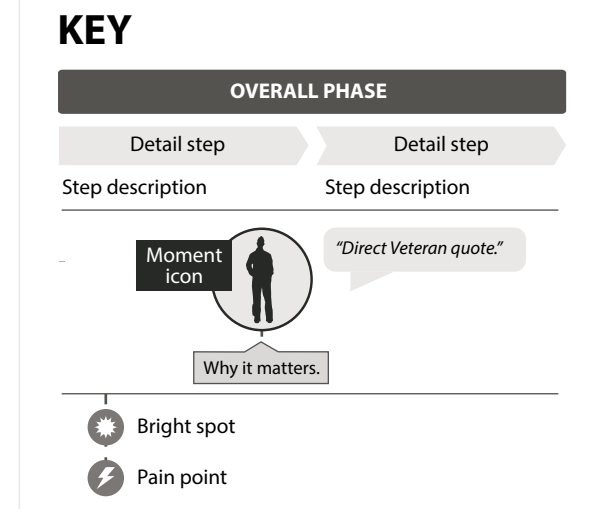


TRANSITIONING SERVICE MEMBER EXPERIENCE

This journey map depicts the Service member experience navigating military to civilian transition, and the impact of activities and events within that journey on their future. Acknowledging that the transition experience is not the same for each Service member, this journey highlights eight key moments in the transition experience that may affect the overall journey and individual outcomes. Each journey moment details a description of the event, its impact on transition, and key quotes. The emotional influence row outlines the impact of a particular step on a Service member's transition based on the pain points and bright spots associated with that step. By understanding the experience of transitioning Service members as they navigate key decisions throughout their transition, VA can better understand where to focus outreach and resources within that journey.

ACRONYMS

VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VHA	Veterans Health Administration
TAP	Transition Assistance Program
VSO	Veteran Service Organization
VFW	Veterans of Foreign Wars
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
ASVAB	Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery



