

# VETERAN HUB

Research on War Experience  
and Return to Civilian Life

# JOURNEYS OF VETERANS





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All errors and inaccuracies, if any, in the final version are the sole responsibility of the authors. Any use of the materials contained in the study is permitted provided that the original source is mentioned.

The text of the study is set in Roboto size 14 font to make it accessible to people with different levels of vision.

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# Information about Veteran Hub

The Veteran Hub Charitable Foundation was established in 2017 by the Pobratymy nongovernmental organization, the Olena Pinchuk Foundation and the Victor Pinchuk Foundation to give back to Ukrainian veterans returning to civilian life after their service.

Veteran Hub's mission is to provide professional support to veterans on their way to settling back into civilian life. We are creating a network of safe spaces where veterans and their families can communicate, attend educational events and receive comprehensive psychological support services. Today, the Veteran Hub's network includes two operating spaces for clients in Kyiv and Vinnytsia and three mobile offices in the Kyiv, Vinnytsia and Dnipro regions that deliver services to veterans and their families. The network provides online and telephone **+38-067-348-2868** services to clients from all over the country.

Veteran Hub is developing a partnership program to support eight small spaces, «Plus Plus++», in cities with an underdeveloped system of services for veterans. Since its inception, Veteran Hub consultants have provided over 30,000 services to veterans and their families. The organization's spaces have been visited more than 48,000 times.

Based on the daily experience of counseling veterans and their loved ones, Veteran Hub implements projects to inform a wide audience about the needs of veterans and ethical ways of interacting with them, conducts analytical research to develop projects for veterans based on their actual needs and improves services for veterans and their loved ones and the public policy tailored them.

The Veteran Hub has already conducted its own research:



[The Journey of a  
Warrior's Beloved  
One](#)



[Conscious  
Parenthood during  
War](#)



[Sexual Life of  
Warriors after  
Wounding](#)



[From Wounding to  
Returning](#)

in cooperation with  
the NGO Pryncyp

In addition, the Veteran Hub team is researching the employment of veterans in the workplace, in the open air and manufacturing, and in the National Police. The team is researching the interaction of the National Police with veterans, as well as suicide response and prevention among veterans.

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# Introductory Remarks

The journey of a veteran is the journey of a warrior. War, as well as returning from it, are parts of that journey.

Since 2014, more than a million Ukrainian soldiers have stood up to defend Ukraine, our way of life and our values. Until recently, civilians, our relatives and friends have taken up arms and donned uniforms, changing lives forever.

Military service in wartime affects the well-being of soldiers, veterans and their families. This impact can be partially mitigated by quality care, services, support and empathy at every step of the way.

However, the price paid by Ukraine's soldiers cannot be recovered. They will not be able to re-live the time they spent in service with their families, nor will they be able to bring back their fallen comrades and be the same as they were before war.

Learning to live with the experience of war behind them is the journey of veterans; the journeys that veterans take to return from war to their homes and their communities and continue to follow for years after completing their service.

This journey, often hidden behind complicated scientific terms and formulations, is very human. It means that you get unaccustomed to civilian life and need to reacquaint yourself with everything that was left behind when you entered the military. It is about the fact that the body hurts after the war and needs to be taken care of, and the psyche has to become accustomed to new conditions. It's about changing your own self and finding your own identity and purpose; about the value of one's own story and being heard. It's about daily courage to feel confident and safe, to have stable support and a community you trust to care for others and remember everything that has happened.

Returning to civilian life after military service is a continuation of the ordeal of war, not a relief from it.



We invite you to read the story told by many veterans' voices. We have recorded and processed that story so people who care about the well-being of veterans – that is, their loved ones, doctors, psychologists, government officials and program developers – better understand the feelings and experiences of Ukrainian veterans and take them into account.

We explain in simple terms: What happens after returning from war, while the war is ongoing? In this study, we describe different stages of the journey and provide our conclusions. We deliberately limited the number of these conclusions and refrained from making recommendations in this document. We want it to remain a story that belongs first and foremost to the veterans – those whose journey we tried to sensitively recreate. We invite you to read this document to formulate your own assumptions and conclusions.

**We are often asked how to communicate with veterans.**

Our answer is invariably the same: Ask the veteran or veterans in front of you. Let this study serve as a conversation starter because real relationships are built in person.

For more than nine years, we, like hundreds of people in Ukraine, have been working to develop veterans' affairs. For the past five years, we have been doing this under the Veteran Hub brand. Every day we advise and support soldiers and their loved ones and listen, study and talk about the experience of war and returning home. Having your trust is a great honor and a great responsibility for us. We thank you for it.

Sincerely,  
the Veteran Hub Team

# Introduction

To protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and to ensure its economic and informational security are the most important functions of the State and a matter of concern for all the Ukrainian people. – Article 17 of the Constitution of Ukraine

Uniformed combatants and veterans with injuries, scars and prostheses, and no external signs, are a large and important part of our society. Until recently, we considered veterans to be only those who served in the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; but, for the past decade, Ukrainian veterans have been our husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, colleagues, friends and neighbors.

Russia's war in Ukraine began in 2014 with the illegal invasion and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and inspiration of hostilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. In 2022, it spread to the rest of the country through a full-fledged invasion. Since then, hundreds of thousands of people have been defending Ukraine's territorial integrity through the security and defense forces and rebuilding their civilian lives after completing their service.

Since 2014, Ukraine has granted veteran status<sup>1</sup> to those who participated in World War II, the war in Afghanistan as part of the Soviet Union, other conflicts as part of peacekeeping commitments as well as those who defended the territorial integrity of independent Ukraine. Over the eight years of Russia's war against Ukraine, the number of veterans has grown to 670,458<sup>2</sup> as of January 2022. The number of men and women involved in service during the time of Russia's full-scale invasion remains classified. According to the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, the number of combatants and families of fallen soldiers as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion could reach more than five million.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the Status of War Veterans, Guarantees of Their Social Protection, Law of Ukraine Number 3551-XII (2023a) (Ukraine), [zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3551-12#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3551-12#Text)

<sup>2</sup> Analytical information according to the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, [data.mva.gov.ua](https://data.mva.gov.ua)

<sup>3</sup> Exclusive interview with Minister of Veterans Affairs Yulia Laputina to Interfax-Ukraine,

Military service during wartime has a lasting impact on the lives and well-being of veterans and their families. But what happens after service?

In this study, we analyzed the journeys of Ukrainian ATO/JFO veterans after completing their service and the many years after beginning civilian life. We found journeys of female and male veterans have similar stages.

From generation to generation and from country to country, veterans go through similar experiences and challenges.<sup>4</sup> There are differences; but, there are common features that can be summarized in the form of the Journeys of Veterans – a map of the most common moments in the lives of Ukrainian veterans. The vision of this pathway in our study is based on the American Journeys of Veterans Map,<sup>5</sup> developed at the request of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Our study accounts for the Ukrainian context, including that the return of veterans continues to take place in an unfinished war. And, service in the Ukrainian context is now directly related to Russia's war against Ukraine.

After their service, veterans return home – to their country and the community they defended. Society plays a key role in the veteran's journey. Creating a friendly, supportive and understanding environment is one of the challenges and tasks for Ukrainian society today.

Reintegration is a two-way process that requires effort from both the civilian environment and veterans rebuilding their civilian lives.

Reintegration is a part of support programming for veterans and their families in countries that have faced the return of a significant number of combatants to civilian life. Such programs exist in the United States, Canada, Israel and many other countries. Since 2014, after the outbreak of Russian-inspired hostilities on the territory of Ukraine, civil society and the state began to provide a wide range of support and programs for

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[interfax.com.ua/news/interview/830543.html](https://interfax.com.ua/news/interview/830543.html)

<sup>4</sup> Crocker, T., Powell-Cope, G., Brown, L., & Besterman-Dahan, K. (2014). Toward a Veteran-centric view on community (re)integration. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, 51(3), XI–XVII. [doi.org/10.1682/jrrd.2014.01.0011](https://doi.org/10.1682/jrrd.2014.01.0011)

<sup>5</sup> The Journey of Veterans Map (no date.). VA News and Information. [https://news.va.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/11/Veteran-Journey-Map-2016-S508C\\_11.3.22.pdf](https://news.va.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/11/Veteran-Journey-Map-2016-S508C_11.3.22.pdf)

veterans and their families, and the research community is generating the first insights into the definition of reintegration.

Despite considerable practical experience and knowledge gained by experts over the past decade, these efforts do not yet have a single approach shared by the majority of citizens; we cannot speak of unified research and policy to support veterans and their families. As of mid-2023, there are a small number of scientific and analytical publications in the public domain that mention the concepts of reintegration and readaptation which is not enough to address this topic in academic and public discourse.

Despite the fact that Russia's war has been raging for nine years, society, the state and veterans themselves often understand the concepts of «rehabilitation», «adaptation» and «reintegration» in different ways. The state and the private sector lack a unified, comprehensive approach to supporting veterans returning to civilian life. This is a common problem when veterans' needs are referenced differently and various metrics are used. Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Resolution Number 1068-r<sup>6</sup> from December 18, 2013 refers to adaptation of military personnel and their families to civilian life and consists of psychological, legal and professional elements, while the Law of Ukraine On Social and Legal Protection of Military Personnel and Their Families<sup>7</sup> does not contain a clear definition of the process; but, instead regulates it. Veterans reintegration in the Ukrainian context is not new, but can be presented under different concepts due to the lack of a unified approach.

Despite the significant role of society, the primary actors in the journey are veterans. For them, transition is a difficult process where they may need support. From the experience of consultations and communication in the Veteran Hub, we know that immediately after returning, veterans often feel anxious because they do not understand:

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<sup>6</sup> On Approval of the Concept of the State Targeted Program for Social and Professional Adaptation of Servicemen Subject to Discharge and Persons Discharged from Military Service for the Period up to 2017, Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Number 1068-r (2014) (Ukraine) [zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1068-2013-p#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1068-2013-p#Text).

<sup>7</sup> On Military Duty and Military Service, Law of Ukraine Number 2232-XII (2023) (Ukraine), [zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text)

- What to do next;
- What is happening to them;
- The reactions of their body and mind are normal and sometimes even predictable; and,
- What is happening to both the immediate environment and society at large as veterans are re-establishing relationships with their loved ones.

When we talk about life after war, we choose general words: Return, rehabilitation, reintegration and recovery. These words have become so familiar that we rarely think about what actually happens after war. What is the process of returning? What do people experience returning from war? What challenges do they face and how do they overcome them? How can we determine if a person has returned or if their civilian life is successful?

Our research is an attempt to find answers to all these questions. This is an in-depth analysis of the life path of Ukrainian veterans after completing their service. Its objective is to identify the stages that Ukrainian veterans experience after returning from war and to outline the specifics of these stages. We analyze what challenges and needs arise on the veteran's path and how we as a community, the state and veterans' families and friends can help meet these needs.

Finally, we point out blind spots that currently exist in our understanding of the experience of the military and veterans and encourage our colleagues to analyze individual experiences in more depth. In addition to the veteran's journey, we identify how society can influence the improvement of veterans' well-being by first identifying the components that determine this well-being.

As long as the Russian war is ongoing, it would seem too early to talk about returning. We believe that we need to be no less prepared for reconstruction and returning from war than we are for combat and defense. At the moment, our country is not ready to address at least three times as many veterans as in the last eight years combined.

Returning from the war is a thorny and difficult path that future veterans will experience. Some will go through it for the first time, some will return to a familiar route where everything has changed and some will already be on their own journey in civilian life. As long as the war is ongoing, returning will have more challenges and difficulties.

We have an outdated logic and approach to veterans, a lack of resources and many derivative problems without ready-made solutions. Meanwhile, many Ukrainian soldiers are already returning from the war and our task is to identify professional solutions and to simplify this journey for people who risked their lives and health for the sake of our security and territorial integrity of Ukraine.

We intended this analysis to be an invitation to discussion and action by all involved stakeholders – particularly, the Office of the President of Ukraine, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Security Service of Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada as well as the international donor community, Ukrainian philanthropists and civil society working to support veterans in Ukraine. The journey of veteran women and men can serve as a reference point, a map for a conversation about transforming the veterans' affairs system, rethinking state policy toward veterans and building better interaction between veterans and the society they served to protect.

The study initiated by Veteran Hub will be useful for veterans, their families, NGOs, government institutions, researchers and all stakeholders. It describes what a soldier experiences after returning and indicates what we, as a society, can do to make the return and reintegration process successful.

This document has a complex structure and consists of an introduction, a section on concepts necessary for understanding the veteran's journey as well as a methodology. Sections and subsections are stages of the veteran's journey that can be traced in our research.

## **List of Abbreviations**

LU – Law of Ukraine

ATO – Anti-terrorist Operation

JFO – Joint Forces Operation

TRO – Territorial Defense

NGU – National Guard of Ukraine

GUR – Main Intelligence Directorate

SOF – Special Operations Forces

PCO – Participant of Combat Operations

HEI – Higher Education Institution

MEC – Military Medical Commission

NGO – Nongovernmental Organization

IFV – Infantry Fighting Vehicle

# Concepts for Understanding the Journey of Veteran Women and Men

This section presents basic definitions necessary to understand both our study and transformational processes a veteran goes through after returning from service.

**Our study is based on the following key concepts:**

- Veteran;
- Veteran's journey;
- Veterans' well-being;
- Returning;
- Planning horizon;
- Identity and social roles;
- Military and civilian culture.

We invite you to familiarize yourself with these terms before we present the key findings of our study.

**VETERAN** – In our study, we define a veteran as a person who participated in combat operations in the Russian-Ukrainian war within the territory of Ukraine starting from 2014 till present. The term «veteran» may include volunteers of the Hospitaller Medical Battalion; members of volunteer battalions; conscripts; regular military personnel; reservists; mobilized persons; and foreign citizens who protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

The applicable law of Ukraine defines war veterans as persons who participated in the homeland defense or combat operations in the territory of other states. According to Section II, Article 4 of the Law of Ukraine «On Military Duty and Military Service», war veterans include: combatants; [persons with disabilities caused by war](#); and war veterans.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> On Military Duty and Military Service, Law of Ukraine Number 2232-XII (2023) (Ukraine),



Military units can be combat and non-combat, i.e. those that do not participate in combat operations but are mainly engaged in logistics to deliver food, shells or other supplies or to conduct training. Not all enlisted individuals or those who signed a contract during a special period or the state of martial law are combatants. At this point, we need to provide a precise definition of the term «combat operations». This is a deployment of military units, subdivisions or other forces and means of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, other defense force units, as well as the special forces of the National Police of Ukraine to perform combat tasks or missions jointly or independently during the repulsion of armed aggression against Ukraine with the purpose of liquidation (elimination) of an armed conflict, and/or performing other tasks with the use of any type of weapon (weaponry).<sup>9</sup> Based on this definition, artillerymen, operators of reconnaissance or strike UAVs, and air defense personnel shall be considered combatants, as they use various types of weapons to perform tasks that are crucial to the country's defense.

**In general, military service can be divided into the following forms:**

- Regular military service;
- Military service under mobilization;
- Contractual form of military service;
- Volunteer formations – this is rather relevant for the ATO/JFO in the time period until February 24, 2022;
- So-called «pirates»<sup>10</sup> who do not belong to any of the above forms of military service, but voluntarily participate in military operations.

In our study, we did not distinguish between the forms of military service, nor was it important for our respondents to have a formal combatant status. Instead, the key for us was a soldier's testimony and recounting their war experience and the path he or she takes after returning. All of our respondents had such experience.

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[zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text).

<sup>9</sup> On Defense of Ukraine, Law of Ukraine Number 1932-XII (2023) (Ukraine)  
[zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1932-12#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1932-12#Text)

<sup>10</sup> The term, as used by veterans, refers to people who are not officially registered for military service but who voluntarily join the war operations in various ways.

Different formats of service and combat background or lack thereof affect the experience of returning.<sup>11</sup>

**THE JOURNEY OF VETERAN WOMEN AND MEN** is what happens to veterans after they complete their service and return to civilian life. This concept is based on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Journeys of Veterans Map.<sup>12</sup> Robert A. McDonald, the 8th Secretary of Veterans Affairs, assembled a team of service design specialists led by Sarah Brooks who conducted an in-depth national study, visited every state and interviewed more than 150 veterans. As a result of their work, they developed a life map to illustrate the processes that happen to veterans after they return from service; systematize the needs of veterans at different stages of their lives; identify key points of interaction between veterans and the Department, and offer logical solutions to improve the experience of veterans and service providers during such interactions. This systematization of veterans' experience provides a comprehensive picture of the challenges they face on their way from the beginning of their service to returning to civilian life, throughout the entire veteran's journey.

The journey of female and male veterans has a convoluted structure. In different stages that a soldier goes through, there are different needs peculiar to each period. The state policy shall be adjusted to make sure it meets actual needs of veterans. The veteran support system shall be designed in a way it does not get overloaded when all needs are «piled on» at once. At each stage, the interaction among stakeholders is progressing in different ways. The state shall be in a position to modulate the stages in the veterans' support depending on the date of demobilization.

**The veteran support system should be built with an understanding of the needs and processes in the lives of veterans.**

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<sup>11</sup> Wells, S. Y., Brennan, C. L., Van Voorhees, E. E., Beckham, J. C., Calhoun, P. S., Clancy, C. P., Hertzberg, M. A., & Dillon, K. H. (2021). The Impact of Hostility on Quality of Life, Functioning, and Suicidal Ideation Among Male Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. [doi.org/10.1002/jts.22691](https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22691)

<sup>12</sup> Journeys of Veterans Map. (no date). VA.gov Home | Veterans Affairs. [va.gov/ve/docs/journey-map-veteran-2016.pdf](https://va.gov/ve/docs/journey-map-veteran-2016.pdf)

The main stages of the veteran's journey in Ukraine are life before enlisting, beginning of service, combat experience, end of service, beginning of civilian life, taking care of yourself, reinventing yourself, rooting in civilian life, retirement, aging, dying, and death.

These stages largely coincide with those developed by the U.S. Journeys of Veterans Map and have been confirmed for the Ukrainian situation based on the analysis of the results of focus groups with veterans. The previous study, implemented through focus groups in 2020, was conducted by the Veteran Hub team. The current study is more in-depth and aims to examine the journey and stages that veterans go through in order to build a support and reintegration system based on the information received.

## **WELL-BEING**

The global academic community currently lacks a single universal definition of well-being, but there are many variations that are more or less similar to each other. For example, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention uses the following definitions of well-being: «positive assessment of life», «wellness,» and the experience of good physical health. The state of well-being is formed both from how a person feels psychologically and from his or her actual state of physical health and his or her feelings about it.<sup>13</sup>

Well-being consists of a combination of subjective and objective factors that contribute to a high level of life satisfaction. For example, the availability of housing is an objective factor, while each of us will have specific requirements for our own housing and diverse needs, and accordingly, will assess our own satisfaction with the available housing differently. Therefore, when assessing well-being, we should take into account not only the objective fact, but also a person's needs and their own assessment of satisfaction with the way life is going in a particular area of well-being.

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<sup>13</sup> Lee, M. T., Kubzansky, L. D., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2021). *Measuring Well-Being: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Social Sciences and the Humanities*. Oxford University Press, Incorporated.

In Ukraine, there is also no uniformly accepted definition of well-being that covers all areas of human life and prosperity. In building the model of well-being that we present here, we relied on the concept of veterans' well-being in the United States and Canada and took as a basis the work of David Pedlar and James Thompson.<sup>14</sup> Although the top-level model of well-being, in our opinion, is quite universal and similar for all people, when delving into the definition in each of the areas, their content and categorization, it is necessary to pay attention to realities of life in each individual culture and consider national specifics, traditions and worldview.

In this study, we rely on our own operationalization of well-being, which includes six components. All components of well-being were selected after a preliminary literature review.



**Figure 1. The Concept of Well-Being**

<sup>14</sup> Thompson, J. M., Vogt, D., & Pedlar, D. (2022). Success in life after service: A perspective on conceptualizing the well-being of military Veterans. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2021-0037>

It is important to consider the concept of well-being in conjunction with the Journeys of Veterans, as different components and needs for well-being may manifest themselves differently at each stage.

