



HEROES
WITH HEARING LOSS

HEARING LOSS MENTAL HEALTH

Addressing Mental Health Challenges In Veterans With Hearing Loss And Tinnitus

Veterans face unique health challenges, and hearing-related issues (hearing loss, tinnitus) rank among the most common service-connected disabilities.¹ While veterans make up a relatively small percentage of the total U.S. population, a disproportionately large number of veterans experience mental health issues such as depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). A 2020 study found veterans are 57.3% more likely to commit suicide than non-veteran adults, and of those who died of suicide, 24.4% of them had been diagnosed with PTSD.² (“Post-traumatic stress disorder is a mental health condition that’s caused by an extremely stressful or terrifying event – either being part of it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety and uncontrollable thoughts about the event.”)

Yet, a combination of hearing-related issues and mental health conditions can create challenges that are especially difficult to manage. Research consistently shows that veterans with hearing loss experience higher rates of depression and anxiety compared to those without hearing difficulties.³

Key Statistics:

- As of 2020, more than 1.3 million veterans were receiving disability compensation for hearing loss, and more than 2.3 million received compensation for tinnitus.⁴
- One study found that 72% of veterans diagnosed with tinnitus also suffered from anxiety, while 60% had depression and 58% had both conditions.⁵



Understanding The Connection

The relationship between hearing issues and mental health is bidirectional. Hearing difficulties can trigger or worsen mental health symptoms, while psychological distress can amplify the perceived handicap of hearing loss.⁶



How Hearing Loss Affects Mental Health

- **Communication Barriers:** Difficulty understanding conversations leads to frustration, embarrassment, and a potential withdrawal from social activities. This isolation is a significant risk factor for depression.⁷
- **Cognitive Load:** People with hearing loss expend extra cognitive effort to understand speech, which can cause mental fatigue and increase stress levels.⁸
- **Loss Of Identity:** For many veterans, hearing loss represents a significant change in ability and self-perception, which can trigger grief responses and challenge one's sense of self.⁹
- **Hypervigilance Exacerbation:** For veterans with PTSD, hearing loss can heighten hypervigilance as they struggle to monitor their environment through compromised auditory channels.¹⁰

The Compound Effect Of PTSD

The combination of hearing loss and PTSD creates unique challenges:

- Tinnitus (ringing in the ears) frequently co-occurs with hearing loss and can trigger or intensify PTSD symptoms.¹¹
- Hearing difficulties can exacerbate the aforementioned hypervigilance and startle responses in veterans with PTSD.¹²
- Communication barriers may reduce the effectiveness of traditional talk therapy approaches for people with hearing loss.

Barriers To Care

Veterans with hearing loss often encounter significant obstacles when seeking mental health support:

- **Communication Challenges:** “Traditional” mental health treatment relies heavily on verbal communication, creating inherent barriers for those with hearing loss.¹³
- **Stigma:** Veterans can face stigmas deterring them from seeking needed care.¹⁴
- **System Navigation:** The complexity of navigating healthcare systems can be particularly challenging for veterans.¹⁵

While it's clear that the issues presented for veterans with hearing loss can seem daunting, they are also preventable and treatable.



Strategies For Holistic Support

For Healthcare Professionals:

1. **Integrated Screening:** Screening for mental health conditions in veterans with hearing issues and assessing hearing function in those presenting with mental health concerns is recommended.¹⁶
2. **Communication Accommodation**¹⁷:
 - Face the veteran when speaking
 - Reduce background noise during appointments
 - Ensure good lighting so facial expressions and lip movements are clearly visible
 - Consider using captioning services
3. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Establish referral pathways between audiology and mental health services to facilitate coordinated care.¹⁸
4. **Trauma-Informed Approach:** Recognize how hearing loss might interact with trauma history and adapt treatment accordingly.¹⁹

For Family Members And Support Networks:

1. **Communication Strategies**²⁰:
 - Maintain face-to-face communication
 - Speak clearly but don't shout
 - Rephrase rather than repeat when not understood
 - Be patient and avoid showing frustration
2. **Encourage Connection:** Support veterans in maintaining social connections through accessible activities and communication tools.²¹
3. **Recognize Warning Signs:** Be alert to signs of withdrawal, irritability, or changes in mood that might indicate worsening mental health.²²

For Veterans Service Organizations:

1. **Accessible Services:** Ensure that all veteran services are accessible to those with hearing loss through captioning or other assistive technologies.²³
2. **Peer Support:** Develop peer support programs that connect veterans with similar experiences of hearing loss and mental health challenges.²⁴
3. **Advocacy:** Advocate for improved access to both hearing healthcare and mental health services for veterans.²⁵

The Role Of Technology In Breaking Barriers

Assistive communication technologies play a crucial role in supporting veterans with hearing loss:



Captioned Telephone Services: For example, Hamilton® CapTel® provides real-time captions during phone conversations, reducing communication barriers in personal phone interactions, including healthcare appointments.



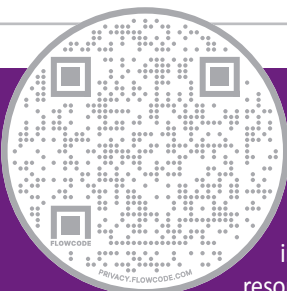
Hearing Aids With Mental Health Features: Modern hearing aids with tinnitus masking and smartphone connectivity can help manage both hearing difficulties and mental health symptoms.²⁶



Remote Therapy Options: Speech-to-text apps can help ensure better understanding and clarification during live conversations, such as with a telehealth provider.

Moving Forward: A Call To Action

The intersection of hearing loss and mental health represents a critical but often overlooked aspect of veteran healthcare. By implementing integrated approaches that address both hearing and mental health needs, quality of life and health outcomes for veterans can significantly improve.



Explore More Resources Like This

The Heroes With Hearing Loss® program, provided by Hamilton CapTel, is committed to reconnecting veterans with the people who are most important in their lives, including their families, friends, colleagues, communities and healthcare professionals. We accomplish this by providing lifestyle-focused solutions and information that minimize the impact of hearing loss. Scan the QR code to explore additional educational resources, and visit HeroesWithHearingLoss.org to learn more about solutions for veterans with hearing loss.

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² "National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report," U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, 2022 mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2022/2022-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-508.pdf

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⁶ Holly Reed, "The Psychological Effects of Hearing Loss on Adults," The University of Akron, 2018 ideaexchange.uakron.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1625&context=honors_research_projects

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⁹ Hailey Lammers, "Monitoring the Impact of PTSD on Patient Satisfaction with Hearing Aids," University of South Dakota, 2021 red.library.usd.edu/idea/319

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