PHASE	JOINING THE MILITARY		SERVING IN THE MILITARY AND TRANSITION PROCESS				ADJUSTING TO CIVILIAN LIFE	
	Life experience before joining	Deciding to join the military	Experiencing life in the military	Deciding to separate	Balancing work & transition needs	Approaching separation	Re-establishing and reintegrating	Navigating lifestyle changes
DESCRIPTION	Individuals have varying levels of life experience before joining the military, some join straight from high school, while others have work experience, higher education or a level of financial independence before joining.	People join the military for many reasons. For some, the military is viewed as a stepping stone into a successful life as a civilian, whereas others may prefer to pursue an entire career and life of military service.	Daily life in the military can be intense and all encompassing. The military provides for housing, food and many other needs.	The decision to separate may be the result of long-term planning, a reaction to positive or negative military experiences, or an abrupt change-in-plans (injury, punishment, lack of promotion, etc.) with very little warning.	Service members experience many competing priorities as they near separation. Command support greatly impacts the ability to meet transition activity timelines.	The final moments prior to separating from the military can feel complex and overwhelming.	After separating, Veterans find themselves without the supportive resources of the military and attempt to apply their plans while seeking civilian services and resources where they need the most help.	Community, purpose, culture, and identity are often secondary focus areas for recently separated Veterans, and consideration of these areas is only addressed once a gap is noticed.
SERVICE MEMBER EXPERIENCE AND EMOTIONAL STORY	<p><i>Service member feels encouraged and confident their transition</i></p> <p>Having life experience prior to joining the military can positively influence the ability to adapt to civilian life by leveraging that prior knowledge.</p> <p>"The financial independence that I have now is because I joined the military in my 20s...I have worked since I was a teenager."</p> <p>"The foundation of what made me transition out so easily is that I had a life before I joined the Coast Guard."</p> <p>"I am in a good place. When I joined the military I had educational goals. I met those goals. It made it easier to find employment, I think. I got a job in what I have my master's degree in. So, now I am getting more hands on employment in that."</p> <p>"I wanted to get out of my hometown, get out, get some college money in the military. I was in a little garage band before. But then 5 years...6 years in I kind of fell in love with the military life. I met someone in the military. Created a family long before my friends did. I was lucky enough that I didn't move around as much as some other people do."</p> <p>Depending on the reason an individual joined the military, their separation may be viewed as a positive or negative outcome.</p> <p>"I loved it. It was closer to the college experience than community college...I got to make some amazing friends. And me moving away and them moving away and getting stationed together...you just bond with people on a deeper level. The military is not all sunshine and flowers, there's some negatives to it but going through that with other people [is a positive]."</p> <p>"I had one friend who got out the same time that I did. I think it's more of a lazy aspect because in [branch], you join right out of high school, they tell you what to wear, your NCO gives you ride. They make it so easy. When you get out...you're on your own...You don't have anybody telling you, 'you have to come to work. If you don't show up, you get fired. I think things being made so easy in the military...'"</p> <p>"I was in my last unit and we went into the field. My knee swelled up and I saw a doctor and he said that I should get out. I didn't want to. I talked to upper leadership and they said they would tell me to stay in if I only had a year left, but I had 8. So, I medically retired... I cried when I got out. I loved being in the military."</p> <p>"I didn't like the chain of command. I didn't like how things were run and how I was treated."</p> <p>If the choice was theirs, the Service member may look forward to separation. If it was out of their control, they may dread it or delay activities necessary to separate.</p> <p>Service members may not leave much time for future planning or engagement outside the military community. Certain experiences within the military can also influence a Service member's desire to separate, stay in the military, or direct their future plans.</p> <p>Many transitioning Service members feel an obligation, or requirement, to fulfill their military duties while trying to find the time to out-process, attend transition assistance information sessions, and take steps toward their future life outside of the military.</p> <p>"I wish we had a list and a schedule of what medical appointments we're supposed to go to and when."</p> <p>Scheduling appointments</p> <p>Working through transition responsibilities</p> <p>Working & coordinating with command</p> <p>"Overall, I love the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps didn't do anything negative to me, it's just my command is what failed me."</p> <p>"It was prolonged because a lot of appointments were not done immediately. Typically, it's supposed to be done like within that first month of the six months. Setting all your appointments for medical, talking to a VA rep, talking to the Soldiers for Life folks, getting all those classes, being informed of the resources that we do have before we exit was just taking so much longer. Once I was about four months [from separation], my major concern was, 'shoot, I need to find a job now.' The job process took about two to three months...they couldn't start my benefit stuff until I exited out of the military. So, I couldn't even make my appointments for the VA. 'Oh, you're still an active duty soldier? You can't do it just yet. You have to wait.' That's when I got told 30 days to 60 days after is when you start making all your appointments."</p> <p>Separation day</p> <p>"There's a lot of overlap in the job aspects. There are a lot of 'here are your expectations and your trainings, do your job.' The Coast Guard provided a decent amount of independence where you don't have a supervisor watching over you, there is oversight, though. Going to the civilian world, there is no hand holding. There is the immediate expectation of 'here's your job go and do it.'"</p> <p>"I guess the biggest thing for me getting out is trying to find a new purpose in life or something you want to strive for."</p> <p>"I haven't signed up for help yet. I think it's part of the depression or anxiety I have...I got emails letting me know about mental health from VA I believe. I checked out the website, and see the places I could go to for help. When I went to do the mental health one, there was nothing showing up in my area."</p> <p>Without the support and structure of the military, some Veterans may struggle to access important resources, or find themselves with immediate financial needs.</p> <p>"It all went pretty smooth. From what other people tell me, from what my chain of command was telling me, 'Oh, we had this person get out and it took this long and it was this hard.' It was pretty smooth with me. It had a lot to do with me wanting to get out so fast. Some people are reluctant because they're gonna stop getting paid. I feel like, if you put the work in, you can make the transition easier."</p> <p>Veterans may not immediately feel the impact of lifestyle changes as they transition. Often these changes are perceived as superficial; therefore, may have a greater impact on the Veteran, their expectations and actions, than they expect.</p> <p>"I am not sure how to define a successful transition because...there's ALWAYS the next step. It's like, 'what's next?..transitioning is not like a one, two, or three step program. It happens over time. Everyone is going to have a different story. For example, when you move, you sometimes get all your stuff in one piece. Other times, stuff is broken [and you can't predict success]. That is something that may or may not happen."</p> <p>Reintegration and navigating lifestyle changes may be difficult and lead to crisis situations</p>		<p><i>Service member feels confused and lost about their transition</i></p>					
BRIGHT SPOTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A foundation of financial management is beneficial before and after the military Work and education exposure help ease future reintegration into a civilian lifestyle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The recruiter explains how service would lead to civilian success Excited and proud to join the military and begin this new adventure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gain a reliable and supportive community and close relationships that help with any questions or needs Receive world-class experience and training for several skill sets and roles from a structured school environment and real world application Gain exposure to a bigger world with travel opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Able to follow through on a plan created long ago Feeling support from family and mentors that helped in the decision to separate Looking forward to the future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Command made an effort and set aside protected time to focus on transition needs and to take advantage of programs such as SkillBridge Transition activities began a year or more ahead of the separation date, allowing for multiple engagements with transition assistance services and ample planning time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having a plan for next steps in place allows for value to be gleaned from transition assistance classes and information Finding a place to live, a job, starting school, and establishing family's needs because of a perfect storm of long-term planning, networking, and fortuitous circumstances Receiving direction and guidance from a strong support network of other Service members, Veterans, friends, and family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find a job or school program that meets immediate financial needs in a chosen post-service geographical location Navigate gaps in knowledge by using the resources received in the transition assistance classes Quickly identify where gaps in support can be filled by family, friends, or other services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work or school studies provide a strong sense of purpose and create a sense of fulfillment Actively rebuilding a reliable and supportive community to engage with brings comfort Enjoying the freedoms of civilian life and spending more time with loved ones Feel comfortable in the civilian environment and feel validated in their decision to separate from the military
PAIN POINTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A lack of life experience outside of high school may not allow for a realistic understanding of how to thrive in an adult civilian environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruiters stop returning calls, forcing a change in plans Didn't score very high on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) and were left with limited military job options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Face stigmas when seeking healthcare that complicate the ability to receive disability compensation in the future Dislike the controlling, demanding, and time-intensive nature of military service Experience physical and mental hardships as a result of military service Unable to be present and miss out on important family moments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approaching retirement, being separated for behavioral issues or medical reasons and have difficulty accepting the situation Did not choose to separate, but given an ultimatum; focus on family needs or accept an undesirable next step in the military Feeling disrespected and increasingly isolated once military command and fellow Service members became aware of the desire to separate Having future plans discredited or mocked as a retention tactic for re-enlistment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Command did not support transition needs, requiring military-focused work up until separation date, with little-to-no time to prepare Transition activities and support resources provided inaccurate or confusing information Unsupportive command or compressed timeline did not afford Service member opportunities to engage in transition related programs and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advice and guidance is scarce and timelines are extremely-compressed, limiting planning and possible preparations for what comes next Roadblocks may emerge at unexpected moments when attempting to engage with resources and services; which adds to confusion and frustration Out-processing, transitioning or supplemental checklists are redundant or confusing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services and resources are not as structured as they were in the military, causing confusion, frustration, and disengagement Relying on piecing together resources and support as problems arise without the time needed to properly set up for success Military skills and roles did not easily translate into the appropriate civilian counterparts, requiring compromise and additional steps to reach the goals of the original plan Paperwork and process mishandling creates disruptions in the ability to receive benefits such as healthcare, disability claims, and retirement pension that are needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find difficulty relating to civilians and regularly feel as if others do not hold the same standards at work and in their social environments Struggle to find a similar sense of structure or purpose to that of the military and move from one job or location to the next

