Minority Fellowship Program
The National Board for Certified Counselors

Innovations in Counseling (Part 13, Session 6)

Understanding Veterans: Factors Contributing to Substance Use Disorder & Suicide

Webinar Follow-up Question and Answer Session with Garret Biss, MRED, CPRC

Question
For counselors working with veterans or other service people, what specific techniques have you found most effective in guiding folks toward finding deeper connections and fostering authenticity?

Answer from Presenter:

This is a powerful question, and it speaks directly to the core human needs that often go unmet after military service — connection, authenticity, and meaning (what I refer to as the CAM framework). Many veterans struggle not because they're broken, but because they've lost access to the parts of themselves that were most alive in service: their identity, their team, their purpose.

Here are a few specific strategies that can help guide veterans toward rebuilding connection and authenticity:

1. **Use strength-based approaches.** Veterans often come in with the belief that something is "wrong" with them (Unfortunately, this is a message that echoes throughout our society as well. It's no wonder veterans are almost encouraged to feel this way before long.). Counter that by helping them reconnect to the strengths they still carry — discipline, loyalty, perseverance, leadership. Naming and validating these strengths open the door to a more authentic self-image.

2. **Prioritize relational safety.** Many veterans have learned to mask emotion or compartmentalize pain. We're actually trained to do this. Creating a space where it's safe to be emotionally honest — without judgment or clinical detachment — is essential. Be present, be steady, and avoid pathologizing their reactions to trauma or transition.

3. **Normalize internal conflict.** Let them know that the disconnection or emotional numbness they're feeling is not a sign of failure, but a natural response to cumulative stress, moral injury, or loss. Framing this as a human response, rather than a personal defect, can be incredibly freeing. Furthermore, it is to be expected. Just as a hard workout is expected to lead to muscle soreness and fatigue, going through a transition and having to rediscover and redefine yourself is a process that is expected to lead to disconnection and numbness. However, it doesn't have to end there.

4. **Integrate narrative or meaning-making techniques.** Whether through journaling, life-story exercises, or simply guided reflection, help them make sense of how their past experiences shaped them — and how those experiences can serve them (and others) going forward.

5. **Encourage values-based living.** Once a foundation of safety and self-awareness is built, invite them to explore their core values and how they can live in alignment with them again — outside of uniform. This often becomes the bridge to both connection and authenticity.

Ultimately, healing begins when a veteran feels seen not just as a diagnosis, but as a human being with depth, value, and the potential to grow. Your presence and your ability to reflect that truth back to them can be one of the most powerful interventions you offer.

Question
Any tips for rolling with resistance in these populations?

Answer from Presenter:

Great question — and an important one.

When working with veterans, resistance is often a protective strategy rather than defiance. It's a byproduct of broken trust, cultural disconnect, and a history of feeling misunderstood. One of the most effective ways to meet resistance is by focusing on what's *right* with them — their strengths, resilience, and the values they still carry. Start by building them up rather than breaking down their defenses.

Trust, especially with non-veterans, can be hard to earn. Two helpful strategies:

1. Listen with curiosity and compassion — and without shock or judgment. Many veterans carry shame or fear around the things they've seen, done, or thought. When you remain unshaken, it helps create safety. It can also help to say aloud what they may be thinking internally: *"I haven't been through what you've experienced, and I won't pretend to fully understand — but I want to."* That kind of honest acknowledgment can disarm defensiveness.

2. Use limited self-disclosure (when appropriate) to foster rapport. Sharing a bit of your humanity or your connection to the work — even just referencing some of the key ideas from our session, like the CAM framework — can help them feel seen. Many veterans are struggling with a profound loss of self and purpose. When you acknowledge the pain of that loss while affirming their inherent worth, it creates space for healing.

Veterans often feel their dark thoughts or hopeless perspectives are uniquely disqualifying. However, when we normalize their reactions as *understandable responses to extreme circumstances* and reflect back a more compassionate image of who they are, we help open the door to trust — and eventually, transformation.

Thanks again for being part of this important work.

Question
How do you see the cuts to VA staffing and resources by this administration affecting veteran outcomes?

Answer from Presenter:

Veterans come from a culture that prides itself on doing more with less. We adapt, overcome, and innovate when we're under pressure. Maybe this is the moment where veteran care can do the same. Rather than clinging to old models, this could be a chance to redefine what care looks like by not just treating symptoms, but empowering veterans to reconnect with who they remember themselves to be. Reclaim identity, purpose, and emotional health through approaches that actually resonate.