## **RETURNING**

The return of a veteran to civilian life after service is usually referred to as reintegration. The term «reintegration» is relatively new to the academic literature on military personnel and veterans. The term was rarely used before 2004. In 2011, the term was used more often than in any other year. This may be due to the rapid withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and the recognition of their needs by the academic community.

**REINTEGRATION** and related terms describe the period of time, process or outcome that service members and veterans may face after military service. Both reintegration and community integration emphasize veterans' participation in life in multiple roles such as a worker, student, partner, sibling, and others. Terms «readaptation» and «transition» are also used when referring to the return of a veteran. These concepts highlight specific phenomena.

**READAPTATION** emphasizes the psychological aspect of return, or a veteran's adaptation to civilian life post-service, while **TRANSITION** is a passage from the military to civilian institutions. This change in institutional settings is significant for veterans as institutions differ in terms of their cultural, social, and economic specifics. Reintegration refers to the return of servicemen and servicewomen to the social or professional roles they played before enlisting.

Reintegration refers to shared psychological, social, health and community-related ways of functioning with the immediate environment and larger social groups such as teams at work or student groups. It also refers to physical rehabilitation and care needs, for instance, reintegration and rehabilitation treatment plans, case management, and community-based or home-based rehabilitation services for shell shock or trauma, as well as employment programs.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Elnitsky, C. A., Fisher, M. P., & Blevins, C. L. (2017). Military Service Member and Veteran Reintegration: A Conceptual Analysis, Unified Definition, and Key Domains. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8.

In this study, we use the term «return» instead of «reintegration». It refers to the process of returning to civilian life after completion of service. This is a complex process that includes returning to social roles in civilian life, psychological adaptation and taking care of one's own well-being after service in terms of health, meaningful occupation, housing and more. We believe that the term «reintegration» better describes what happens after the end of service in a veteran's life and emphasizes the active role of a veteran in this process.

## **PLANNING HORIZON**

A Stanford University study shows that constant stress affects the ability to plan. The inability to control the situation due to service during the war and war in general brings uncertainty, especially for the military. Therefore one of the indicators of return and well-being is the ability of veterans to plan long term.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, when communicating with the Veteran Hub team, veterans repeatedly spoke about the need to make long-term plans, so this item is included in the well-being model in this study.

We all have dreams and visions of the future. Our aspirations may be long term - stretching into old age and distant future, or short-term - covering only next weekend. We also make plans: from our to-do list to buying a home or establishing a business. Our ability to dream, plan, and implement our plans within a certain time frame is our planning horizon.

Civilian life is characterized by a longer planning horizon. People view their lives through the lens of confidence in the future and security for themselves and their plans.

With the beginning of war and service, the planning horizon begins to narrow. In the military, this happens regardless of how and why a person chooses to join the service – through general mobilization, under

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[doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00369](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00369)

<sup>16</sup> Kulshreshtha, A., Alonso, A., McClure, L. A., Hajjar, I., Manly, J. J., & Judd, S. (2023). Association of Stress With Cognitive Function Among Older Black and White US Adults. *JAMA Network Open*, 6(3), Article e231860. [doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.1860](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.1860)

contract, or in any other way. The only difference is the speed of this narrowing.<sup>17</sup>

If we look at the ability to make long-term plans as a skill, it can be argued that during their service, in their personal lives, military personnel gradually lose this skill. When returning to civilian life, restoring an independent long-term planning horizon is one of the key tasks for a veteran.

While the planning horizon can narrow down in a blink, it takes a lot of time to expand it. A person must not only feel safe enough to believe that in a few months, or even years, their life will be predictable, but also relearn the skill of planning: with every small thing and short plans, making sure that they can control the course of events..

A person's ability to maintain a long-term planning horizon and to implement his or her plan, sticking to it in every detail can be regarded as a marker of a positive trajectory of return.

## **IDENTITY AND SOCIAL ROLES**

Throughout life, a person seeks the answer to the question «Who am I?», while shaping and changing their identity. How we define ourselves, how we position ourselves in society, who we associate with, and how we are perceived by our environment undoubtedly affects our lives. The process of forming identity, acquiring social roles and statuses begins at birth and gradually changes depending on circumstances around us, our actions, and the way we explore ourselves. Simply put, our perception of ourselves and our relationships in society are very dynamic and subject to change. A person can identify themselves in different ways, have several social roles, and perform differently in each of them.

Experience in one role can influence behavior and performance in other roles.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Suspilne (2023, February 24). How many Ukrainians have plans for the future in a full-scale war? – A survey. Suspilne News. [suspilne.media/396125-ak-ukrainci-planuut-vlasne-zitta-v-umovah-povnomasstabnoi-vijni-opituvanna-s-uspilnogo/](https://suspilne.media/396125-ak-ukrainci-planuut-vlasne-zitta-v-umovah-povnomasstabnoi-vijni-opituvanna-s-uspilnogo/)

<sup>18</sup> Коваленко, А., & Безверха, К. (2017). Соціальна ідентичність як механізм адаптації особистості під час суспільної кризи. Український психологічний журнал, 1(3) [Kovalenko, A., & Bezverkha, K.

Military service is only one stage of a person's life journey. The choice to join the service gradually endows a person with the role of a military person, but also guarantees the status of a veteran after the service is completed. The role of a soldier imposes certain obligations both during and after the service.

**Veteran status has no clearly defined obligations. We grant a person the status of a veteran and appropriate recognition as a result of his or her participation in combat operations and service to the Ukrainian people. This status determines that a veteran is a carrier of war experience. No actions of a person after completion of service can erase the past – the fact and circumstances of service.**

Unlike the military world, civilian life gives us the opportunity to freely choose and change our roles. In addition, each person plays several roles at once: we are parents, children, neighbors, citizens, professionals, all at the same time. No single role should override any other statuses a person has in life. Considering the above, veterans can freely choose how to build their lives, define themselves and their values, and their role in society.

Veteran is only one of the many identities a person takes after the war. This identity can influence how a person manifests himself or herself in other roles, but it does not necessarily have to be the main or defining identity in a person's life.

During military service, the way a person performs in other roles may change under pressure. In addition, a person may question their usual functioning in certain roles. It is normal to question and redefine one's roles after returning, including the role of a soldier. This happens at different stages of return and is part of rebuilding civilian life after the war.

When working on the Veterans' Journeys, we define the following key terms:

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(2017). Social identity as a mechanism of personality adaptation during a social crisis. Ukrainian Psychological Journal, 1(3), 48–62.



**IDENTITY** is a person's subjective perception of himself or herself and the personal traits that define him or her. Identity is closely related to what a person defines as his or her own values.

**STATUS** is a person's position in society, or how society defines a person and his or her experience, what rights and attitudes he or she is granted. A person can have many different statuses at the same time. Status is a social term, a legal definition of the bearer of a certain experience.

**A SOCIAL ROLE** is a behavior associated with a certain social status. Each status has its own social role. These behaviors are based on socially defined expectations of a person's position in society. Roles help people interact and build expectations of each other.

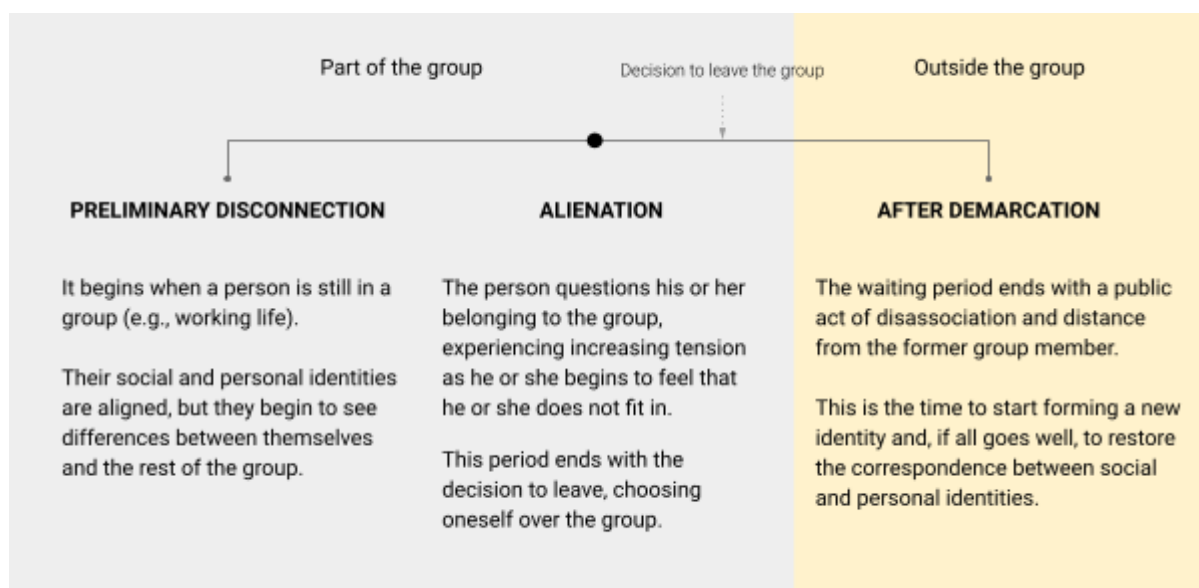
**PEOPLE** are social creatures. People form social identities based on: 1) belonging to different social groups, and 2) the value they place on that belonging. Key life changes, such as the transition from military to civilian life, pose an identity challenge as people are forced to interact with new social groups with different norms, values and beliefs and seek ways to understand and form membership in these new groups.<sup>19</sup>

Catherine de Boer has studied what happens to people's identities when they go through major life changes. She identified a series of things<sup>20</sup> that seem to be common to most people:

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<sup>19</sup> Thompson, J. M. (2017). Veterans' identities and well-being in transition to civilian life – a resource for policy analysts, program designers, service providers and researchers: report of the Veterans' Identities Research Theme Working Group, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2016 / James M. Thompson ... [et al.]. (VAC Research Directorate technical report). P.E.I. : Veterans Affairs Canada. [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, J.M., Dursun, S., VanTil, L., Heber, A., Kitchen, P., deBoer, C., Black, T., Montelpare, B., Coady, T., Sweet, J., & Pedlar, D. (2019). Group identity, difficult adjustment to civilian life, and suicidal ideation in Canadian Armed Forces Veterans: Life After Service Studies 2016. Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health, 5(2), 100–114. [doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.2018-0038](https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.2018-0038)



Visualization and Translation – Veteran Hub, Based on the Work of Catherine de Boer

Therefore, at the beginning of service, there is a separation from civilian life and a gradual withdrawal from the civilian group to join the military, and after returning to civilian life, one must rejoin the group and acquire an identity almost anew.

For a successful transition, it is necessary to learn to identify positively with the civilian social group and integrate with this identity in such a way that it becomes an important part of the personality.<sup>21</sup>

**The development of new post-war identities that allow veterans to enjoy good well-being is seen as a key challenge in supporting the military in the transition from military to civilian status.**

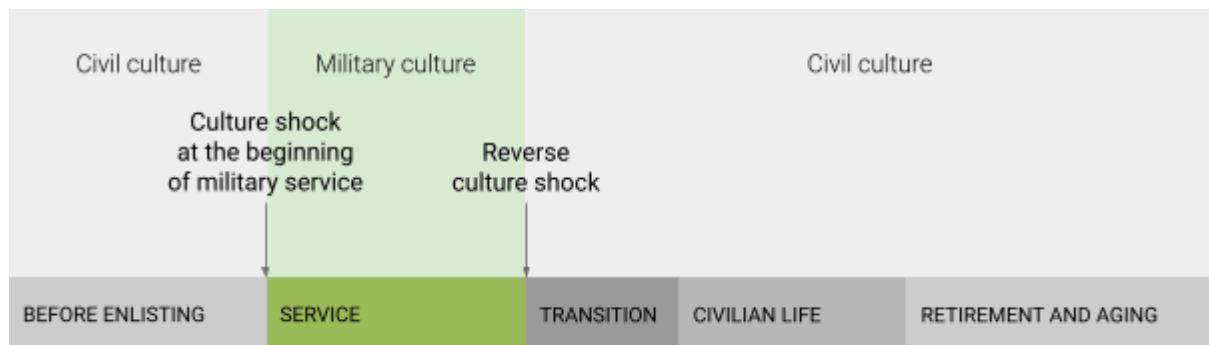
Military training and service reinforce military identities that serve well during service. Identity shifts that cannot be prevented after service impact veterans' well-being both psychologically and more generally. The end of service leads to challenges, such as: Where will I find a job? What is my purpose? Where will I get treatment? Who will help me? Where will I live?<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, J. M. (2017). Veterans' identities and well-being in transition to civilian life – a resource for policy analysts, program designers, service providers and researchers : report of the Veterans' Identities Research Theme Working Group, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2016 / James M. Thompson ... [et al.]. (VAC Research Directorate technical report). P.E.I. : Veterans Affairs Canada. [publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, J. M. (2017). Veterans' identities and well-being in transition to civilian life – a resource for

## MILITARY AND CIVILIAN CULTURE: CULTURAL ACCLIMATION/ACCULTURATION

Completion of service and return to civilian life also means a transition from military to civilian culture. In the life of the military, this transition will be at least the second and is considered a «reverse culture shock.»<sup>23</sup> A person faces the first culture shock<sup>24</sup> when he or she chooses to join the service.<sup>25</sup>



Habitual behavior and attitudes in civilian life do not always hold true during service. Regardless of whether people who join the army already share military values, they gradually integrate them into their everyday lives.

### What do we mean by the word «culture»?

There are many definitions of the word «culture», each of which is used in a different context. Culture is sometimes referred to as a kind of brain software.<sup>26</sup> Culture is always known and is inherently a group

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policy analysts, program designers, service providers and researchers : report of the Veterans' Identities Research Theme Working Group, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2016 / James M. Thompson ... [et al.]. (VAC Research Directorate technical report). P.E.I.: Veterans Affairs Canada. [publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Bergman, B. P., Burdett, H. J., & Greenberg, N. (2014). Service Life and Beyond – Institution or Culture? The RUSI Journal, 159(5), 60–68. [doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.969946](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.969946)

<sup>24</sup> Culture shock describes the complex feelings and stress that people experience when the cultural practices they have been using no longer apply in a new setting, prompting them to reflect on and adapt the coping skills that helped them thrive in one cultural context to another. (Raud, R. (2013). Mis on kultuur? Sissejuhatus kultuuriteooriasse. Tallinn, Estonia: Tallinna Ülikooli Kirjastus.)

<sup>25</sup> Castro, C. A., & Dursun, S. (2019). Military Veteran Reintegration. Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier.

<sup>26</sup> Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind (3rd ed.). McGraw Hill Professional.

phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> People are born, grow up, live and work in a certain social environment where they acquire knowledge that is commonly known and shared in that community. This includes not only the classical sciences, but also very basic skills of language and ethics, moral principles, norms and rules of behavior, everyday life and entertainment. This experience is layered throughout life, directly influencing our identity and making us who we are. The sources of this «software» lie not only in the environment where people grew up, but also in the places where they gained their life experience.<sup>28</sup> That is, by changing environments and living within them, people borrow unique characteristics from them that they later try to apply in other circumstances. This «software» allows us to assign meaning to loosely connected sets of manifestations, texts, and actions within our cultural environments, but for other people who have different cultural experiences, our environments may appear different or even meaningless.<sup>29</sup>

To work on veterans' journeys, we chose a fairly straightforward definition: **CULTURE** is a loosely connected set of manifestations, texts and customs that give meaning to the human environment.<sup>30</sup> **CULTURAL HABITS** are the actions that people take and participate in to create and preserve meaning.

### Transitioning between cultures

By changing the environment, a person makes a transition between cultures. It can be more or less striking, depending on how substantial the difference between cultures and their customs is. Military service takes place in a military culture that largely deviates from civilian norms

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<sup>27</sup> Cultural practices are the things that people do and actively participate in, creating meaning and maintaining meaning. Culture is always learned and essentially a group phenomenon. (Castro, C. A., & Dursun, S. (2019). Military Veteran Reintegration. Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier.)

<sup>28</sup> Raud 2013, quoted in Castro, C. A., & Dursun, S. (2019). Military Veteran Reintegration. Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Culture is a loosely tied set of representations, texts, and practices that give meaning to a person's environment (Castro, C. A., & Dursun, S. (2019). Military Veteran Reintegration. Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier)

and rules. At the end of the service, the soldier makes a transition from military culture to civilian one.

Returning from service consists of thousands of details, both major and minor, that need to be managed. For veterans, these details will include getting used to a new daily routine, changing diet and eating habits, choosing casual clothes and shoes, making new arrangements for the division of family responsibilities, choosing a civilian job, and much more. Thus, military personnel who are discharged from service are like newly arrived residents of their own country.<sup>31</sup>

Part of the difficulty stems from the difference between military and civilian values.<sup>32</sup> When fundamental ethics are questioned or attacked, «this causes moral outrage and makes it particularly difficult to channel identity change.»<sup>33</sup>

As with any acclimation, a person's transition between cultures takes time. However, if we are talking about getting used to new weather conditions or time zones, it is fair to say that it takes several days or weeks.

**When it comes to changing long-standing cultural habits, it is worth setting a realistic time frame that will be unique to each individual**

Although we cannot say how long the return to civilian life should take, from our years of experience we are talking about years and decades.

In present-day circumstances, the entire society in Ukraine is undergoing profound fundamental changes. The civilian life to which veterans will return after their service will be significantly different from the pre-war reality they were used to. And it is impossible to predict ahead of time what this civilian society will look like.

We can predict that some of the experiences of veterans will be more understandable and familiar to civilians, as a critical mass of Ukrainians

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<sup>31</sup> Castro, C. A., & Dursun, S. (2019). Military Veteran Reintegration. Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier

<sup>32</sup> Bar-Tal, D. (2000). Shared beliefs in a society: Social psychological analysis. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications Inc.

<sup>33</sup> Ehala, M. (2017). Signs of identity. Routledge: The anatomy of belonging.

have directly faced war and had at least partially similar experiences. We can also predict that the recognition of veterans' experience will be higher than before, as many civilians have experienced firsthand that a Ukrainian military is a defender, someone who saves lives by risking their own.

However, the clash of different cultures/experiences cannot be avoided. We should not idealize the unity of the military and civilians, because we will have to learn to coexist in that same society long after the war. Difficulties may arise in particular in the workplace, as competition in the labor market will be quite intense for a long time, and many civilian employers, despite their great respect for the military, have limited knowledge of how the military works, what functions and tasks military personnel perform, and what value their competencies can bring to civilian industries. We run the risk of once again encountering the harmful stereotype of employing veterans primarily out of respect or gratitude (charity employment) rather than recognizing their professional level and achievements, taking into account their service as work experience – a phenomenon we observed when working with veterans between 2018 and 2022.