The Lifer

Driving Desire: I am trying to let go of the military even though it means everything to me.



TRANSITION CONSIDERATION

Consideration Level

Planning

Planning was not a high priority as my focus was mainly on working or handling appointments until my last day in the military.



Support

I may not have much support or desire it. My focus will be on doing my job or going to medical appointments, which may lead me to grasp for support structures once I separate from the military.



Access to Resources

I may see transition as a "check the box" task while I'm still in the military. I know there are resources available, but I may struggle to find what I need at the last minute.



TRANSITION PRIORITIES

Priority Level

Housing

I may have a general idea where I will live next. It may be that I will move to be closer to family, or will choose to stay close to our last duty station.



Family

I had to put family second for a long time. Now that I have the availability, I will want to put a higher focus on spending time with them.



Education

I may be less interested in education as I enjoyed my military skillset and will try to continue using my skillset if I can. I may have passed any GI Bill resources on to my family.



Employment

I will try to find a job outside of the military, but my focus is on family and reacting to what's changed.



Finances

I may have high hopes of replacing and maintaining my current financial lifestyle. I may find difficulty in replacing the resources provided by the military. I will rely on my pension or disability for support.



Health

I may have health issues from a long military career or from a specific disability from the military, so I will need to spend time ensuring my health is taken care of appropriately.



Pre-military life: The military was always my goal. I may have family who served as well, and I joined as soon as I had the opportunity.

Military life: I will be proud of my service and will have loved my time in the military. I may be forced to leave due to retirement, or any number of reasons influencing an early separation, when I'm not ready to move on.

