or explaining written instructions. In general, be patient, flexible, supportive, and take the time to understand the veteran and to make sure she or he understands you.

AVOID BIASES AND ASSUMPTIONS

A VSR should never reveal biases to the veteran. As discussed in Chapter 24, veterans include an incredibly diverse group of people, some of whom may be vastly different from ourselves.

The VSR should demonstrate an open, supportive, and non-judgmental attitude to every interviewed veteran.



Try to avoid making assumptions about the veteran's military experience. Not every veteran thinks back on their time in the military positively. They may feel uncomfortable being thanked for their service. Even well-intentioned comments, such as "I don't think I could have done what you did" may trigger a veteran and elicit a negative

response, which could break down the rapport you have developed with the veteran.

LANGUAGE

When communicating with veterans with disabilities, it is best to discuss those disabilities in an empowering manner. For example, instead of describing someone as "afflicted by PTSD" or a "victim of TBI," describe the veteran as one who "experiences" PTSD or TBI. Instead of a veteran who "suffers from hearing loss," phrase this as a veteran who is "hard of hearing." Referring to someone as a "veteran with a disability" instead of a "disabled veteran," puts the veteran first and not her or his disability. These seemingly minor differences can be very meaningful. It can express to veterans that the VSR does not see them as a victim, as "broken," or defined by their disabilities.

VETERANS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

If a veteran comes in with an aid or interpreter, be sure to look and speak directly to the veteran and do not only address the person assisting the veteran. Also, be sure to ask the

veteran if she or he wants the aid to be present during the meeting with you, or would prefer for the aid to wait elsewhere. If a veteran appears to need help getting up or moving about, it is important to first ask if he or she needs help and get permission before assisting them. Avoid any tendency to talk slower or louder when working with someone with a physical impairment. Don't assume that a veteran with a physical disability also has a cognitive disability or is hard of hearing.

END OF THE INTERVIEW



Before the veteran leaves, be sure to ask if they have any questions or have anything else they want to share with you. Leave the veteran with clear follow up instructions so they know exactly what needs to happen next. Ensure you have accurate and complete contact information for the veteran in case you have follow up questions for them after the interview, and let them know when and how to contact the VSR should they have questions or need further guidance.