However, the fact that the military also has a different economic structure is rarely given due attention. In plain language, the military is literally a socialist system that exists in most cases within a civilian culture that is capitalist. The army tries to provide for all the needs of its members (and to a lesser extent, their families). First of all, every person in the army has a job. However, in the civilian culture, employment is very individualistic. Unlike the military culture, which emphasizes teamwork, civilian culture recognizes individual accomplishments and qualities. This can lead to many military members perceiving civilian employment as a self-promotion, with a «man to man wolf» atmosphere. Many military roles do not have civilian equivalents, leaving the military members alone with employability challenges and a sense that civilians do not value their skills.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Castro, C. A., & Dursun, S. (2019). Military Veteran Reintegration. Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier

## Military culture in Ukraine and the world

Military culture is unique with its own set of characteristics that we need to understand in order to help enlisted individuals deal with the transition to civilian life.<sup>35</sup>

Although the difference is obvious, since 2014, there has been no comprehensive study of military culture in Ukraine and changes it underwent. In our opinion, the military culture in Ukraine is still being formed. Until 2014, military culture was based on the Soviet legacy and continuity of cultural traditions, which were carried forward by «old school» Afghanistan veterans and military members. This culture was characterized by the phenomena of hazing, seniority, tyranny of officers, and corruption which penetrated the entire military system - from the «captains» who would put on sale the Army property to generals who would build mansions and abuse their power.<sup>36</sup> Although the Ukrainian military took part in joint exercises and peacekeeping missions with Western armies, the number of such enlisted individuals exposed to Western military culture was critically low to bring up significant change in the Ukrainian military culture.<sup>37</sup>

With the beginning of the Revolution of Dignity, the armed forces became subject to the first moral confrontations. The fighting as a result of the Russian attack caused critical changes in the army within a few months, in particular due to the rapid mobilization of a lot of people who were not accustomed to that culture or even opposed to it. After a year of compulsory service, some of these people completed their military duties and moved to the operational reserve. In 2022, some of them rejoined the Army, while others signed contracts to continue their

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<sup>35</sup> Castro, C. A., & Dursun, S. (2019). Military Veteran Reintegration. Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier

<sup>36</sup> Ukrinform. (December 6, 2021). Збройні Сили України: від «радянської шинелі» до стрижня нації. Укрінформ – актуальні новини України та світу [Ukrinform (December 6, 2021). The Armed Forces of Ukraine: from the «Soviet Overcoat» to the Core of the Nation. Ukrinform - current news of Ukraine and the world].  
[ukrinform.ua/rubric-antifake/3363664-zbrojni-sili-ukraini-vid-radanskoi-sineli-do-strizna-nacii.html](https://ukrinform.ua/rubric-antifake/3363664-zbrojni-sili-ukraini-vid-radanskoi-sineli-do-strizna-nacii.html)

<sup>37</sup> Смолянчук, В. Ф. (2015). Мілітарна культура українського суспільства: історія і сучасність. Історико-політичні студії. Серія «Політичні науки» [Smolyanyuk, V. F. (2015). Military culture of Ukrainian society: history and modernity. Historical and Political Studies. Series «Political Sciences»], (2 (4)), 88–97.

service, thus having no break from service throughout the last decade. The Ukrainian military culture is a globally important phenomenon that needs to be studied further. Enlisted individuals with predominantly civilian experience became the driving force and provoked changes in the military culture, rather than vice versa – falling under the influence of the military culture when joining the army - this is the trend observed throughout the world.

In different countries, military cultures share certain common features, including the importance of collective rather than individualistic approach. The military group comes before the individual and brotherhood is reinforced by all possible means.<sup>38</sup> Military culture generally emphasizes qualities such as unity, discipline, good physical fitness, duty and sacrifice.<sup>39</sup>

However, military culture is permeated with values that may contradict our general perception of the military philosophy. The armed forces value restraint, humility, and peacefulness. The value of peace is manifested through the preservation of harmony, which in certain cases also means engaging in war to restore balance, while restraint means the use of lethal force only as a last resort. Obedience to orders should be seen not just as compliance with the rules, because only those orders that are just and morally justified should be obeyed, although cases of disobedience are rare.<sup>40</sup>

In the Ukrainian situation, we can identify two key groups of military personnel: career military with predominant life and professional experience through military service and education, and mobilized operational reserve personnel with extensive civilian experience before service. Nevertheless, the most enduring and meaningful ties between

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<sup>38</sup> Grimell, J. (2015). A transitional narrative of military identity: Eris's story. *International Journal for Dialogical Science*, 9(1), 135e157.

<sup>39</sup> Grimell, J. (2015). A transitional narrative of military identity: Eris's story. *International Journal for Dialogical Science*, 9(1), 135e157.; Rahbek-Clemmensen, J., Archer, E. M., Barr, J., Belkin, A., Guerrero, M., Hall, C., et al. (2012). Conceptualizing the Civil-Military Gap: A Research Note. *Armed Forces & Society*, 38(4), 669e678. [doi.org/10.1177/0095327X12456509](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X12456509)

<sup>40</sup> Coll, J. E., Weiss, E. L., & Yarvis, J. S. (2011). No one leaves unchanged: Insights for civilian mental health care professionals into the military experience and culture. *Social Work in Health Care*, 50(7), 487e500. [doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2010.528727](https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2010.528727).



the Ukrainian military are usually formed in combat situations. The mere emergence of friendly camaraderie and the association of oneself with one's group is key to the development of a military identity and one's own belonging to the army. The bonds that soldiers build among themselves often lead to a strong identity with their military community.<sup>41</sup>

Loyalty to the group and attaching one's identity to the military becomes one of the most difficult challenges in the transition to civilian life.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, strong bonds between colleagues often lead to distancing between the military and civilian worlds.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social Science Information*, 13(2), 65e93. [doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204](https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204).

<sup>42</sup> Definition of a veteran: the military viewed as a culture (Castro, C. A., & Dursun, S. (2019). *Military Veteran Reintegration*. Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier).

<sup>43</sup> Coll, J. E., Weiss, E. L., & Yarvis, J. S. (2011). No one leaves unchanged: Insights for civilian mental health care professionals into the military experience and culture. *Social Work in Health Care*, 50(7), 487e500. [doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2010.528727](https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2010.528727).

# Methodology

In 2019, Robert A. McDonald, the 8th Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, visited the Veteran Hub in Kyiv. During a meeting with civil society organizations, he spoke about how he and his team have been working to make government services veteran-friendly. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is a national organization that provides comprehensive support to more than 20 million U.S. veterans<sup>44</sup> - from Civil War veterans to veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq. It is an employer to more than 360,000 people accross all states.<sup>45</sup> There were cases where veterans could spend years on the waiting list to receive a service targeted at veterans. Some of them may have died while waiting, but their names continued to be on the waiting list.<sup>46</sup> The services provided for veterans were not veteran-friendly or easily accessible, therefore no more than 60% of veterans actually applied to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs<sup>47</sup>. The level of bureaucracy reached its peak, and the needs of older generations of veterans dictated all veteran policy, regardless of the veteran's age.

To understand the root of the problem and try to find a solution, Robert assembled a team of service design experts led by Sarah Brooks, who conducted an in-depth national study, visited every state, and interviewed more than 150 veterans. The result of their work was the Journeys of Veterans Map,<sup>48</sup> which was developed to illustrate the processes that happen to veterans after they return from service. This document helps to understand the needs of veterans at different stages of their lives. This map identifies key points of interaction between veterans, the

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<sup>44</sup> VA.gov | Veterans Affairs. (no date). VA.gov Home | Veterans Affairs. [va.gov/VETDATA/index.asp](https://va.gov/VETDATA/index.asp)

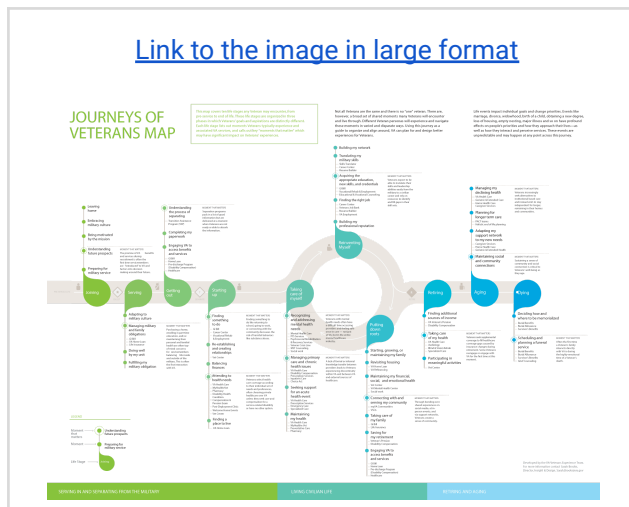
<sup>45</sup> The Challenges Facing the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2021. (no date). CAP. [americanprogress.org/article/challenges-facing-department-veterans-affairs-2021](https://americanprogress.org/article/challenges-facing-department-veterans-affairs-2021)

<sup>46</sup> UATV English. (August 7, 2019). Robert A. McDonald Shares American Experience in Shaping State Policy for Veterans [Bideo]. YouTube: [youtube.com/watch?v=lkufounybMg](https://youtube.com/watch?v=lkufounybMg)

<sup>47</sup> The National Press Club. (November 7, 2024). Robert A. McDonald speaks at the National Press Club – Nov. 7, 2014 [Bideo]. YouTube: [youtube.com/watch?v=lyz2ebRUzVY](https://youtube.com/watch?v=lyz2ebRUzVY)

<sup>48</sup> Journeys of Veterans Map. (no date). VA.gov Home | Veterans Affairs. [va.gov/ve/docs/journey-map-veteran-2016.pdf](https://va.gov/ve/docs/journey-map-veteran-2016.pdf)

administration and service providers and offers solutions to improve the veteran experience.



This map is not unique. Mapping a client's experience has its roots in business and marketing. It is a strategic tool that allows you to analyze and depict the processes that occur during the interaction between the customers and service providers.

In researching the veteran experience, numerous teams from different countries have developed their own versions of the veterans' journeys. For example, in the UK, a document titled, «Three Stages of Change»<sup>49</sup> was developed, the main focus of which is the emotional component during the veterans' transition to civilian life.



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Based on the Work of Headquarters Support Command, Vince Connelly

According to the authors, the model proposed by Brooks is one of the most detailed and comprehensive.

The Veteran Hub team, together with IREX, undertook to repeat the analysis based on the Journeys of Veterans Map and outline the Ukrainian Veterans' Journeys. However, while in the United States, the

<sup>49</sup> Information Sheet 2 «The emotional pathway.» (no date). Y Transition to Civilian Life. Headquarters Support Command

team of authors analyzed primarily the points of intersection between the client and the Department, in the Ukrainian case, **we reversed the task and decided to first analyze what is happening in the lives of veterans, and then check whether the existing services meet their needs.**

First, we analyzed the original version of the map and made assumptions about the processes and needs that Ukrainian veterans may experience at each stage of their journey. We tested these assumptions through focus groups with female and male ATO/JFO veterans. All focus groups took place at the Veteran Hub in Kyiv and were moderated by a team of a psychologist and a veteran. Based on the results of the focus groups and with the support of the authors of the original version of the map, in November 2020, the Veteran Hub together with IREX presented an adapted basic Ukrainian version of the Journeys of Veterans.<sup>50</sup>

From 2020 to 2022, a number of projects were based on the study of the Veterans' Journeys and the needs identified in it, including: It's OK<sup>51</sup>, HR Praktyka,<sup>52</sup> and Guidelines for Primary Care Physicians.<sup>53</sup> We integrated the Journeys of Veterans as a mandatory component of the training program for Veteran Hub staff and continued to receive feedback from veterans, military personnel, their families, and stakeholders regarding the importance of this material. The Veterans' Journeys served as a tool to translate veteran experience to those who were seeking to support them. We were able to explain in simple language what happens after returning from war and help those who wish to become more useful in supporting veterans.

In 2021, we decided to deepen our understanding of the Veterans' Journeys and, together with IREX, developed a methodology for conducting in-depth interviews with veterans. This methodology was

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<sup>50</sup> Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social Science Information*, 13(2), 65e93. [doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204](https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204).

<sup>51</sup> Educational Platform It's OK. (no date). Veteran Hub. [tseok.com.ua](https://tseok.com.ua)

<sup>52</sup> Praktyka. (no date). Veteran Hub. [veteranhub.com.ua/employment/hr-praktyka](https://veteranhub.com.ua/employment/hr-praktyka)

<sup>53</sup> Guidelines for working with veteran patients and combatants (2021). IREX, VeteranHub, INgenius. [ingeniusua.org/sites/default/files/other\\_file/veteran-1\\_0.pdf](https://ingeniusua.org/sites/default/files/other_file/veteran-1_0.pdf)

based on understanding the veteran demographics formed by the results of the IREX Veteran Reintegration Study (2021).<sup>54</sup>

**The purpose of the study is to record and analyze the experiences of Ukrainian veterans.** It appears extremely useful when mapping directions and ways to facilitate the return of veterans to civilian life.

**The objectives of the study are:**

- 1. Identify the stages** that Ukrainian veterans go through after completing their service (stages of the Veterans' Journeys).
- 2. Identify the specifics of each stage** of the Journeys and the life events that accompany a particular stage, as well as the challenges and needs at each stage and how they can be overcome.
- 3. Based on the information obtained, create the Journeys of Veterans Map** in Ukraine.
- 4. Identify the components** of veterans' well-being after completion of military service and at the stage of return.
- 5. Develop recommendations** for public policy design on reintegration of the target audience and improvement of their quality of life.

We chose a qualitative method for the research design. The method of data collection is in-depth semi-structured interviews. The main advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as formalized surveys, which is important for an exploratory study such as ours.<sup>55</sup> In-depth interviews are an effective qualitative research tool for getting the full perspective of the

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<sup>54</sup> How policymakers can support the veteran community in Ukraine: Results from a veteran reintegration survey (no date). IREX.

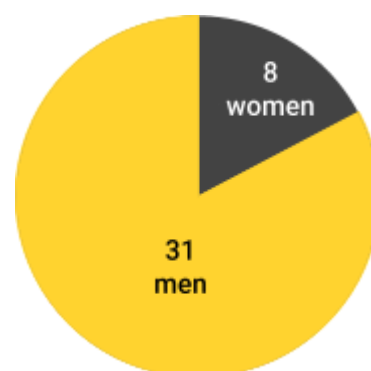
[irex.org/insight/how-policymakers-can-support-veteran-community-ukraine-results-veteran-reintegration-survey](https://irex.org/insight/how-policymakers-can-support-veteran-community-ukraine-results-veteran-reintegration-survey)

<sup>55</sup> Swedberg, R. (2018). On the Uses of Exploratory Research and Explanatory Studies. In J. Gerring, C. Elman, & J. Mahoney (Eds.), *Producing Knowledge*. Retrieved from <http://people.soc.cornell.edu/swedberg/On%20the%20Uses%20of%20Exploratory%20Research%20and%20Exploratory%20Studies%20in%20Social%20Science.pdf>

respondent.<sup>56</sup> They can also provide a more relaxed atmosphere for collecting information – people may feel more comfortable talking to you about their experiences.<sup>57</sup>

The target group of the study is veteran women and men who served in the war between 2014 and 2021. This study covers the experience of Ukrainian veterans before the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion.

The study involved 39 female and male veterans with different gender and age distribution: eight women and 31 men aged 25 to 63. The interviews were conducted from July 2021 to February 2022. Respondents were recruited through the dissemination of information on the Veteran Hub's client database and social media pages through Google Forms. The sampling criteria were as follows: mandatory inclusion of both genders; different time intervals after completing their service to cover different stages of the veterans' journeys.



The interviews were conducted in Kyiv, Vinnytsia and Dnipro, cities where Veteran Hub spaces were operating at the time of the interview. These cities were chosen due to their accessibility, as well as data sensitivity and availability of appropriate space for interviews. A total of 60 interviews were conducted. However, after the outbreak of the full-scale Russian invasion, the staff of the Dnipro branch of the Veteran Hub destroyed 21 of their interview recordings for security reasons. This left 39 interviews to analyze.

The interviewers were trained by IREX specialists. The interviewers were Veteran Hub employees who worked as case managers or had

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<sup>56</sup> Packer, M. J. (2018). The Qualitative Research Interview. In *The Science of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., pp. 56–70). Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/science-of-qualitative-research/4BB8F074ACDD0CC27A53935761129C9A>

<sup>57</sup> Boyce, C. and Neale, P. (2006) *Conducting In-Depth Interview: A Guide for Designing and Conducting In-Depth Interviews for Evaluation Input*. Pathfinder International Tool Series, Monitoring and Evaluation-2. [pathfind.org/site/DocServer/m\\_e\\_tool\\_series\\_indepth\\_interviews.pdf?docID=6301](https://pathfind.org/site/DocServer/m_e_tool_series_indepth_interviews.pdf?docID=6301)

psychological education at the time, as they understood the specifics of communicating with a group of veterans.

The data collected from the in-depth interviews were analyzed through coding in the MAXQDA software environment. Based on the coding, a thematic analysis was performed.

Since the study took place during the ongoing war, this analysis centers on service directly related to participation of soldiers in the war.

Although veteran status can also be obtained in peacetime through participation in peacekeeping missions in other countries, our analysis focuses only on service during the war in Ukraine.

During their service, soldiers can perform different tasks and jobs: some participate in combat missions, some provide logistics, while others perform other tasks at headquarters or in the rear. We hypothesize that a variety of work activities may produce different impacts on a person's experience and trajectory. However, in the study we did not distinguish between these experiences, and all of our respondents had combat experience.

### **Study limitations**

1. The study is non-representative, so we cannot assert the prevalence of any particular experience and do not aim to generalize the experience of veterans. This study shows the diversity of veterans' experiences and the stages that soldiers go through. Yet, we believe that in the future, studies should be conducted at the national level to examine specific topics and trends.
2. Our study focuses on the post-service stages, so the pre-service and service stages receive less attention and, consequently, less information about these stages.
3. The study respondents are veterans who are involved with the Veteran Hub. The respondents were selected based on the Veteran Hub's client base and social media pages. Such a method of data collection and distribution of the application form for participation

in the study could have led to the fact that the Respondents were primarily urban residents and people who are more actively involved with veterans' NGOs. This made it impossible to study the experiences of veterans living in rural areas or those who are not active members of veterans' networks and organizations.

4. Our research had a geographical limitation: we focused on three cities only – Dnipro, Vinnytsia, and Kyiv – where we could ensure confidentiality and security. However, after the outbreak of the full-scale Russian invasion, as a result of the security situation, Dnipro interviews were lost and only the interview recordings from Kyiv and Vinnytsia were preserved.
5. In the study, we considered all the veterans as one group and did not identify subgroups such as soldiers with injuries or soldiers who were prisoners of war. Our respondents include people with different stories, but all of them were considered altogether, without breakdown into subgroups. To complement the Journeys of Veterans research, separate studies may be conducted to explore lived experience of various subgroups within the veterans' group.
6. We did not investigate in detail the stages of retirement, aging, dying and death. We believe it would be worthwhile to conduct a separate research to explore these stages in the journeys of veterans. This would enable the policy makers to develop a better understanding of veterans' needs and challenges across different stages of their lives. In this way, we can make sure veterans live with dignity at any stage of life.
7. Our research mostly describes positive trajectories of the veteran's journey to show veterans finding strength and support despite difficulties, integrating with their communities after return from service and taking care of the quality of their life. We almost never describe negative journeys, when a veteran did not integrate and therefore exhibited deviant behavior, such as addictive behavior. We recognize the importance of describing and researching



negative trajectories to prevent veterans from isolation upon return, deterioration of their health or well-being, or mental health complications. In certain cases, all the above may even result in suicide. In the meantime, our document describes the challenges, obstacles and needs of veterans. If we keep them in focus while creating opportunities to support veterans on their way back, we can prevent negative trajectories.

8. Within the framework of this study, interviews were conducted before the full-scale invasion. Therefore, they do not present the experience of returning soldiers after the full-scale invasion. Yet, considering that returning is a natural process, we assume that general stages would be the same, but the circumstances would be different. Detailing each of these stages and processes is key to designing a meaningful support system for veterans today. A similar study should be conducted to collect relevant information on the specifics of the Journeys of Veterans after 2022.

## **Ethical Principles**

During the study, we were guided by the current legislation on the «Principles of Respect for Human Dignity» and the Veteran Hub's Code of Ethics. When collecting, storing and analyzing information, we were guided by the principles of confidentiality and voluntary participation on the part of the respondents. All respondents were informed about the study's purpose and objectives. The study used consent forms, and all respondents voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. In addition, all data obtained during the interviews and their subsequent analysis are confidential, so all quotes are anonymized to prevent the respondents from being identified. The transcripts did not contain any personal data that would allow the respondents to be identified.

All interviewers were trained prior to the interviews and were introduced to the ethical principles of interviewing.

# Journeys of Veterans: Key Findings

The journey of a veteran begins with his or her decision to join the service. In fact, the veteran's journey is a continuation of the journey of a warrior. Each person follows his or her own path and overcomes challenges.

In this section, we summarize the key findings of our research and provide a brief overview of the Journeys of Veterans. These findings represent our professional judgment based on the testimonies of our respondents. No two veterans are the same, and each person will experience these stages in their own way. That being said, many points are common to many veterans we interviewed. This journey does not analyze personal factors – a person's life is influenced by many factors that do not always depend on combat and service experience: marriage or ending a relationship, having children, developing illnesses, accidents, loss of loved ones and other events can happen to any person at any stage of the journey.

Despite all the challenges and barriers that stand in their way, veterans are mostly able to cope with them and successfully rebuild their civilian lives. However, support is important at every stage of the journey and should be available when veterans need it.