Transition story: I will know several colleagues who have gone through transition, or I may be placed in a unit to help me transition if I am going through a medical discharge. Even if I am armed with knowledge, I still may try and work until the last minute instead of focusing on my needs as much as I should.

Life after transition: The key to my success will be having others who are able to push me to take care of my own needs. I may find it challenging to set myself up for success as my primary focus was not on my transition needs.

“

I haven't wrapped my head around being a retired Veteran. I don't want to walk in and say 'I'm [my rank] retired.'

“

...I was doing my job [in the military] for about two to three days before my terminal leave. I headed back CONUS, that was a big floodgate. And then, first day of classes was like, 'okay, now we're a civilian.'

What I want during my transition:

- I need a network that can help push me in the right direction at the right time as my focus is on accomplishing what the military needs me to do and not on my transition.
- I need realistic expectations to be set about what my lifestyle will look like once I leave the military and how I can best set myself up to be successful.
- I need someone else to put aside time for me to focus on my transition.
- I expect the services outside of DoD to have the same reliability and structure. I will become frustrated or confused if I discover that to not be the case.



The Goal Oriented

Driving Desire: I view the military as a way to reach my future goals.



TRANSITION CONSIDERATION

Consideration Level

Planning

I had a general plan for what I want to accomplish since before enlisting, but it is becoming more focused on specific goals the closer I am to separation.

Low Med High

Support

I may rely on my family and other Veterans for support to help me when I transition, or help me quickly get back on my feet once I transitioned.

Access to Resources

I know the resources I need, but sometimes I do not receive helpful information.

TRANSITION PRIORITIES

Priority Level

Housing

Housing may be a lower priority because I feel this is likely to be supported by my family, friends, my own personal planning, or the GI Bill.

Low Med High

Family

If I have a family, this may be a lower priority as my main focus is to ensure our family finances are established or next steps are securely in place.

Education

I may have joined to gain access to the GI Bill, so most of my energy may go into taking the necessary steps to attend college.

Employment

I may have joined to gain access to a job skill or career. This learned skill or career path may not translate well into a civilian career field or may not be readily available when I transition and am trying to land a job after my military service.

Finances

Financial security is the cornerstone to achieving my goal. I may find that I won't make as much money as I planned. If I choose education the GI Bill helps, but I still may have to find a job to ensure I can pay all of my bills.

Health

I may not focus much on my health at the moment because I feel fine and other things are more important.

Pre-military life: I had a specific goal I wanted to achieve when I joined the military.

Military life: I will focus on completing my initial military contract, but I may decide to stay in longer or potentially retire from the military if I enjoy the work and lifestyle.

Transition story: My singular goal will be to maintain my post-military plan that I settled on before joining or that I figured out during my time in the military. My transition experience and attention will be focused on fulfilling my education or career plans.

Life after transition: The key to my success will be landing my chosen career or effectively using the GI Bill.

I may find it challenging to set up a support group or have a social life because that is provided in the military and my friends from before the military may have become unreliable.

“

I am in a good place. When I joined the military, I had educational goals. I met those goals. It made it easier to find employment, I think. I got a job in what I have my master's degree in. So, now I am getting more hands on experience.

“

I knew I wanted to go into aviation because my neighbor worked with the Blackhawks. When I was 12, he let me go into the simulator and then I passed the certification. I did junior guard in middle school and JRTC in high school.

What I want during my transition:

- I need my resources to provide me with specific information and enough time to put actionable steps into my plan.
- If I choose to pursue education, I need my school to understand my experience.
- If I choose to pursue a job skill, I need time and understanding to acquire a position in the location I choose to live after separation.
- If I choose to pursue a job skill, I need to better understand how to market myself.
- If I choose to pursue a career, I need to be provided a realistic picture of my job search, timing, and value I may bring to the civilian job market.

The Purpose Seeker

Driving Desire: I am trying to find a purpose for my life after the military.



TRANSITION CONSIDERATION

Consideration Level

Planning

I may create several tentative plans, but it can be difficult to know which one is right, so I will pursue multiple options if I'm able.

Low Med High

Support

I will ask anyone and everyone for advice to learn about their experience and see if a job opportunity or resource might help me as well.

Low Med High

Access to Resources

I will seek-out as much information and guidance as is possible to try and piece together the next steps in my life.

Low Med High

TRANSITION PRIORITIES

Priority Level

Housing

I may have housing in place and experience with the VA Home Loan; but I may also be willing to move wherever an opportunity takes me if I think it's for the right reasons.