From a locus of control standpoint, we can't control federal budget decisions. However, we can control how we respond — as clinicians, community leaders, and veterans ourselves. We can focus on what's within our influence: building peer-driven programs, exploring cost-effective alternatives, and prioritizing strength-based care that works.

I'm optimistic because I see real innovation already happening. Organizations like Boulder Crest Institute are pioneering the field of post-traumatic growth — moving beyond symptom management and helping veterans grow through adversity. Programs like V-WERT (Veteran Wellness, Empowerment, and Resilience Training), which I recently launched in collaboration with Chatham County Jail, are delivering trauma-informed, strengths-based support that empowers veterans to rebuild connection, authenticity, and meaning — often outside traditional systems entirely.

This might also be the pressure point that brings wider adoption of promising alternatives — from psychedelic-assisted therapies (like psilocybin or ibogaine) to positive psychology-based wellness programs. Many of these approaches cost a fraction of traditional care and offer outcomes that are more sustainable and transformative.

Question
The connections that veterans make in their civilian life are going to look drastically different than those made within their unit based solely on the difference in their shared experiences. How do you help a client navigate those differences and not feel as though the civilian connections are "less than?"

Answer from Presenter:

This is a challenge most veterans face. The connections formed in a military unit are forged through intense shared experiences, mutual reliance, and often life-or-death stakes — it's a level of connection that's hard to replicate in civilian life. So, it's understandable that new relationships might feel shallower or less significant by comparison.

I think the key isn't to replace those old bonds but to reframe what connection can look like now and to normalize the shift.

A few ways we can help veterans do this:

1. **Validate the loss.** First, acknowledge that what they had was real and meaningful — and that grieving its absence is valid. Trying to downplay the contrast or dismiss their sense of loss only deepens the divide.

2. **Shift the comparison.** Encourage them to stop measuring new relationships against old ones. The military connection was forged in a unique environment with a very specific purpose. Civilian relationships serve different purposes — and those *can* be just as fulfilling, even if they feel unfamiliar at first.

3. **Focus on depth, not origin.** Help them identify the qualities they valued in their unit relationships — trust, honesty, purpose, loyalty — and explore ways those can be cultivated in civilian life, even with people who haven't worn the uniform.

4. **Redefine connection.** Use this as a chance to invite them into a broader definition of connection — one that includes vulnerability, shared values, and intentional presence, not just shared hardship. This opens the possibility for deep, meaningful bonds outside the military framework.

5. **Tie it to identity growth.** If they're open to the idea of post-traumatic growth, frame this as an opportunity to expand their capacity for connection — not to diminish the past, but to add new dimensions to who they are now.

6. **Perhaps most importantly, encourage connection with other veterans.** While civilian connections are essential, it's often through peer relationships with other veterans — regardless of branch, rank, or job — that many begin to feel seen again. There's an unspoken understanding among veterans that bridges differences. Military service leaves its mark on some more than others, but on *every* veteran to an extent. That's why we still call ourselves *veterans* and not just civilians again. It reflects a lived experience that shapes how we see the world — and how we connect within it.

Ultimately, the goal isn't to convince them that civilian relationships are "as good as" their unit bonds — but to help them see that they can be *good in a different way*. That shift can be incredibly healing.

Question
How often are the connections made within a person's unit carried into their life after they leave the military? As a counselor, is that a connection that we can tap into?

Answer from Presenter:

It really depends on the individual, but in many cases, those bonds don't carry over in the way we might expect. While connections during service can be incredibly strong — even life-defining — they often fade or become complicated after separation.

It's important to approach this area with sensitivity. For some veterans, reconnecting with former unit members could be a source of support. For most, it can stir up complex and painful emotions: grief, guilt for leaving the service, shame for not staying in, or a sense of disconnection when realizing how different their lives have become—questioning if those bonds were what they thought they once were.

Even the strongest bonds can be challenged by the transition to civilian life. Former service members are often in different phases — some still serving, others thriving or struggling in their own ways. Trying to re-engage those connections can sometimes reinforce feelings of isolation, failure, or loss of identity.

We *can* explore these connections, but with caution. Ask open-ended questions about the veteran's current relationship with their former unit and how those connections make them *feel* now. If it brings comfort, there may be an opportunity to build on that support. If it brings up pain or unresolved feelings, it might be more helpful to process those emotions and shift focus toward building new, aligned connections that support where they are now in life.

Don't assume unit bonds are either intact or helpful. Let the veteran lead the conversation and be mindful of the emotional weight those connections may bring up.