## **The journeys of veterans in Ukraine unfolding while the war is still ongoing**

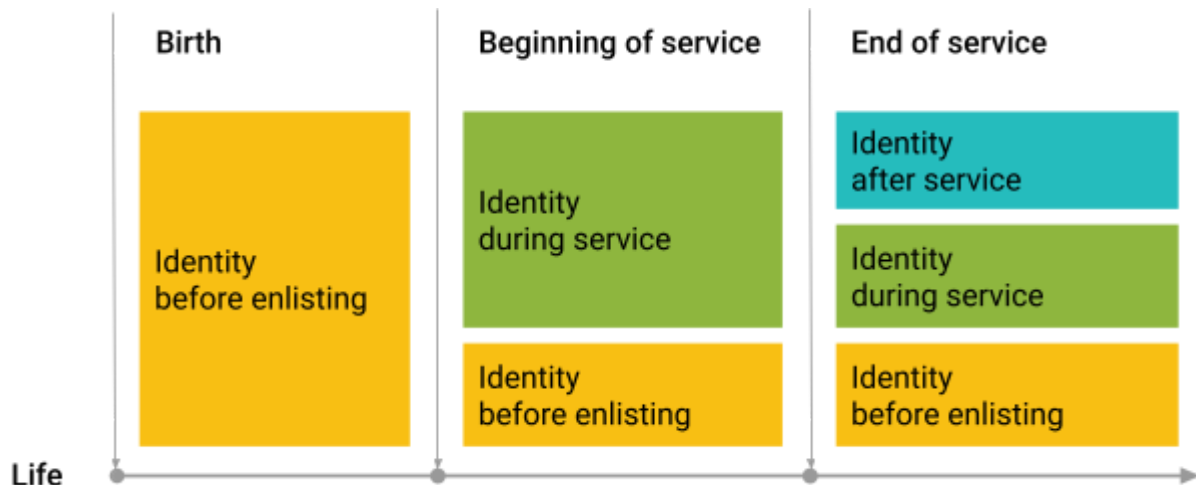
The journeys of veterans fall under the influence of important historical and background factors: the service phase overlaps with the war phase, that is, service during the war to defend the soldiers' country and their own territory. That essentially means that the end of service and return also occur when the war is not over. This affects the consequences and the trajectory of the journey. Readiness to serve even after completion of service indicates that a person understands and is mentally ready to return to war, and this affects the return.

Ultimately, the study of veterans' experience makes warriors for independence visible. To study and meet the real needs of veteran women and men is one of the ways to express our gratitude to the defenders of Ukraine.

### **War is a part of soldiers' lives, but it is not their whole life**

Little is known about the pre-service experience of ATO/JFO veterans, and although we asked questions about this in the survey, we were able to collect memories and interpretations that may have changed over time rather than facts. However, we have noticed that different experiences of civilian life before service lead to different expectations at later stages and are reflected in the decisions and behavior of soldiers. Studying pre-service experiences is an important aspect in analyzing the veteran's journey.

A person's identity is not static, and it is influenced by the entire set of experiences they acquire. We recorded the changes that veterans noticed in themselves during and after their service.



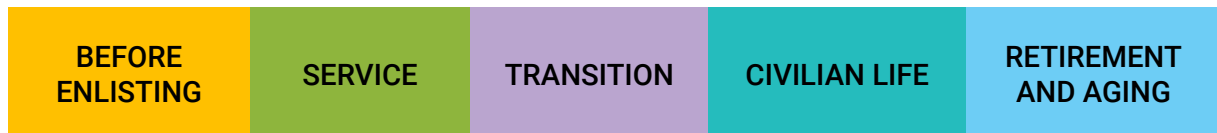
Visualizing the change of veterans' identity<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Thompson, J. M. (2017). Veterans' identities and well-being in transition to civilian life – a resource for policy analysts, program designers, service providers and researchers : report of the Veterans' Identities Research Theme Working Group, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2016 / James M. Thompson ... [et al.]. (VAC Research Directorate technical report). P.E.I. : Veterans Affairs Canada. [publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf)

## **No two veterans are the same and each journey is unique in its own way**

Nevertheless, we managed to identify and confirm the stages of the journey, their components, important moments and processes that Ukrainian veterans faced after completion of their service. This analysis enabled us to identify the needs of veterans at each stage of their lives.

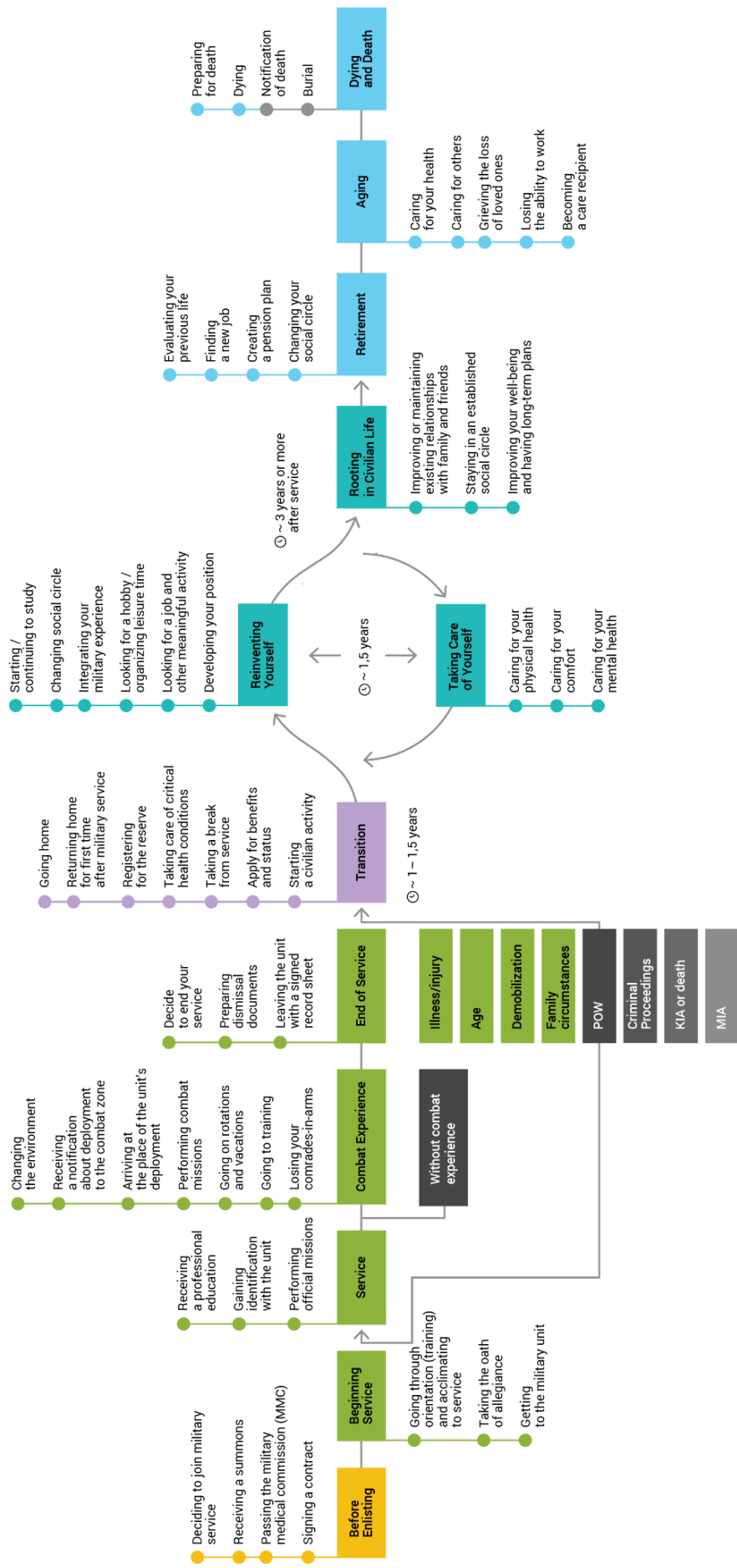
### **We identify five key phases of a veteran's journey:**



### **Once they make a decision to join the service, they are united by their common experience.**

Each phase contains several stages, each of them outlining a certain veteran's experience. Depending on the format of service completion, we assume that the further journey may vary and require detailed study. Yet, we observed that the experience of veterans who completed their service due to injury and then started civilian life in hospitals and rehabilitation centers was not drastically dissimilar from that of other veterans, but rather took place in a different environment. Therefore, it is important to consider the environment in which veterans will go through on their journey.

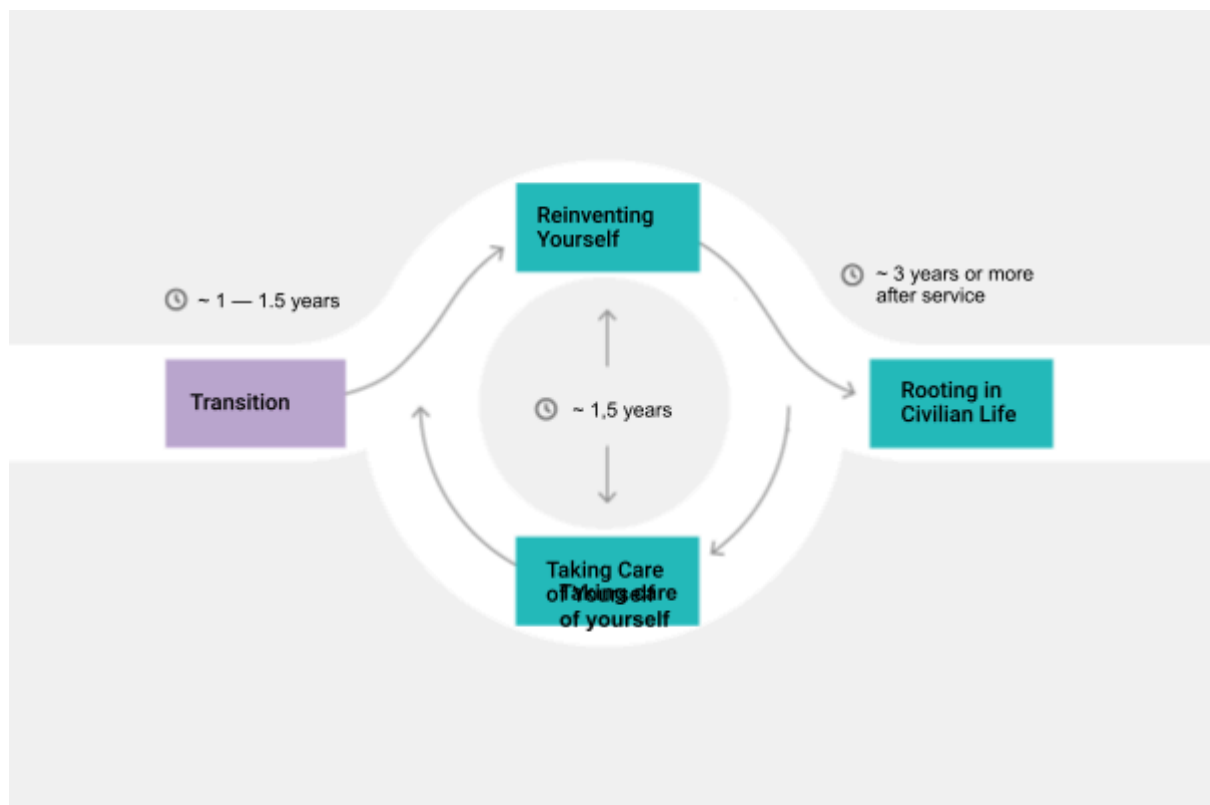
# Journeys of veterans during the war



## Returning to civilian life takes time

There is no definitive timeframe for a veteran's journey, and each individual will follow their own path at their own pace. However, we found that after service in the ATO/JFO, Ukrainian veterans typically needed up to one and a half years for the transition phase to feel part of the civilian world again, and at least another one and a half years to take care of themselves and reinvent themselves. Thus, rooting in civilian life, a state in which veterans felt confident enough to plan their lives in the longer term and had enough support in civilian life, occurred at least three years after completing their service.

Once there is an understanding of a stage to stage duration, this can help to offer relevant and well-timed services to meet the veterans' needs.



## Time and planning horizon are different at each stage

During war, soldiers have a vague idea of their future and focus on actions and tasks that help them survive here and now. Once civilian life begins, their planning horizons broaden, but this does not happen

overnight. The ability to plan for the long term and to stick to one's plans are among the signs of rooting in civilian life.

### **Age can affect the veteran's journey**

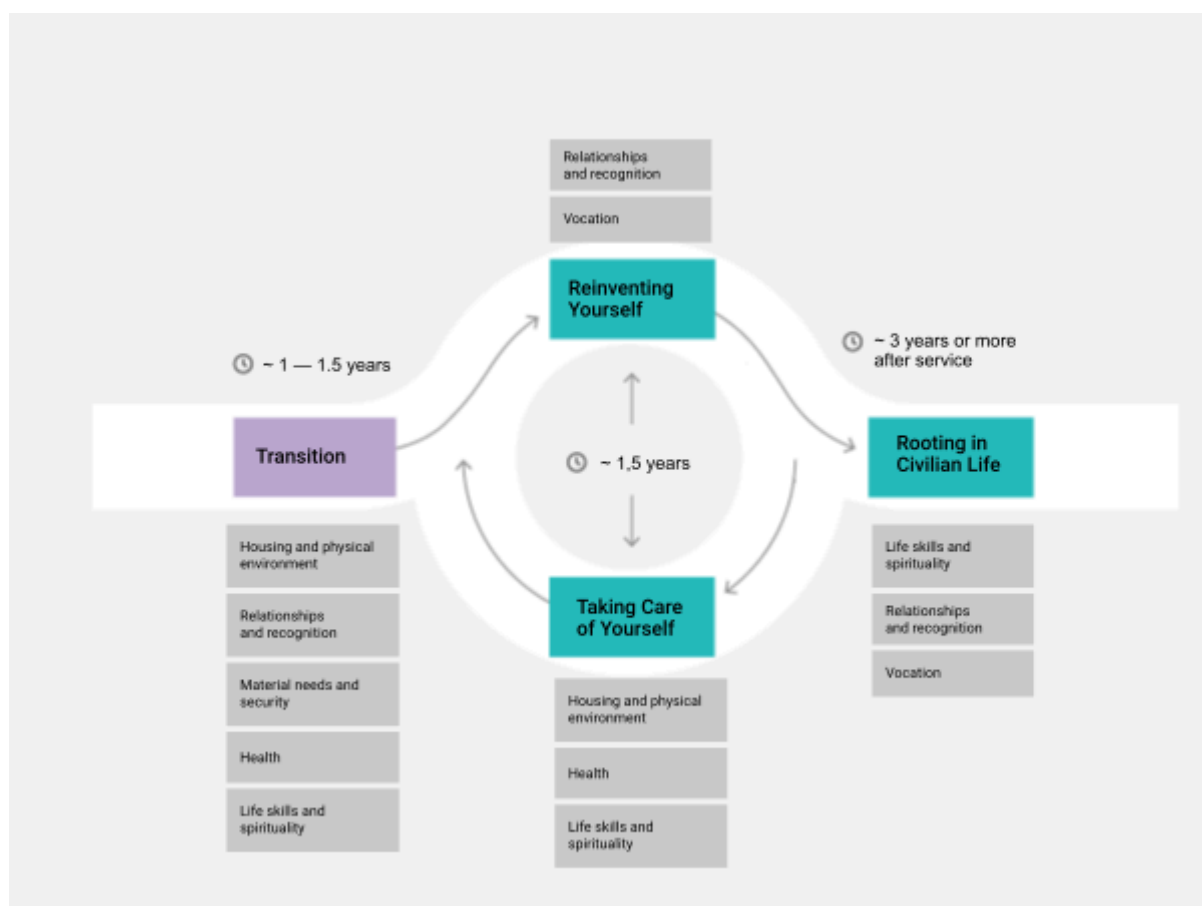
Ukrainian veterans represent a wide age range, including those for whom service was the first independent experience in their adult life and those who complete their service in their senior years. Previous life circumstances and the specifics of age affect how veterans experience returning and what challenges they face. Returning may be overlapping in time with the aging process.

### **There are positive and negative trajectories**

A positive trajectory is possible if a veteran receives sufficient support and understanding and enjoys a high standard of living in his or her life. Yet, we recorded cases when veterans did not even begin to move on their journey for almost three years. Further research is needed to identify the reasons and risks for positive and negative trajectories, as well as to understand ways to support and prevent negative consequences of return.

### **Well-being is important throughout the veteran's journey**

At each stage, we tried to identify all the factors of well-being and analyze how they are manifested in the lives of veterans. We noticed that the attitudes towards veterans' well-being and needs differed at each stage. Each stage was also characterized by certain priority areas of well-being.



A high level of well-being along the way can help veterans. The study emphasizes that strong social ties, including family, well-being, and pre-service experience produce a significant impact over the process of returning. This is also supported by international research. At the same time, this is a qualitative study, and further research is needed to confirm and validate this hypothesis among Ukrainian soldiers, and to explore the impacts and relationships.

### **Veterans walk their own path, but they do not walk alone**

Support on the veteran's journey comes from many people around him or her, not just dedicated professionals and government agencies. Family, significant others, friends, commanders, siblings, colleagues, peers, and friends are not an exhaustive list of those who influence the veteran experience, either positive or negative. Relationships with others are important throughout the journey, and the ability to build sustainable connections is one of the signs of rooting in civilian life.



## **Military service during wartime has a lasting impact on the lives and well-being of veterans**

Support and understanding are critical at every stage of the journey, no less important at the end of the journey. Aging and retirement, dying and death are equally significant periods that should be given due attention in a separate study.

In the following sections, we outline each of the stages of the journey and draw our own conclusions.

# Before Enlisting



Service

Transition

Civilian Life

Retirement and Aging

- Deciding to join military service
- Receiving a summons
- Passing the military medical commission (MMC)
- Signing a contract

**Before Enlisting**



**BEFORE ENLISTING**

Where do warriors come from?<sup>59</sup> Every person is born and raised in civilian society, and before starting service, they gain significant life experience, build the foundation of their identity, worldview, and life. Military service and war are a part of a soldier's life, but not their entire life.

Formally, all men under the age of 60, as well as women with appropriate education, are obliged to perform military service.<sup>60</sup> Defense of Ukraine is the responsibility of the entire Ukrainian people, according to Article 17 of the Constitution of Ukraine. In reality, since 2014, military service has become more than an obligatory duty. Some people evade it, while others join the service in a proactive manner, either under contract or as volunteers.

After the shooting of the Heavenly Hundred, Russia illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula, temporarily occupied large areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and launched a many-year war against Ukraine. In 2014, the regular Army of Ukraine was not ready to defend the country from the aggressor, so Ukrainians began to join volunteer units en masse, and the government resorted to partial mobilization of the population to staff the ATO units. Those were people who had no previous service experience (or those with conscript service experience), who had led civilian lives before the invasion, were building careers, and most often had no plans to serve in the military.

That is to say that the Ukrainian soldiers were civilians who, until recently, were distinguished from other citizens only by their respect for duty and determination to join the service.

When the Anti-Terrorist Operations/ Joint Forces Operations began, it became obvious that the data collection system regarding Ukrainian military personnel was outdated. Military registration and enlistment offices did not have digital data records, and the information they recorded about the servicemen and servicewomen at the beginning of

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<sup>59</sup> According to the law, the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations such as the Territorial Defense Forces (TD), the National Guard of Ukraine (NGU), Main Directorate of Intelligence (MDI), the Special Operations Forces are staffed through conscription or contractual employment.

<sup>60</sup> On Military Duty and Military Service, Law of Ukraine Number 2232-XII (2023) (Ukraine).  
[zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text)

their service was often flawed.<sup>61</sup> Existing studies consolidate retrospective views of the military and veterans over their past, which may have been distorted by time. We do not have reliable data to create a portrait of a Ukrainian soldier and his or her life before enlisting, and therefore we can only make assumptions on some events in their life at later stages of their service.