Low Med High

Family

My family will be my priority and the bridge to my new sense of purpose and community.

Low Med High

Education

I may pursue education if I believe it will help me with the next step I want to take for myself.

Low Med High

Employment

I will review multiple jobs and new roles before settling into one. I may change my mind to re-enlist or serve in another capacity in the National Guard or Reserves to maintain a similar sense of purpose I had in the military.

Low Med High

Finances

I will plan and have several concepts for how my financial situation may look once I decide which path to pursue.

Low Med High

Health

My health will take a backseat to my pursuit of purpose and next steps.

Low Med High

Pre-military life: I've always been attracted to the military and may have had other family who served as well. I may have worked a job or two as a teenager prior to entering the military.

Military life: I will have a good military career. Somewhere along the way, I will choose to separate due to developing new career interests, wanting to spend more time with my family, or planning for retirement.

Transition story: I will focus a lot of my time on finding something that will give me a similar sense of purpose to the military, which requires me to learn about as many resources as possible so I can weigh my options.

Life after transition: The key to my success will be building a new community by focusing on my family or volunteering to help other Veterans.

I may find it challenging to integrate in the civilian space if my new job and coworkers don't live up to my values or provide me with a new sense of purpose.

“

I was going to wait until August to get out and go to school. And then I applied at [company], and I didn't like it there. It felt like I was the only one working. So I decided to do full time schooling. So I have been going to school full-time.

“

I really didn't have a plan with my separation or retirement. I just knew I had an education. I knew I wanted to work, but I didn't know what type. I wanted my daughter to still see me have a purpose, basically.

What I want during my transition:

- Initially, I will need to hear the experiences and advice of others who have transitioned so I can consider my options.
- I may need to be connected with other Veterans who were a similar rank or skillsets so I feel confident in the options I have.
- I will need the time and space to organize my various plans.
- I would prefer to receive training more often so I can ensure I didn't miss anything.



The True Separator

Driving Desire: I just want to get out the military.



TRANSITION CONSIDERATION

Consideration Level

Planning

I may have a general idea of what life outside the military looks like for me, but I'm mostly just focused on getting out and moving on.



Support

I may lean heavily on family or friends for housing or other needed support for a starting point following separation.



Access to Resources

I will avoid military or VA resources because I'm trying to leave the culture behind me. Engaging these resources may just be a check-the-box task for me while I'm still in the military.



TRANSITION PRIORITIES

Priority Level

Housing

I will have an idea of where I can go that may include staying with family, friends, or my own apartment if I can afford it in my home state.



Family

If I have a family, they may be one of the key reasons for why I want to separate.



Education

Education may be an option for me as it allows me to explore new opportunities and provides quick financial support from the GI Bill.



Employment

Employment for the sake of financial support may be crucial for me as I try to establish my next steps. I may rapidly test my fit for many jobs and rely on my family's network to find initial employment opportunities outside of the military.



Finances

Reestablishing my finances may take some time, so I may rely on family support to make ends meet.



Health

Health is a low priority as I attempt to piece together the more immediate needs that will allow me to begin planning and taking action on my next steps.



Pre-military life: I may have joined before I was sure what to do with my life, or when college didn't feel right for me.

Military life: Military culture may not be a good fit for me. I may have had bad experiences with my command, my job, or the environment that heavily influenced my decision to separate.

Transition story: When I tell my peers I'm separating, I may be treated with less respect than I deserve; which will amplify my decision to leave. I will be tired of the military and want to do something different, but I may also have some trouble figuring out what that is because I'm so focused on getting out.

Life after transition: The key to my success will be setting up structures for housing and financial support while I get back on my feet.

I may struggle with what to do, who to reach out to, and which VA resources will be best to utilize because I want to disengage from anything dealing with the military for a while.

“
Well, I mean, I was at the end of my rope. I couldn't go any further.”

“
When my husband was deployed and I was a first time mom I didn't hear anything from my leadership about maternity leave or checks-ins. So that was another indicator that, 'hey, I need to go.'”

What I want during my transition:

- I may feel I'm treated with less respect once I inform my command and other Service members that I'm planning to separate. A lack of support can add stress, anxiety, unnecessary time constraints, and hardship on my ability to transition effectively.
- I will need VA and other military-related resources to understand that I may be apprehensive to engage while I'm separating, but still may have a need for what they are able to offer me.
- I may have a few ideas, but not a clear plan in mind for my future. I will need patience and support from those around me while I explore my next steps.