If we consider the life experience of Ukrainian veterans before they begin service, we can better understand their life circumstances and their motivation to join the military. **International experience shows that you may be in a position to identify the likelihood of a serviceman or a servicewoman running into significant difficulties after service, if you consider their life experience before enlisting.**<sup>62</sup>

But what do we know about ATO/JFO veterans?<sup>63</sup> First of all, ATO/JFO veterans probably represent all segments of the population, but they are mostly quite mature people who have acquired significant cultural competencies, organized their own lives, and built up a certain resource and social capital.

According to the IREX Veteran Reintegration Study (2021), the average age of veterans in 2020 was 39, meaning that most started serving between the ages of 33 and 38. And the main age group of ATO/JFO veterans at the time of service was between 18 and 44 years old,<sup>64</sup> but there were also many people from other age groups,<sup>65</sup> and in some

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<sup>61</sup> Ukrainian Paper Army. How the document flow in the Armed Forces works and what to do about it. Scans. (2016, March 24). Articles and data journalism for people – Texty.org.ua. [texty.org.ua/articles/66282/Ukrajinska\\_Paperova\\_Armija\\_Jak\\_pracuje\\_dokumentoobig\\_u-66282](https://texty.org.ua/articles/66282/Ukrajinska_Paperova_Armija_Jak_pracuje_dokumentoobig_u-66282)

<sup>62</sup> Thompson, J. M. (2017). Veterans' identities and well-being in transition to civilian life – a resource for policy analysts, program designers, service providers and researchers : report of the Veterans' Identities Research Theme Working Group, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2016 / James M. Thompson ... [et al.]. (VAC Research Directorate technical report). P.E.I. : Veterans Affairs Canada. [publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> In this study, we asked respondents only about their experience before serving in the ATO/JFO.

<sup>64</sup> Reintegration of ATO and JFO Veterans (SCORE Ukraine Analytical Report) (2022). Identifying and overcoming challenges using the social cohesion and reconciliation index (score) in Ukraine. [api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/REP\\_DGEUkr21\\_Vets-Report\\_FIN\\_UKR.pdf](https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/REP_DGEUkr21_Vets-Report_FIN_UKR.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> According to part one of paragraph seven of Article 22 of the Law of Ukraine «On Military Duty and Military Service,» during the special period, the age limit for military service for military ranks under a senior officer is 60 years, and for senior officers – 65 years.

cases, in particular among members of volunteer formations, there were much older groups who had long passed the age limit for service.

The decision to join the military is a common experience that unites them and influences their entire lives.

*«And I went back to work as a driver, and it was 2008, and drivers were paid well then ... I traveled all over Ukraine, and I can say the salary was good.» – Male Respondent 14.*

*«At the time of my conscription, I had my own business, which was quite good. I was doing my own business, which gave me some income.» – Female Respondent 23.*

*«I: And before enlisting, did you have a job?*

*R: Yes, I did, I guarded a pond.» – Male Respondent 35.*

Although the motivation to serve is a private matter and can differ significantly for each individual, based on the experience of Veteran Hub counseling, we can assume that the lack of previous combat experience, patriotism and the desire to protect loved ones were common characteristics of ATO/JFO servicemen<sup>66</sup>.

*«The war changed my life, because I did not plan to serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine before these terrible events unfolded, which are still going on in eastern Ukraine.» – Female Respondent 23.*

**Based on the interviews with respondents, we identified the following types of reasons to begin service with the ATO/JFO:**

- **Volunteers**

Those who joined volunteer formations after the beginning of the ATO/JFO.

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<sup>66</sup> The interview took place before the full-scale invasion. – Editor's Note.

*«I tell everyone that I was drafted by the military enlistment office. I was called by the war... I consider myself a patriot of my country, and I have always believed and still believe that it is my duty to defend my homeland.» – Female Respondent 23.*

- **Mobilization**

Those who joined the service during mobilization.

*«Well... my wife had a hard time letting me go at first, because I actually went to the military commissariat when I was mobilized and wrote to her from the military commissariat.» – Male Respondent 20.*

- **Belonging to a military unit**

Career military, first- and second-line operational reserve members, those who had military experience and/or were in the military before the war started in 2014.

*«You know, I have a little bit of a unique experience. Because this is the second war. After Afghanistan...» – Male Respondent 32.*

*«Before the war, I did conscript service, and after my conscript service, I got my first contract, which is my first experience of being a contract soldier in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. After that, there was a break, probably five years, I was at home, doing all sorts of things, and then the war started. And in the second wave of mobilization, I volunteered, came to the military enlistment office, wrote a report, passed a medical examination, and went to defend Ukraine.» – Male Respondent 24.*

Among the respondents, we can distinguish those who dreamed of becoming a military man and those who never thought about it:

*«R: ...I've been playing with toy guns since I was a kid and I had a dream of becoming a soldier...*

*I: Maybe someone in the family was in the military...*

*R: There was no one, I don't remember what book we read, it was just written there, it was just like this, these people are born for war, it was just like this...» – Male Respondent 26.*

*«R: Well, I cultivated this in myself before enlisting, because I knew that when I turned 18 I would go to serve in the Armed Forces.*

*I: How did you know that? Did you dream about it or was there someone in your family?*

*R: I dreamed about it.*

*I: Yeah, you dreamed about it, and you were working towards it.*

*R: Yeah, I've been dreaming about it since school, that's it. And so I gradually prepared myself for military service.» – Male Respondent 27.*

Each of these groups has its own experience, motivation, and way of getting involved in the war. People with military experience and professional military members perceive their participation in the war as part of their job. Volunteers – mentioned their service as a «call of the heart» to defend the homeland against Russia's aggression. During the interviews, they said that they were ready to defend the country again if necessary. Although there is a stereotype<sup>67</sup> that mobilized soldiers were less motivated to serve, this is not confirmed by the research data. Some respondents were dissuaded from participating in the war or were told about the possibility of «getting off,» but they joined the ranks anyway. Regardless of circumstances at the beginning, every soldier made a personal decision to serve. Whether it is through mobilization or conscription, the moment when a person realizes that the service is inevitable, his or her journey begins in which their new identity is created – a warrior. Everyone will have their own story about this important moment, their own motivation and their own experiences. And although the beginning of service, as well as the whole further path, is very individual, once the decision is made, the life of a soldier changes quickly and dramatically.

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<sup>67</sup> Stepaniuk, N. (2022). Wartime Civilian Mobilization: Demographic Profile, Motivations, and Pathways to Volunteer Engagement Amidst the Donbas War in Ukraine. *Nationalities Papers*, 1–18. doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.82



*«To be honest, I was 27 years old... I came to the Sviatoshyno military enlistment office in 2014 and was told by a colonel: "Your time hasn't come yet, no matter how long you've been serving and you don't even know what a machine gun is. When the time comes, you will go." And then it was the end of 2016, the beginning of 2017... I came to the military enlistment office and said, "Take me to the service. At that time, many of my friends were there..."» – Male Respondent 15.*

*«And then, basically, my fate was such that I went to the ATO, that's how it was. Although my friends are there from the church: "Let's get you out of this, that's all." I said: "No. I can't do that." But then I did, and even then, my wife only knew that I left on my own. How could it be... We argued, I was mad that they didn't give me a summons, I came for a summons.» – Male Respondent 36.*

We have to address the issue about the impact of the Maidan events on respondents and their attitudes and decisions to join the military. Some veterans say that it was the events of the Revolution of Dignity that impacted their values and decision to participate in the war.

*«On the one hand, why did I go there? I was sitting at my place... well, besides the fact that I was on the Maidan and saw what was happening there ... but... My grandfather was in World War I, my father took part in World War II, so I needed to... also... Because you have to think... Well, first of all, not for ourselves, but for Ukraine to be independent.» – Male Respondent 34.*

For some respondents, being a volunteer in the security and defense forces helped them to prepare for the military service. Volunteering became widespread after the beginning of the ATO/JFO.

*«To begin with , before ... Before I made the choice to serve in the military, really, I worked as an employee of the Armed Forces. Well, at first. This is my way to military service. This is volunteering. It was the Maidan, supporting families, a lot of volunteer work, especially psychological work .» – Female Respondent 25.*

*«Actually, I wasn't worried. Here, perhaps, I need to go back a little more. I have two university diplomas, a bachelor's degree and a master's degree, on the topic of international conflicts. And so at the beginning, when I started this topic at the bachelor's level, and the Maidan began at the end of the year thirteenth, in the year fourteenth we had the Maidan, and I participated in all this as a volunteer. So it was familiar to me. I was constantly watching the news, videos, and it kind of hurt me. In the year '16, I defended my dissertation for my master's degree, just to continue the same topic, and after a while, realizing that my husband had left [for the Army], I somehow wanted to be close, and the only option I found for myself was to sign a contract. Back then, in the year '22, I thought I was as ready as I could be, as it turned out a little later – not as ready as I could be, but in principle it wasn't some kind of tragedy or stress, it was easy. I mean, I understood where I was going. It was like that.» – Female Respondent 18.*

Military service fundamentally changes a person's life and way of life of their family. Accepting these changes is a challenge for both the military and their environment.<sup>68</sup> Gaining the approval and support of loved ones was important for the veterans we interviewed at the beginning of their journey, but sometimes they faced misunderstanding and alienation from their partner or fathers and mothers.

Some respondents said that they faced their family's rejection as regards their decision or choice to join the Army. Sometimes relationships improve during the service, but for some, relationships deteriorate.

*«Well... my wife had a hard time letting me go at first, because I actually went to the military commissariat when I was mobilized and wrote to her from the military commissariat... that I was being mobilized. It was, like, a surprise for her, and... then my family was trying to pull me back, and I... and I actively resisted it. And the first months I was there, or rather a month and a half, while I was in the training, our communication on the phone reached the point when she was saying: "Come back, take the children, I don't want to do anything with you... and I don't want to raise*

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<sup>68</sup> Study of the unique experience of military and veterans' partners «The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved One» (Analytical Report). (no date) Veteran Hub. <https://bit.ly/3Q070Tg>

*children with you there.” But then, gradually, my family eventually accepted all this, and when I got to the sector, to the ATO, I already had the support of my family there, through correspondence, text messages with my wife, even letters to each other, we would send them by Nova Poshta whenever possible. When I came back, everyone was waiting for me.» – Male Respondent 20.*

*«Only recently, we resumed communication with my mother. Before that... It was hard. Let's just say that she was not ready for the fact that she, as she says, gave birth to girls and they were taken away to war. For her, let's just say, my behavior was wrong, atypical. She said, “You shouldn't have done that.» – Female Respondent 19.*

*«The kids were small at the time. By the way, my youngest child was less than two years old when I signed the contract. But that didn't stop me. The children took it well, it was all right for them. They understood me and my choice. But my husband did not understand me... and this led to the breakup of our relationship.*

*I: So... You divorced, right?*

*R: Yes.» – Female Respondent 23.*

Some respondents, having decided to join the service, did not want their family to worry, so they did not tell them about their decision:

*«And my mother, for example, learned it from strangers... that I was in the East. I tried not to tell her about it... because I was worried about her health. Because I realized that she would be worried... for example, in moments like this, when there is no signal, when she cannot reach me by phone. Well... knowing that I am in the East, it would be... such... unpleasant moments for her... and unpleasant consequences for her health. So I didn't tell her about it until the very end... I mean, she found out about it from strangers.» – Female Respondent 23*

## Impact of Pre-Military Service Well-Being on the Warrior's Journey

While the military service is an important and often identity-changing milestone, other aspects of a soldier's life, such as their knowledge, experience, attitudes toward service, and their general well-being affect warriors' lives during and after the military service. We assume that age at the time of starting and ending service may also have an impact, as people may have different social capital and health status depending on their age. Veterans who did not have much life experience before their service and who did not create their civilian lives for various reasons may face extra challenges after completing their service, as they may not have enough support to rely on when rebuilding their civilian lives. Our study is qualitative and cannot suggest correlations. However, we do have testimonies from veterans to confirm that their well-being and connections before enlisting had an impact on their return.

For example, a veteran who had his own home and a family waiting for him said that it was easier for him to return:

*«I came back to my apartment, and I think it would have been harder with my parents, because of a little bit, I mean, they have a little bit different perception of it all and I think it would have been a little bit tense with my parents! And since I was coming back to my family and we were in our apartment, all this also, I think, had a very, very strong influence on the fact that it gave me the feeling of coming home so immediately...» – Respondent 14.*

Another example is a veteran's return to the job he had before enlisting:

*«I: You mentioned earlier that you returned to the same job right away, when all the issues with documents and so on were resolved. Can you recall, let's say, the first days when you returned to work? How did you feel among the team?*

*R: Well, basically, because I went back to my old job and knew all the people there and knew the work, so it wasn't really a return for me. I don't even remember, I just came and started working, and that was it. There were no such issues there.» – Male Respondent 5.*

Alternatively, we may have a situation when a veteran who does not own a home might have financial difficulties upon returning because he or she pays almost all his or her money for rent:

*«And then, basically, my main task was to continue, to bring socialization to a reasonable point again. Because I still feel uncomfortable in that regard, because I don't have a roof over my head. I mean, ah... the roof that I have now is rented, and I actually spend all my pension on rent. Because I have a daughter, I have a responsibility to my daughter.»<sup>69</sup> – Respondent 9.*

The state provided partial support during the service, but the combatant would still have to spend his or her own money and buy the necessary things:

*«Because my sister told me that, too, about where the money went. Because they constantly needed some kind of diesel fuel, some wires, cables, underwear, socks, cigarettes, but it seems like it's nothing... But still, it seems like a couple of thousand, maybe ten thousand, and where did it go? I would not buy anything for myself there. I mean, I buy some combat boots, but I also look on the Internet, because I think that this is about my feet, and this is about my health. You look for a hat or a jacket. I mean, perhaps the state provides these things, but it doesn't provide much.»<sup>70</sup> – Male Respondent 15.*

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<sup>69</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

<sup>70</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

## Conclusions: Before Enlisting

1. Pre-military service soldiers are people with different experiences, beliefs, and life circumstances; but, the decision to join military service is an important moment that defines them as soldiers and affects their lives.
2. Life before service can have a significant impact on a veteran's journey. Further studies are necessary to explore the ways of developing support programs and services for veterans and preventing problems that may arise after military service.
3. It is the choice to join the service that should be considered the beginning of a warrior's journey. Regardless of how soldiers choose to begin their service<sup>71</sup>, their combat and service experiences will be similar.
4. In war, the beginning of military service often occurs suddenly. Citizens join the Army under pressure from circumstances and are motivated to defend their country.
5. Before enlisting, soldiers rarely identify themselves with the entire experience and have only a vague idea of the reality of service and life after. In simple terms, when they choose to join military service, soldiers do not imagine themselves as future veterans.
6. Support, understanding and acceptance from family and close friends is important for soldiers when they decide to continue their service.

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<sup>71</sup>There are several ways to join the military service in Ukraine: before the full-scale invasion, it was possible through joining volunteer formations, mobilization, or by virtue of belonging to a military unit (active military and reservists).

Before Enlisting

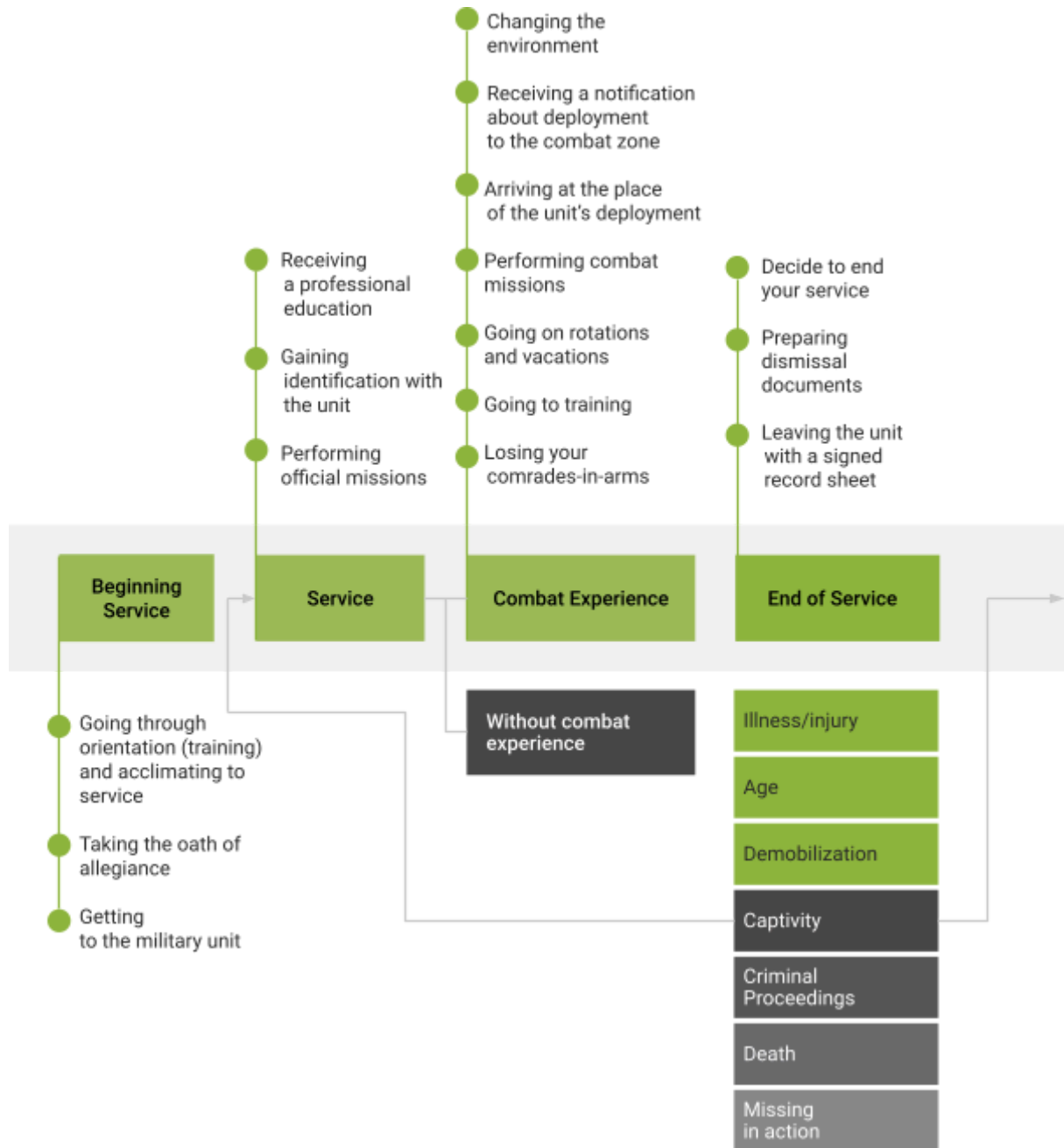
**Service**



Transition

Civilian Life

Retirement and Aging



## SERVICE



Service is a period when a person's life changes dramatically. When people join the military, they enter a completely new environment, a new culture with its own challenges, traditions, and habits, and the experience they gain in the military will stay with them forever.

Gradually, a person moves from the civilian world to the military culture, and his or her identity begins to change, acquiring more connections and qualities necessary for life in the Army.<sup>72</sup> Almost the entire life of soldiers is spent in the military environment, so naturally he or she is gradually losing frequent quality contacts with civilians. This can lead to a sense of alienation from the civilian community. The experience of serving during the war may cause a combatant to revise values that are not always reflected in the civilian environment.

With an unprecedented number of civilians joining the ranks of security and defense forces, considering the need to continuously deter Russia's aggression, the Ukrainian army began restructuring. A total of six waves of mobilization took place between 2014 and 2018;<sup>73</sup> The Ministry of Veterans Affairs has over 670,000 veterans as of January 2022.<sup>74</sup>

### **According to the Veteran Reintegration Study, ATO/JFO veterans served for an average of 770 days<sup>75</sup>**

In this period, we distinguish three separate stages of the Journey: the beginning of service, its passage, and its completion.

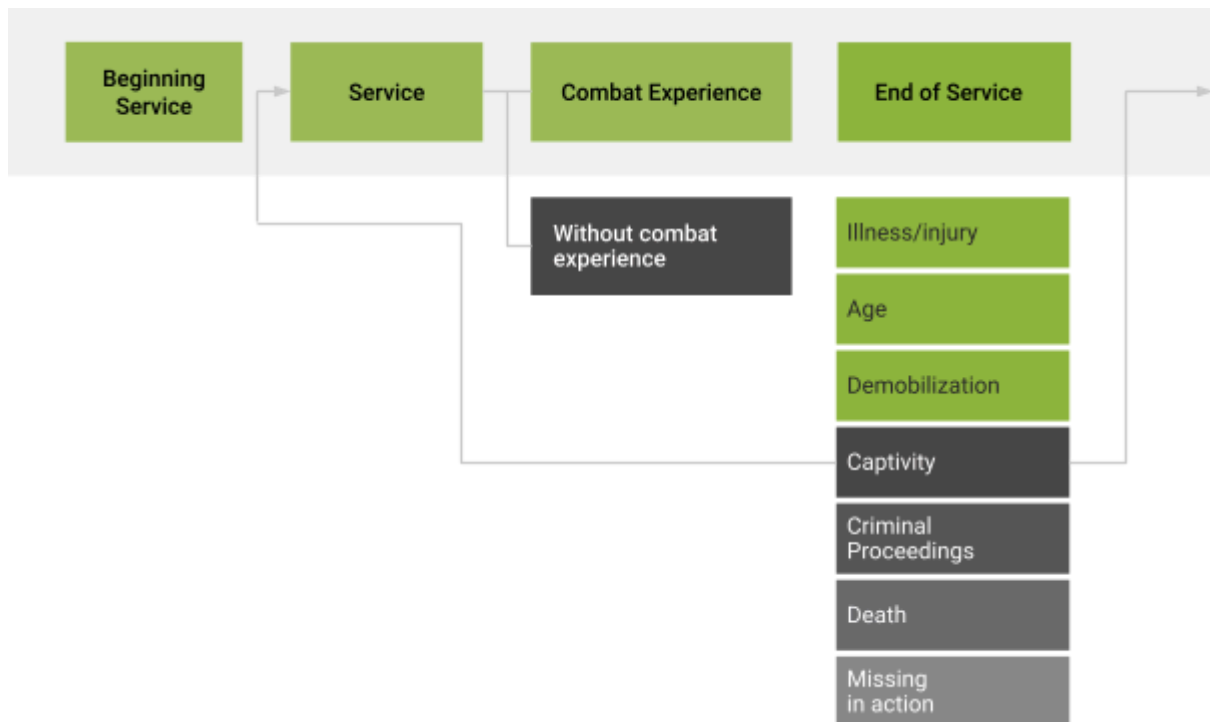
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<sup>72</sup> Thompson, J. M., Dursun, S., VanTil, L., Heber, A., Kitchen, P., de Boer, C., Black, T., Montelpare, B., Coady, T., Sweet, J., & Pedlar, D. (2019). Group identity, difficult adjustment to civilian life, and suicidal ideation in Canadian Armed Forces Veterans: Life After Service Studies 2016. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 5(2), 100–114. [doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.2018-0038](https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.2018-0038)

<sup>73</sup> Ukrinform. (2018, November 29). Mobilization in Ukraine: what happened, what will happen... and when will the provocateurs calm down? Ukrinform – current news of Ukraine and the world. [ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/2590663-mobilizacia-v-ukraini-so-bulo-so-bude-i-koli-provokatori-zas-pokoat-sa.html](https://ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/2590663-mobilizacia-v-ukraini-so-bulo-so-bude-i-koli-provokatori-zas-pokoat-sa.html)

<sup>74</sup> Analytical information based on data from the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine (no date). Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine [data.mva.gov.ua](https://data.mva.gov.ua)

<sup>75</sup> Veteran Reintegration Survey Results on Female Veterans in Ukraine (Analytic Report). (2021). IREX. [https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/IREX\\_Female%20Veterans\(3\)\\_11.pdf](https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/IREX_Female%20Veterans(3)_11.pdf).



We have identified three important factors that, according to the respondents, had a significant impact on their service. One of them is the influence of the soldiers' prior experience and well-being on their future journey. At the time of beginning service, soldiers may have a certain level of health (physical and mental), financial situation and family well-being, which may affect them during their service.<sup>76</sup> The second factor arises from the differences in the military system at the beginning of the war and after 2018: different forms of recruitment, different work, vacation, and support arrangements. The third factor is that the discharge from service took place in an unfinished war. Thus, veterans remained ready to fight and had a premonition of a full-scale war. This suggests that their return was partially driven by a constant sense of threat and change.

<sup>76</sup> Kizer, K. W., & Menestrel, S. L. (Ed.). (2019). Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society. National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25380>.

## Beginning Service

No matter what their lives were like before, soldiers began their journey with the decision to join the service and participate in combat. The choice to serve in wartime is a person's decision in fundamentally difficult circumstances. To some extent, it is a choice without a choice. After all, military service is primarily a civic duty and an integral part of the social contract. At the same time, we are aware of numerous cases of violation of this duty.<sup>77</sup> If they wanted to and made the necessary efforts, citizens had many opportunities not to join the service, using illegal or semi-legal means. We intentionally do not distinguish between the journeys of military members who joined the service voluntarily or through mobilization. We believe that any person who eventually made the choice to serve will follow the same veteran's path after returning: they will face the consequences of service for their own well-being and will likely go through the stages we describe later in the study.

Military service in the peaceful time will be different from that in the wartime. In our study, the Service stage is about participation in hostilities.

It is important to emphasize that this study was conducted before the full-scale invasion and does not represent the experiences of soldiers who joined the security and defense forces after February 24, 2022. We are grateful for this opportunity to record the experiences of Ukrainian veterans who joined the service at different stages of the war. Despite numerous legislative, procedural and cultural changes that have taken place since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion, we believe that this study can complement important efforts to rethink the journeys of Ukrainian soldiers and contribute to the meaningful improvement of their life at each stage of the journey.

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<sup>77</sup> Svoboda Radio. (2023, August 30). Thousands of Ukrainians went abroad because of bribes – Zelensky. Radio Liberty. [radiosvoboda.org/a/news-zelensky-vlk-habari/32571766.html](https://radiosvoboda.org/a/news-zelensky-vlk-habari/32571766.html)  
Two men even swam across the river. How draft dodgers are caught at the border and what awaits them (no date). Your City is your television. [tvoemisto.tv/exclusive/kilka\\_cholovikiv\\_navit\\_zagynulo\\_yak\\_uhylyanty\\_probuyut\\_peretnuty\\_kor\\_don\\_ta\\_s\\_kilkoh\\_vzhe\\_zatrymaly\\_136131.html](https://tvoemisto.tv/exclusive/kilka_cholovikiv_navit_zagynulo_yak_uhylyanty_probuyut_peretnuty_kor_don_ta_s_kilkoh_vzhe_zatrymaly_136131.html)

**Beginning service is a period of transition between civilian past and the new military reality.**

At the beginning of service, the soldiers typically go through several important processes:

- Join the ranks of security and defense forces;
- Receive training before a soldier is assigned to a particular brigade or battalion. The training can be divided into several stages such as general coordination training and specialized training within the core field of a new recruit;
- Get assigned to a specific military unit, where a new military member will serve.

At the initial period of service, soldiers withdraw from civilian life and gradually leave the civilian community to join the military, and after returning from service, they have to reintegrate with their community and build their identity almost from scratch.

Since 2014, for many Ukrainians the military service has become enlistment-based. Under the pressure of active hostilities, service begins immediately, leaving little time for training in the rear. New entrants often join their units on the front line in an extremely short time. Unfortunately, insufficient military training prior to service can produce negative consequences for the well-being and health of soldiers for many years to come.

At different stages of the war, access to training for the ATO/JFO members varied significantly. There are testimonies of soldiers who went to the combat zone without any training at all, as well as those who underwent months of drills. Some of the respondents had been trained beforehand, and some had been trained while on duty:

*«At first, we were called up for two months in Huelva, we studied at the training center, and then all of us came from there... 32 of us came from Vinnytsia.» – Male Respondent 34.*

According to the respondents, quality training, support and explanations before the start of service would be helpful:

*«I think it would be good to have some kind of psychological assistance... support for the military, because we all understand that we are all going there... but we do not understand how many of us would return.» – Female Respondent 23.*

*«I wish that psychologists or psychotherapists held meetings with women being recruited, to endorse or give consent to this particular person's service. Because I have seen that half of the women who join the army cannot stand all that is happening there. There is a military charter, it's about subordination to a superior, not everyone is ready to do it, and many people ask a question: "What do you mean? Why should I?" You have to if you signed a contract. And in principle, this should be done not only to women, yet they should be a priority for such meetings. This is probably the most important thing, because after all, it's not the babysitting function that they go to.» – Female Respondent 18.*

At the beginning of their service, the interviewed veterans did not understand what awaited them in the near future and had vague ideas about their upcoming military and combat roles.

*«I: And during these eight months, what else did you have going on ? Were there any additional exercises... what... did you have going on during this period, in the unit?*

*R: Well, of course, I arrived at the unit and was assigned to a position where I had certain responsibilities. Many things... not many things, almost everything was new to me. Because I say... I'll repeat once again that I had never been involved in the service, and I never understood what it is, and in general, what it is all about. But I studied, I tried to learn everything and improve myself. All my time.» – Female Respondent 23.*

In the service, military personnel without prior experience may eventually begin to consider service as a career where they can develop

professionally. It is important to note that the Ukrainian military had different forms of service:

*«Well, the military enlistment office, I can't sign a contract and go on a contract. I have a mother, I have children, I... Well, I was happy to volunteer. There are those who are ready to go, but they have a backup at home, and I am the one who keeps everything at home. But anyway... We come to the front and it's exactly the same.» – Female Respondent 38.*

Since 2014, the Russian Federation has been financing and directly conducting military operations on the territory of Ukraine. For more than nine years, the security and defense forces of Ukraine have been gaining combat experience on a daily basis, and the professionalization of military personnel has led to the evolution and improvement of military service. However, the service is much more multifaceted and complex than people who are not directly involved in it usually realize.

In addition to combat units, the army unites educational institutions, training facilities, logistics, communications, supply, transportation, management, production, armament, representations, medical forces, and many other activities necessary to ensure functioning of the military units. Not all military personnel fight in the trenches and risk their lives every day. Among the interviewed veterans there were those who performed combat missions with weapons in hand, as well as those who provided logistics, food supplies and medical care. We are grateful for the contribution of each and every one of them.

At different stages of their journey, soldiers can deploy in different formats and gain both combat and non-combat experience in the army. Soldiers learn and teach others, acquire new skills and competencies, master equipment and learn specific occupations, change ranks, take responsibility, manage others, get sick, get injured, change units and sometimes branches of the military. Service is not static.

*«During my service, I learned, for example, how to drive trucks – KAMAZ, ZIL, GAZ-66... I mean, I learned all about these vehicles and drove them on my own, without relying on anybody else ... If I need to cook, I will cook, if I need to write an order, I will write an order, if I need to bring something in*

*or out, I will do it. Whatever your duties are, whatever tasks are assigned to you... you have to fulfill them.» – Female Respondent 23.*

Military personnel may also change their perceptions of service.

*«Well, in principle, I think I treated it as a mundane thing, I had this feeling during my service, when I found out that the army is not as disciplined as I imagined it to be.» – Male Respondent 17.*

*«And also, well, it was quite strange for me that maybe I just imagined that the military... everyone there... almost like a brother, they would die for each other, but in practice it turned out that . . . Well, just like in the army, just like in life, people are different, and it is not always the case.» – Male Respondent 20.*

## Conclusions: Beginning Service

1. When a new recruit begins military service, he or she moves from a civilian to military culture. They form the identity of a warrior.
2. From that moment on, the way of life, resources and routines change and appear different from those in civilian life.
3. At the beginning of their service, soldiers begin to lose connection with their civilian circle and instead form a new military environment.
4. At the beginning of service, soldiers typically have vague ideas about their future military roles; yet, the new military reality can change their previous perception of service.
5. In times of war, service often begins under the pressure of active combat, leaving soldiers little time to prepare while in the rear. Instead, they are immediately deployed to their units to perform missions.
6. High-quality training at the beginning, support and guidance before the start of service and explaining details of their duties – all is welcome and necessary information for soldiers.



## Combat Experience

Until recently, to confirm combat experience in Ukraine, two statuses were used: the status of combatant and the status of person with a war-related disability. Since 2019, these statuses have also been granted to military personnel who joined volunteer formations.<sup>78</sup> Although social status is a designation of a person's experience, there are registered cases of status abuse. It is reported that there are many bureaucratic problems in the status registration. Military personnel condemn unfair granting of combat participant status to people who do not have fighting experience. The process to apply for combat participant status is often overly bureaucratic and complicated. Yet it largely depends on the way the process is organized in the unit and the level of professionalism of the command.

*«When I joined the Army, after six months I could submit my documents, thanks to the fact that our drill hall was a hundred meters away, and so my friends with whom I served helped me with the list of documents I needed. I submitted them, and after I don't remember how long I waited, I received them. So there were no problems with that, no problems at all. The only thing was that at that time I had to wait quite a long time, well, relatively long...» – Female Respondent 18.*

*«Well, it turned out to be a little bit unpleasant regarding the combat participant status. At that time, well, I already had state awards from the President, but the combat participant status was still not there, as it turned out. Despite all those combat missions, there were some guys who were just there, who came later than me... and after staying for a month, and they just left earlier... and they already had [a status] a long time in their hands, and they enjoyed all those benefits. I was not there yet...» – Respondent 20.*

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<sup>78</sup> On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Granting Status and Social Guarantees to Individuals from Among Participants of the Anti-Terrorist Operation, Law of Ukraine Number 329-IX (2019) (Ukraine). [zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/329-20#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/329-20#Text)

Our goal was not to investigate the difference between the journeys of soldiers with combat experience and those without. We did not aim to identify their needs to improve military service either. Yet, we asked servicemen and servicewomen about their combat roles to better understand how they think all this might affect their future civilian life.

People experience a wide range of emotions during war. This includes not only the stressful state mentioned above, but also more positive, kind, funny and tragic stories.

During military service, uncertainty, danger, and other factors can lead to a loss of long-term planning skills. Instead, the focus of planning is shifting to short-term.

*«Many, many stories. Different ones... sad, funny, tragic... and all kinds of stories. That is, there is everything in them: laughter, tears... grief, joy... Because today you talk to someone, you see your fellow soldier, and an hour later you get a call, and that's it, he is gone...» – Female Respondent 23.*

«Somehow, in three years, three and a half years, I got so used to the idea that I might not come back, yes, when you buy something for home, even during a vacation... Because the question arises: Will I be needing it?» – Male Respondent 19.

### **Different Army**

In our conversations with respondents, we noticed a significant difference in the way they described the service environment: in 2014–2018 and from 2018 onwards. For example, in 2014–2018, they mentioned a large wave of volunteers with a strong, almost ideological motivation to be at war to defend Ukraine. In contrast, at a later stage, according to respondents, more people joined the war whose main motivation to fight was financial.

*«It's not enough anymore. To be honest, everything has changed for me, and it has changed now. Yes, the guys are coming, but now they are more like migrant workers. They are paid something. When I started, we had... God, the guys were crying, don't you remember what those military enlistment offices would do, they would not take him or her, it was, well [such a desire to get enlisted]... And now, well, it's not like that.» – Female Respondent 38.*

*«In fact, I was lucky with the battalion, because I was quite... most of them, almost, well, more than half of them are volunteers, you know? And they serve there to do a good job, not to make you a shit.» – Female Respondent 25.*

In addition, those who were in the Army in 2014-2018 had different combat experience than those who came later. This can be explained by the fact that the nature of hostilities from 2014 to 2018 was more intense than the period between 2018 and 2021.<sup>79</sup>

*«Those guys who have combat experience between 2014 and 2018 are the only people who have actually fought, in a way, they have seen the blood that they themselves caused in most cases. They realized what they could have done there. And starting from 2018 to the present, in most cases... it's... well, people can occasionally see this blood, in a way, on the front line: someone was wounded, someone was killed – I mean, snipers from the “DPR” or “LPR” killed our people there. You would see a combatant's brains, kind of scattered there, someone may have been wounded there... his arm torn off. Or they would have just wounded him, inflicted some physical damage. This is not a psychological and combat trauma like the ones received in the time period between 2014 and 2018. There is a difference, quite significant one.» – Male Respondent 22.*

Since 2018, according to our data, ATO/JFO veterans started leaving security and defense forces as a result of increased bureaucratization, a significant change in both combatant profile and task intensity.

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<sup>79</sup> «Army on hold.» Will Ukraine's Army be left without food, weapons and reforms – BBC News Ukraine (no date). BBC News Ukraine. <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-54485115>

*«And in the time period after the year '18 , for example , when the transformation of the Ukrainian army into the UPA<sup>80</sup>, the so-called Ukrainian Paper Army, began. When there was subordination... There were a lot of instructions and nomenclature orders, and so on. These people lost themselves. And they wanted to be free again, in most cases, the peak, as I see it, happened around 2020, when those combatants who could actually do something in this world began to leave en masse. And then there was a period of so-called "mercenaryism," when people joined the army because they were offered good benefits, good pay, basically a plush job, as they say. And, in fact, it is relatively easier to sit in those positions and try not to get caught.» – Male Respondent 22.*

*«R: Now , in '19, because in '20 people started to leave a little bit...  
I: Again, orders, deteriorating conditions and...  
R: And all that human junk came just to loll around. And to find someone who is capable of doing... something else.» – Female Respondent 25.*

Everyone had different experiences with vacations. Some people were given vacations easily, others had a hard time getting a leave:

*«I can hear from the conversation that there is some depression there, but don't worry, come back there, when you go on vacation, we'll go to the lake, it will be summer there. I say, "I don't know, they will let me go on vacation or not.»<sup>81</sup> – Male Respondent 15.*

Different formats of service that existed between 2014 and the beginning of the full-scale invasion determined the involvement and experience of soldiers. There were three formats of service: contract or mobilization; volunteer formations; and so-called pirates who did not officially belong to the above two categories but also participated in the combat operations. Each format of service had its own specifics. For example, soldiers – volunteers or “pirates” could come home after a

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<sup>80</sup> A play on words, the abbreviation UPA in Ukrainian stands for Ukrainian Insurrectionist Army founded in 1942; here it is referred to as the Ukrainian Paper Army

<sup>81</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

certain period of time at the front and then return to service. This may have produced an impact on their return, as they had more frequent contact with civilian life. Yet, the unfinished missions also affected their self-awareness and return.

*«If I want to go, if things go well, I go, if not – I would stay at home.»  
– Female Respondent 38.*

Deployments to the front line could be of different duration. There were some soldiers who would combine service with their main job and would go to war in their free time or during vacations.

«Well, at work, how can I describe this to you? I'm used to working around the clock. If it was like that every day, I wouldn't be able to go. That was the kind of patriotism we had back then. They would call me from work, I would... change shifts, take time off, you know... Then, if I could, I would take all the vacations I could : unpaid leave, and all kinds of vacations, well, all that I could do. And then I would come back and work it off. I worked it off. All the people were on vacation, and I was forced to whitewash the ceilings and paint the walls. It was like that. At first, they were nice to me, and later, they were pressuring me.» – Female Respondent 38.

### **Change of Personality**

When a person begins service, he or she develops and accepts a new military identity, builds social ties with fellow soldiers, learns new knowledge and skills, and finds the desired sense of purpose and belonging. Military and combat service is a significant layer of life experience unlike any other. Just like life before service, this experience will influence the future of a veteran.

Both military service and the war create circumstances that change a combatant's personality entirely. Usually, servicemen and servicewomen

can realize or feel these changes when returning to civilian life or during temporary leave. It represents contrast to their military life<sup>82</sup>.

*«To some extent, yes, now I am more prone to focus on family and relationships. I don't know, some of the risks that took place during the fighting, risks to life, to health, they make me think about who I am in this world, what will be left after me, and all that. That's why... I started thinking more about my family after returning.» – Male Respondent 28.*

*«In terms of this comfort, I feel much better now, I can handle some difficulties much better, I have something to compare with, my stress resistance has kind of increased, sometimes I still get anxious because of some jokes, but I don't know, I'm better... I can better determine what is worth being anxious about and what is not. I think in this respect I left the army much healthier than when I joined.» – Male Respondent 17.*

During the service, reflections on the meaning of life often appear. One of the reasons may be the proximity to death.

*«Well, there was a feeling that while you are sitting there, life is passing by and that it can end suddenly, and you should not put it off.» – Male Respondent 1.*

*«And this guy, a tank soldier, twenty years old, he says: "I'm walking and thinking: I'm going to die now, that's it, I have no chance. What have I done in this world? I haven't done anything yet." That is, my destiny has not been realized, that's it. Something like this happened when people were coming out of the battle, when someone was trying to blow them up, they had to come out without being blown up and alive.» – Male Respondent 13.*

*«I: Tell me, do you feel the influence of your combat and military experience today? I mean, in everyday life?*

*R: We appreciate every moment. More and more. I mean, I appreciate each*

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<sup>82</sup> Mobbs, M. C., & Bonanno, G. A. (2018). Beyond war and PTSD: The crucial role of transition stress in the lives of military veterans. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 59, 137–144.  
[doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2017.11.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2017.11.007)

*moment more and I am more relaxed about external stressors.» – Respondent 33.*

## Conclusions: Combat Experience

1. While serving in the Anti-Terrorist Operation zone and Joint Forces Operation soldiers experienced changes in their civilian environment. Due to the lack of time, conditions (solitude, privacy and communication) and personal resources, the quality and frequency of communication may change or decrease. Communication with the civilian environment also significantly depends on the format of service. Someone in the civilian environment may stop communicating with a soldier and vice versa.
2. In service during combat operations, soldiers are often unable to maintain a high level of their own civilian identity – to continue their own business, to maintain and develop relationships, to increase their income or protect their property. This can lead to a decline in overall well-being and further influence support available in a veteran's life after returning from service.
3. Identity undergoes changes during service and experience gained by soldiers influences values and beliefs and forms new views, interests and skills.
4. Due to conditions of war and accompanying stress, soldiers often lose the skill of long-term planning in their private lives and the planning horizon is narrowed to a few hours.
5. Each soldier may have a different format of work in the service: Some have combat experience, some provide logistics and some perform other important tasks in headquarters or cities in the rear. Each experience is important; but, different experiences in the service will have



a different impact on a person and his or her trajectory after returning.

6. Health can deteriorate significantly while serving in the military, although most soldiers respond only to critical injury and serious illness because there is no time or resources during service; the focus is on the task at hand.
7. From 2014 to 2022, we recorded a conditional division of the army into «different armies» by veterans. According to respondents, from 2014 until approximately 2018, the army was characterized by a high level of patriotic motivation due to the large share of volunteers. From 2014 to 2018, the intensity at the front was higher; but, from 2018 to the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, it decreased, so soldiers who saw a more or less intense period had different combat experience which potentially affected their return.

## End of Service

The end of the service is a part of the journey when a soldier ends his or her service of his or her own free will or due to circumstances beyond his or her control.

Although from a legal point of view, service ends when a person is discharged from the ranks of the security and defense forces, we emphasize that in order to provide quality support to soldiers on their journey to becoming a veteran, **the main indicator of military duty completion should be a person's decision to discontinue service.** From a legal point of view, changing status is easier than a psychological transition from one role to another. Currently, there is no formal ceremony associated with the end of service. Often, discharge happens at once and is extremely mundane. One day you are a military man or woman, the next day you are a civilian. It goes without saying that soldiers' lives have changed during their service, so the longer they live in this new life, the harder it can be to transition to the civilian world they have already forgotten. There is no specific timeframe, but the longer a soldier stays in the military, the more he or she is integrated into its rules, traditions, culture and symbols, the more difficult and stressful it will be for him or her to return to civilian life.<sup>83</sup> The civilian future, in addition to being a pleasant anticipation, can cause anxiety and misunderstanding among soldiers. Just like at the beginning of service, many of them lack a clear view of what awaits them after discharge.

*«But during this period, when I was about to leave, I had a feeling of anxiety that, as if the army provides some kind of social security, when you know that whether you would succeed or fail at work, you would still receive your salary, you would have some kind of medical care, you know, some kind of protection, kind of. Or maybe it's a little bit of a false feeling, when you don't know, when you haven't tried something else, and when this lack of knowledge of this other thing is a little bit scary. And that's the first month, the first month, for sure, when you don't know what will*

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<sup>83</sup> Mobbs, M. C., & Bonanno, G. A. (2018). Beyond war and PTSD: The crucial role of transition stress in the lives of military veterans. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 59, 137–144.  
[doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2017.11.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2017.11.007)

*happen at a new job, you've never worked. Because after school I worked in one field for 11 years, and the only people around me were those who were doing the same thing. And if you don't really know what awaits you in another job, in another field, then there is a little bit of a feeling of uncertainty.» – Male Respondent 3.*

*«I had some doubts about how to find myself in civilian life. I mean, during this period of time, from 2014 to 2021, I had already gotten used to military service: lining up, some meetings, and so on. And when you come out into civilian life, it's a bit unusual to adapt after that, when you don't have to go to a line-up, you know that your boss will not call you...» – Male Respondent 27.*

According to the law, a formal decision to finish the service often does not depend on the combatant himself or herself, but may be determined due to age, health, completion of mobilization or contract expiry, or other reasons.<sup>84</sup>

### **The interviews allowed us to identify the following reasons for discharge mentioned by respondents:**

- **Completion of enlistment campaign:** this is relevant only for those who were enlisted during the ATO/JFO time period. As of August 2023, the military service people that were enlisted after the introduction of martial law are not yet subject to demobilization, and some of them have been in service for almost a year and a half. Another reason for discharge is expiry of the contract. Currently, according to the law,<sup>85</sup> it does not occur during martial law:

*«Well, I had a demobilization order. Since I did not serve under contract, I was mobilized in the sixth wave and the last two months before demobilization, or rather, well, almost three months, I spent outside the*

<sup>84</sup> All conditions of discharge are regulated by Article 26 of the Law of Ukraine Number 2232-XII (2023) «On Military Duty and Military Service» (Ukraine). <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text>

<sup>85</sup> On Military Duty and Military Service, Law of Ukraine Number 2232-XII (2023) (Ukraine). <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text> (Chapter IV. Article 23, Part 3)

*ATO sector, because I had a shrapnel wound to my knee. It was not a very serious injury, but it did not allow me to continue my service, so I spent the last three months in rehabilitation, in a hospital. And it turns out that in the last month, literally, I was already, well, when I was able to walk more or less, I returned to my unit's deployment base and was already waiting for an order to demobilize. At that time, I had already had two rotations in the ATO. One of them lasted six months, the other, at the end of which I was wounded, lasted about three months, and I received state awards for participation in combat operations... Well, actually, somewhere in late November, when the wave of mobilization was already very long, we were finally demobilized. I came back home and gradually started to integrate into civilian life.» – Male Respondent 20.*

- **Personal Decision**

*«I resigned at the end of my contract and just decided to change my lifestyle a little bit, i.e. to move more towards civilian occupations and try myself at civilian life.» – Male Respondent 27.*

- **Age**

*«A year, a year and two months of combat. And then, because of my age, I was demobilized; so, literally, from the beginning of 2016 until now, I have been in civilian life.» – Male Respondent 13.*

- **Health Condition**

*«I served until 2018. In 2018, I was wounded. After the injury, I was treated for another year. In 2019, in February, I think, I was discharged for health reasons. And in 2020, almost a year after my discharge, I founded and opened my own business. I am working now.» – Male Respondent 5.*

There is a certain group of soldiers who finished their service as a result of injury, although they did not want to. If it happens like this, not only a decision to terminate the service shall be made, but also other legal procedures are to take place.

*«I ended it, first of all, because of my health, because I could hardly walk. I had an injury to my spine, and stretching my spine for six months was not*

*very effective. And problems began: first, I wanted to complete my service, and second, I did not want to serve in the National Guard. I planned to get back on my feet a little bit more and go to serve in the armed forces, but it didn't happen.» – Male Respondent 16.*

However, there are many examples when people with injuries incompatible with military service actually returned to service multiple times; destroyed documents; concealed details of their injuries; choose volunteer formations or simply «stormed» commanders.

- **Family circumstances**

*«In total, I have 42 months of service, three and a half years, from the year '14 to '18. To be honest, I had no intention of leaving the service. But the fact is that at seven months of pregnancy, the armor does not fasten very well. They just wrote me off. Well, they didn't write me off, I was just about to end my contract and they didn't intend to extend it due to my pregnancy.» – Female Respondent 19.*

- **Other reasons**

The desire to be active, which was not there during the service:

*«There was nothing exciting in the unit, to put it bluntly, there was no movement. Even if I had gone to that reconnaissance unit, I would have been doing some bullshit anyway. I didn't have the moral resources to go somewhere else.» – Male Respondent 33.*

Since 2014, many military service members in Ukraine have been forced to make decisions to end their service before the end of the war in which they have been involved. Some of the territories they fought for remain occupied by Russia to this day, which deprives the military of a sense of victory and completion of the mission component of their service. This also affects the feeling of guilt towards their comrades-in-arms, as veterans noted that upon returning home, they repeatedly mentally return to their comrades-in-arms who are freezing or injured somewhere in a trench.

Feeling of guilt towards their brothers and sisters-in-arms is another reason for trying to return to service.

*«But when it turned out like that, when everything started to happen, the losses, when we really had guys defending our land, I was sad to leave it. I mean this is about the end of my service.» – Female Respondent 25.*

Military service members may experience the end of service, either voluntarily or due to formal circumstances, as something not only positive, but also as a loss of something important. Moreover, these feelings can occur at the same time.

*«On the day of my discharge, on the day when I was off on the road, I was so ... happiness overwhelmed me. At that time, I was very tired. I wanted to rest.» – Male Respondent 39.*

*«Mixed feelings. I was a little sad, but also happy at the same time.»  
– Male Respondent 27.*

The decision to end service is usually not an easy one for soldiers:

*«It is very difficult... I did not make this decision in a day.» – Female Respondent 30.*

Technically, at the stage of end of service, the following things happen:

- **Paperwork, handing over weapons, reporting and related processes to end service.**

*«Well, first of all, I had to go to the military prosecutor's office, because it was necessary to close the files on those events, because we simply have no witnesses anymore, those who died or were killed in action, to close the files.»<sup>86</sup> – Male Respondent 9.*

Some respondents said they had difficulties with discharge because there was no information about the process available to them:

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<sup>86</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

*«And anyway, they didn't tell me everything, because people don't know, I was discharged from the army for the first time and I didn't know that I had to order money in advance for severance pay... severance pay is ordered in a few days, a week, and it turns out that to get compensation for material property, you had to order it 2–3 weeks in advance, because it takes much longer for funds to be credited to your account, so I received it not on the day of discharge, but somewhat three months later.» – Female Respondent 30.*

The respondents talked about a lack of legal support at the stage of discharge from military service:

*«Legal support would be nice. Because we have a situation where soldiers have to deal with financial issues when they are discharged, or they must deal with certain papers that are important for the future. I also had a problem with papers and finances. When you retire, you may expect to receive one amount, but in the end for some reason you see another. And most often, the question would arise about payment of... severance... severance pay.» – Male Respondent 1.*

- **Enrollment in Emergency Reserve (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> category)**

The decision to enroll in the reserve of the first or second category is subject to fitness confirmed by the military medical commission.

It is worth noting that respondents had difficulties trying to join the reserve. Some were unable to do so despite their desire, while others pointed out that it was problematic due to bureaucracy or poor work of the reserve administrators:

*«There are still some issues with that. I wanted to join the reserve when I returned from Poland, which was around the year '18 or '19, but I never succeeded to get registered. Because my military ticket was filled out incorrectly at my unit, they made three mistakes, out of three completed*

*pages, or out of four completed pages. And in order to fix it, I had to go to the unit. I went to the unit, and they said, "Okay, come back tomorrow.» On the next day I came, and the guy there went on vacation, so they said come back in a month. And it's clear that this will drag on forever. And the military unit is far away, a little bit because of work, I can't go every day. That's why I gave up on it, because in any case, the military unit where they wanted to send me to, well, now it's not really suitable for me, let's just say. If active hostilities resume, I already have a unit and a place, so everything is ready. Again, I do everything with my own hands. So I don't really count on the state in this regard, especially as a volunteer.» – Male Respondent 16.*

If the discharge from service is caused by an injury, the veteran will face different conditions or environments when restarting their civilian life. Still, he or she will go through the same stages of return. More information on service termination as a result of injury can be found in the study «From Injury to Return: An Ethnographic Study of Journeys of Veterans and Their Loved Ones» by NGO Pryncyp (Principle).<sup>87</sup> We had a testimony from one of the respondents with injury who said that the transition was a stage-by-stage process and began de jure while he was still at the service:

*«Just a year of treatment after being wounded was a kind of adjustment to civilian life. Not the same as others', perhaps. But when I was finally discharged, I had been in civilian life for quite a long time already. And I don't know, there was no such abrupt transition. I served and served, and then I retired and came back. It was just such a long time in the hospital, in Germany, and the rehabilitation process. Everything somehow came together, so it was a gradual process.» – Male Respondent 5.*

It is recommended to study separately the ways of returning soldiers who survived captivity.

**End of service** is a stage that covers the period from the moment you decide to end service until all necessary legal aspects are resolved. The

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<sup>87</sup> Sociological Study: «The Way of the Wounded: Needs, Problems and Vision of the Future» (Analytical Report).(no date). Human Rights Center «Principle».  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Dtt-5nn2bLZK2M1HnkOSCFhjRo9478kE/view>



end of service can occur due to the end of mobilization or contract expiry, voluntary resignation, health or family reasons. Whatever the reason for leaving, the decision to end service is not an easy one and can be accompanied by mixed emotions. Formally, this stage may include: 1) paperwork, handing over weapons, reporting and related processes necessary to complete the service; and, 2) enrollment in the reserve.

Important features that should be noted are the readiness to rejoin the army if necessary and the anticipation that there will be another «great war» or intensification of hostilities. In addition, often when a soldier decides to end his or her service, he or she may feel guilty towards his or her brothers and sisters-in-arms, as well as a sense of uncompleted mission.

### **Premonition of a full-scale war and readiness to fight**

During and after their service, some soldiers felt that they were ready to continue serving if necessary. Some respondents noted that for a long time after returning, they remained in a constant state of waiting for a call to return.

*«...It's like this, when you leave this zone, you are practically free, you can relax, but you can't drink because you are under sanctions. You're like, you're under sanctions! But there is no order... And I get a call from the unit: 'Don't go anywhere, because if... I said: 'If something happens, I'll come back. If you need me, I'll take a train, and I'll be there in twelve hours.' That was the thing. And then, in a way, I couldn't take off my uniform for a couple of months.» – Male Respondent 13.*

Some respondents indicated that despite their discharge, they were ready to return to service if necessary:

*«Well, there was no desire to extend the contract at that time, so I resigned, but if necessary, I'll be ready to come back at any time – my backpack is packed, I'm ready to go.» – Male Respondent 24.*

*«In case active hostilities resume, I already have a unit and a place, so everything is ready.» – Male Respondent 16.*

*«Well, I feel that this is a reserve, and now, looking back at the external situation near the Ukrainian border, I cannot feel myself “civilian”. When the war is over there, then yes, I will most likely feel completely civilian. For now, I still feel some responsibility.» – Male Respondent 37.*

*«Not quite... if it was over... but as it is... it is unclear how long it will continue. And the fact that it continues... in '16 they said on TV that we have a truce... And we have a truce, and they... shoot... That's what a truce is...» – Male Respondent 36.*

An important feature in the process of reintegration of Ukrainian veterans is the incomplete nature of war. Veterans in the interviews spoke about their readiness to continue fighting in the event of active hostilities – the interviews were conducted before the start of the full-scale invasion. They shared an understanding and anticipation that the war might follow, active hostilities might begin.

The readiness to re-enlist and understanding that the war is not over may influence the veterans' returning, as they realize that the time will come when they will have to re-enlist and that returning to civilian life may not be permanent.

*«And to be prepared in case of emergency , so that the backpack is packed. We understand that if we don't, who will stop it all.» – Male Respondent 21.*

*«...If Russia starts attacking and you're all like, you've done nothing all this time, and we're not going anywhere. And, that you are there. And so on. I understand that a new generation has grown up and those who fought will go anyway. And, the majority of the population thinks: "Why bother?"» – Male Respondent 2.*

*«I think I may still have to go back and it's not over yet, I don't think this story is over for me, because one way or another, we will be called up*

*again. We learned how to defend, we will learn how to attack, but I don't think it will be resolved peacefully.» – Male Respondent 19.*

*«Because I immediately realized that I was drafted on a five-year contract, should the big war with the Muscovites begin, we will all go off fighting as heroes, or it will all end and I will resign, and accordingly, the big war would not happen, and I would quit, so there would be no need to stand in line to be enlisted.» – Respondent 8.*

*«I mean, now, for example, the situation in the country is in limbo, and I also ask myself what will happen if... If I have to put on my boots again, I will have to leave again. In general, now I am almost 100% sure that I will sign the contract again and go. Despite what my parents will say, they will be 100% against it because they are worried. Perhaps my boyfriend will be against it because he is also worried and says this is not for you to go there. But still, I have some thoughts and principles, so I re-consider every day: the further I am from the army, the more I am ready to return there if something happens. Unfortunately, the reality is that it is impossible not to think about it.» – Female Respondent 18.*

## Conclusions: End of Service

1. End of service can occur for a number of reasons; but, it is a difficult decision that can often be accompanied by mixed emotions.
2. For those who were injured and did not complete their service, the path of return may differ. In this study, we did not consider this scenario separately, but this was evidenced by the respondents. Such journeys require additional research as do the journeys of those who were captured.<sup>88</sup>
3. Veterans maintained a high level of readiness to return to service after completion, made efforts to join the operational reserve and anticipated a repeated escalation of the war. We emphasize that constant readiness could have a significant impact on the well-being and trajectory of veterans after service and uncertainty of the prospects and sustainability of their civilian life could not help them actually settle into civilian life. At the same time, readiness to re-engage in defense of the country is an important characteristic of ATO/JFO veterans.

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<sup>88</sup> Sociological Study: «The Journey of the Wounded: Needs, Problems and Vision of the Future». Analytical Report. (no date). Human Rights Center Pryncyp (Principle). <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Dtt-5nn2bLZK2M1HnkOSCFhjRo9478kE/view>

## Well-Being: Service

### Health

During the service, various health problems may occur or existing health conditions may be exacerbated, especially if they were not diagnosed properly. Critical conditions or injuries that require surgical treatment may happen. All the above may produce a long-term impact on the health of servicemen or servicewomen. At the same time, service in war and combat has a lasting impact on veteran's health not only because of physical damage, injuries and trauma, but also as a result of excessive physical activity, lack of appropriate equipment, difficult living environment, exposure to weather conditions and other factors. All the above circumstances should be analyzed in detail to develop an in-depth understanding and predict possible consequences for the veterans, such as chronic health problems and eroded general well-being.

*«No wounds, no contusions, no injuries, nothing like that, thank God. Well, let's say, maybe part of the problem was bad water quality and my teeth suffered from it, but this problem was solved.» – Male Respondent 12*

*«But I was diagnosed with hepatitis when my job was to transport the wounded soldiers, just during this period, a month and a half, and I had a very hard time with it, and I had to take a break for a year, I mean, doctors said no physical activity, and it affected me very much.» – Male Respondent 2*

*«It so happened that after the first rotation, I really started having health problems when we arrived at the permanent military deployment center. There, I managed to survive until the very end.» – Female Respondent 25.*

## Physical Health

At the same time, usually during the service, respondents did not pay due attention to any physical changes. They believed that such changes did not affect their ability to serve, because their main task was to survive. According to them, they went to the doctor only if their condition was critical or if they were injured and/or wounded.

*«So the physical changes were like this: during the war, you don't pay attention to this, because you have to survive, you have to jump on a KAMAZ, on a Ural truck with a full tank, otherwise the shelling will start, you won't have time to jump out, you will be covered by fire or even forgotten. That's regardless of your age. And you need this physical fitness to survive.» – Male Respondent 13.*

In addition, bad habits may be acquired or lost during service. Some claim that they did not have such habits because they might have interfered with their reaction to danger and could affect their authority among their brothers and sisters-in-arms.

*«As for bad habits, yes, I have acquired smoking habits in the service, and sometimes I can drink with friends.» – Male Respondent 27.*

*«There in the ATO, I almost immediately started avoiding it altogether in order to maintain the status of a team leader and all these work-related things, it was much easier not to drink than to drink.» – Male Respondent 17.*

## Mental Health

During their service, military personnel are under constant stress. Their bodies are mobilized for survival. Soldiers are in almost permanent tension. Therefore, some things begin to be perceived without emotion.

*«Plus... you understand that military service and staying at the deployment base... it's constantly... you don't have time to recover from one stress, as another stress begins, then the third stress, the fourth. It somehow pours and pours on you so much that, like physical pain... there comes a point... when you stop perceiving it as... on an emotional level. You just see it as work.» – Male Respondent 22.*

*«There's nothing to relax about... War is war. You don't know where it [shells] will come from.» – Male Respondent 34.*

*«When you serve, you get into a kind of vacuum. Something bad is happening there, because this state, the state in which people are, well, it is very tense, it is very bad.» – Female Respondent 30.*

Respondents mentioned that communication with a chaplain may be effective, as it is related to mental health. One respondent said that although he was not a church-goer, he still found assistance from the chaplain effective during the service. Yet he mentioned that the prayer before the line-up was not something that everyone liked.

*«Well, here, yes, here really, in terms of religion, I was very, all this was very supportive, but I was never particularly religious and I was not, I was not directly connected to the church, but ... but the military chaplain helped me a lot, for example, although many guys there ... were skeptical, as if it was just another duty imposed on them, when we said a prayer before the line-up... but... for me it was really cool and really helped a lot.» – Male Respondent 20.*

There were some mentions of psychologists during the service and negative experiences with them:

*«During the war, I never met a single psychologist with shoulder straps who would be competently engaged in psychological work. As a rule, such a pseudo-psychologist would turn into "a senior errand boy" or would be used to write some investigations, while there would be practically no real psychological work.» – Male Respondent 13.*

## Relationships and Recognition

### Family/Friends

When soldiers begin their service, their lives change dramatically. Everyday life is instantly filled with a completely new routine and tasks, and the environment changes from civilian to military. However, the civilian and military worlds exist simultaneously. Outside of service, in civilian life, relationships in a family may continue, although things may turn out differently, not everything in a family goes well, there may be problems such as absence of a father or mother during the growth or maturation of children, remote communication between spouses, and lack of shared experience.

For a military person, understanding from family/partner is very important. Support often would help veterans to mentally return to civilian life and plan something for the moment when they reunite with their loved ones. Veterans often visualize how they will spend time with their families, eat delicious food and sleep longer. In other words, they create an ideal picture of what they miss during their service.

During the service, various events occur in relationships and families. Sometimes respondents meet and get married during their service, continue their relationships, or end them. Some of them have children.

*«Then I was transferred to the command of the Special Forces. I was promoted, plus my wife gave birth to a daughter. And just for the period of her pregnancy in 2017, I was away from almost 2016, I managed to come to the birth only.» – Male Respondent 1.*

But at the same time, the service does not allow combatants to be with partners to the fullest extent, to watch their children grow and be with them.



*«It so happened that when I was mobilized, my son was seven months old, and when I returned, he was already two years old. And... It so happened that our battalion was in the ATO zone for 14 months without any break. We didn't go anywhere, we had no rotation, nothing. There was a five-day vacation, and I came home, and just like that my son was already two years old.» – Male Respondent 14.*

Respondents often said that their family or partners are their core support and encouragement. For some, this is also what helps them to «switch»:

*«I: And who looked after the children?*

*R: The children were with him... The children were with him. I am very grateful to him for that, of course, because ... he helped me to fulfill my duty, or to be involved in the defense of my homeland. The children were under supervision... and that made it easier and simpler for me... of course... for me.*

*I: He was supportive.*

*R: Yeah.» – Female Respondent 23.*

*«In this regard, he was really good, sometimes he didn't understand what I was doing, but he supported me anyway. And that's why the only person who kept his fingers crossed for me, for me to be okay, was my boyfriend.» – Female Respondent 18.*

*«I mean, it's completely different for me. I switch. I come and solve their problems, and this and that. But I switch, because I have a family, I have people to live for.» – Female Respondent 38.*

There are cases when a partner's misunderstanding of the choice to serve led to the end of a relationship. In particular, one respondent shared that his partner's misunderstanding and negative attitude towards service led to divorce. However, the respondent remarried and had a supportive partner at the time of the interview.

*«I: Uh-huh... I see... ah, basically, we mentioned that there was a previous marriage, yes, I understand that the rotations also took place during the previous marriage, or between them, I mean, what was the family's attitude, I don't know...*

*R: Negative.*

*I: Negative, yes, I mean, you went to the service...*

*R: Yeah.*

*I: Uh-huh.*

*R: That's why... that's why it was the first marriage.*

*I: Uh-huh...well...that's why I wanted to know...*

*R: If it was... if it was positive, then he would be the only one, that is, there would be no second marriage.» – Male Respondent 24.*

### **Brothers and Sisters-In-Arms**

During their service, soldiers acquire a new circle of people with whom they serve and go through various combat missions together.

Some respondents noted that sometimes this serves a motivation or fear for them not to let them down or do their tasks better.

The army brings together people with different social statuses, background, age and life values. All of these people may not have known each other or crossed paths in their lives before enlisting, but under the circumstances they have to get along and form relationships. These relationships are unlike any other. During the service, soldiers live a team life, sometimes similar to that in a summer camp for children – sleeping next to each other, eating together, and may not have privacy even in matters of hygiene. Brothers and sisters in arms share life, responsibilities and risks. People you didn't know yesterday can save your life tomorrow.

*«Well, a lot of people just disappointed me in terms of, I don't know, looting and drinking... it's just not acceptable to me at all... Well, incompatible, neither one nor the other on any scale, incompatible with the military uniform, and on this basis I have a lot of people there who seem to be good warriors, good soldiers, and good friends, but if they*

*have such a... trait and such a... flaw, a spot, I don't know, then for me it is already... If not... I can't look at such a person as normal.» – Male Respondent 20.*

*«I: You put bans on yourself for this, for that, for that, right?*

*R: Well, I also had this ... well, one of the fears of the service was that I might not do my job properly and thus... and well, I might not be useful or let my brothers down, for example, and if I start smoking, I... it... it... it will worsen my physical condition, I will not be able to perform the tasks to the fullest and it will be my fault, that is, it also played a role of support.» – Male Respondent 20.*

*«It didn't stop me because ... because it's training, it's training grounds... because it's, for example, a sector... and we shouldn't include a commander or a subordinate... we should do everything for the benefit of our unit... for the benefit of our fellow soldiers.» – Female Respondent 23.*

At the same time, it is worth noting that both fellow soldiers and the leadership can be treated differently, both positively and negatively:

*«No, the brigade is very bad and I would have shot them together with those commanders, I would have shot them. It was my military company, number one, which... Well, we had a priority, you know. Because in all the other companies, people were crying to get out.» – Male Respondent 26.*

Combat service is accompanied by risks of injury, death, captivity or disappearance. Soldiers participating in combat often lose their comrades. Not only do they witness death or injury, but also make efforts to rescue or move the remains of their fallen comrades, notify their families, and identify them. The more intense the fighting, the more casualties among the military.

*«R: ... In the year '15, I had all these burials. All the... bodies, you know, all these black tulips, all these... what you call them.*

*I: The search party.*

*R: Yes, yes, yes. That they started finding these bodies, they started burying... friends who were there with me in the year '15, every week there*

*was a burial. I stopped going to some of them. Because I could not stand it anymore.» – Male Respondent 2.*

## **Civilian Environment**

Due to the lack of time and inner resources, the quality and frequency of communication with the civilian environment begins to decline, and soldiers may feel disconnected from the rest of their community. Although changes in the environment become more noticeable after the end of service, the loss of connection begins during service. Contacts with the civilian environment significantly depend on the format of service: the more frequent rotations, vacations and secondments to rear cities, the more likely a serviceman or a servicewoman is to maintain quality communication with close civilians.

During the service, the environment may change. For example, some people may start providing support to the military, while others may stop communicating.

*«Some brother calls, a godfather calls, my mother calls, my wife calls, and I understand that if you are communicating with 20 people and three people call you, it is clear that you are communicating with these people only.» – Male Respondent 14.*

*«Well, in terms of family, what has changed a lot is the relationship with my sister. She helped me a lot, although before mobilization, before the war, we did not have such a close relationship.» – Male Respondent 20.*

*«And my friends, unfortunately, as it turned out, they disappeared as soon as I signed the contract and left. It took a month for people to stop answering me or calling me or asking how I was doing.» – Female respondent 18.*

One of the respondents said that she expected more support from her family:

*«Well, my relatives and neighbors were such people that I expected more from them...» – Female Respondent 31.*

Respondents said that support was important to them and brought them back home in their minds:

*«There are a few people in my life who called me, these two people, besides my family, the most. They would call me almost every day and ask how I was doing, what was happening, how things were the things, what was going on in general, I mean, he was a complete stranger, not my godfather, not my brother-in-law, not my father, not anyone. He was just an acquaintance. He also used to work in the fire department. And this person, as I said, I'm very grateful to him, because when someone calls you from a peaceful life, disturbs you, I mean not just disturbs you, but asks about you, it's... Well, it's very important to me. It's like you come back home in your thoughts, at least with communication, when you are at war.» – Male Respondent 12.*

## **Vocation**

During service, in particular, during combat operations and war, warriors may develop a sense of vocation, importance and even missionary nature of their activity.

*«Shit, really, what am I doing at home? At home, it's all work and work... and here it's a serious organization, you can build a career ... and yes, yes, it's certainly a lot, but I'm sitting here now thinking that, yes, even in general, if... if I had been mobilized there not at the age of 27, but at the age of 25, or even earlier, when I didn't have a family there, then 90% of me would have stayed in the army. I really understand many people who stayed there... who signed contracts after mobilization and who are now going to sign them... I understand that you really, really find yourself, but in civilian life there is no such opportunity. You went there, you shot something, you drove something, you tried to repair something, and then*

*you realize that this is yours. You just didn't have an opportunity to do it at home, and here you have it and you can do it, and you will be thanked for it, and that's the main thing, and yes... I mean, the army gives us an understanding, and to me personally, of what I want.» – Respondent 14*

*«I tested my worth again in the service.» – Male Respondent 34.*

*«I found myself in my military profession, that's it. I did not expect it to be like this in this war. What I liked about it, I can't say, I found myself. It was very cool. I wanted to do it all my life, unfortunately, because of my wounds, because of my trauma, because of my contusions, I can no longer do it. That's it. But now I teach people, yes. I teach people about military affairs, I learn myself in this process, and basically there are some echoes. I find some satisfaction in this, but unfortunately, I cannot say that I would make it a profession and so on. It's just a hobby.» – Male Respondent 16.*

During their service, military personnel learn new skills. They may get a new education, undergo advanced training and even acquire a new profession. Until now, the military and civilian education and qualification systems remain unsynchronized, so it can be difficult for military personnel to explain the professional component of their service experience to civilian employers, and they may not understand the subtleties and specifics of the military.

## **Material Needs and Security**

### **Property and Wealth**

During the service, most of the needs of the military personnel are met by the command. Yet, the military service members continue to take care of the well-being of their families and loved ones, purchase equipment and gear for their needs, and use every opportunity to maintain their own

civilian accomplishments: run their own business, keep their civilian careers relevant, accumulate savings or take care of their property.

During the ATO/JFO, employers were obliged to keep the mobilized soldiers' jobs and average salaries.

Yet, some soldiers who joined volunteer units did not receive remuneration for their service.

## **Legal Security**

The military servicemen and servicewomen have clearly defined rights and responsibilities and shall abide by laws that govern their activities. However, access to legal support may be difficult, and awareness of rights remains low.

In 2019, volunteers became eligible for combatant status.<sup>89</sup>

Members of the military can obtain certain statuses, for instance, a combatant status, still during the service.

During service, the most important aspect of housing for veterans is that they shall have a permanent home they can return to during leave and rotations. Over time, requirements to your household become as simple as possible because people get used to the limitations of service and stop prioritizing their own needs.

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<sup>89</sup> On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Granting Status and Social Guarantees to Individuals from Among Participants of the Anti-Terrorist Operation, Draft Law of Ukraine Number 2045-1 (2019b).

## Conclusions: The Military Service

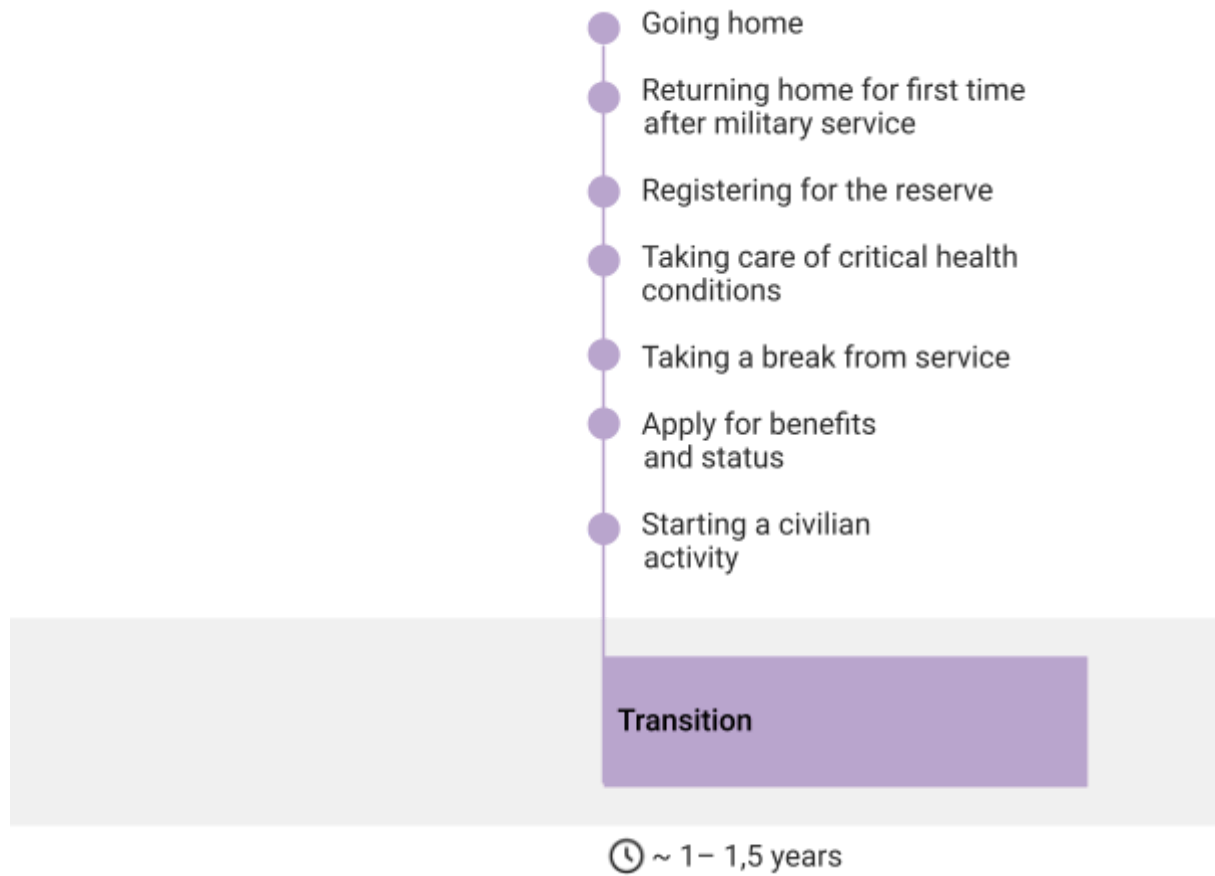
1. Military service is multifaceted, service members performing a variety of functions and tasks, both in combat and in ensuring basic military functions. There are different formats of service – some have combat missions, others perform administrative duties.
2. The conditions of military service during war and combat experience have a steady and lasting impact on veterans' well-being.
3. Some soldiers apply for combatant status while still serving.
4. During their service, soldiers continue to live their lives, experience different emotions and change under the influence of new life experiences and their environment.
5. The civilian environment can change as veterans experience separation and distancing from the military under the influence of war.
6. During war and military service, the skill of personal long-term planning may be lost. The short planning horizon and the shift in priorities from personal to group affect the way soldiers take care of themselves.



Before Enlisting  
Military Service

# Transition

Civilian Life  
Retirement and Aging



War changes the lives of soldiers, but it is not their entire life. Although formal discharge in Ukraine is almost instantaneous, the transition to civilian life takes longer. Immediately after returning home, veterans may be caught between two worlds: military and civilian, and not fully belong to either. Returning, no matter how expected, takes time.

*«When I was demobilized and on my way home, I met a fellow soldier who had been in civilian life six months earlier, because he had been transferred from that unit to the headquarters, and he had been in civilian life for six months. And he said something to me that I didn't hear at the time, but it was exactly what I was saying, that we need such things. He said, when you come back, he said, don't rush to enter anything, don't do anything particularly important. Even if you think that everything is cool, that everything is fine, that everything is super, but still don't rush to do anything.» – Male Respondent 28.*

During military service, combatants may develop a false expectation of an easy and quick return to civilian life. However, returning takes time. This is not because there is something wrong with the veteran, but because recovery from war cannot be instantaneous – it is gradual in nature and requires a lot of time and effort from those who follow this path. The experience of war is like a heavy box that you carry with you and open only when you are safe. When there is no threat to life and health, the human psyche and body begin to relax, allowing many problems that were previously unnoticed to manifest themselves.<sup>90</sup>

On the way home, the environment changes. After discharge from service, for the first time in a long time, there will be more civilians around the soldier than the military.

*«At first, it was quite difficult, because there are so many people. You look at them all, look for any signs of danger, the subway, you are just hiding. Transport, again, a large crowd of people and everyone is close to you. It is so annoying that it just... I don't know, it causes some kind of... well, not panic attacks, I can't say it was a panic attack, but a lot of hostility and aggression towards people. I didn't quite understand why everyone was so*

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<sup>90</sup> White, J. (December 15, 2022). The Forgotten Ones: A Military Veteran's Report on Stress's Effects. American Addiction Centers. <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/veterans/stress>

*positive, living their lives, when we have a big problem, the war, but no one seems to notice it. And everyone is like: "Eeeeeew!!!" New Year's Eve, fireworks! Come on!" And you're like, "Well, it's cool for you, fireworks. Well, in terms of less... quite... what can I say... quite... "Picky"... I don't remember...» – Female Respondent 10.*

Returning from war to civilian life is vaguely similar to returning home after a very long journey. In addition to basic acclimation and getting used to your new environment, you need to restore a lot of knowledge and cultural competencies: understand how things work in the place you are returning to and rebuild your life. For soldiers who have only recently been in a state of constant combat readiness – living in the field or on military bases with many other people; wearing different versions of the same uniform every day; having a changed sleep schedule; eating whatever they have to or what others prepare for them; not having sufficient quantity of water or food or what others cooked for them; driving on roads without lights and traffic lights, and sometimes without roads; not seeing their families for months; losing their comrades and not having the opportunity to grieve for them enough; not being able to plan their lives more than a few days ahead – civilian life may seem like another country. There will be different food, different relationships, different sounds, and a different daily schedule. There are completely different responsibilities and requirements.

*«I had some doubts about how to find myself in civilian life. That is, during this period of time, from 2014 to 2021, I had already gotten used to military service: lining up, meetings, and so on. And when you come out into civilian life, it's a little bit unusual to adapt after that, when you don't have to go to the line-up, you know that your boss won't call you anymore, so it's like that.» – Male Respondent 27.*

*«Due to the fact that there were no vacations, there was no such return to the usual familiar environment in which I was, so the return was a little bit, let's say, unusual or interesting, I would call it, because I was away from home for a long time, away from such a normal social life. It was a very long period because, again, there were no vacations, and it was like returning to some other, yes, maybe not reality, but maybe some other*

*world. It was a bit interesting, that's how I would describe it.» – Male Respondent 28.*

After a long separation, soldiers are returning home for the first time. However, the «home» they left behind when they began their service may have changed significantly by the time they return, or may not have been a safe environment anymore.

Veterans return to what they had built before they served. A person experiences the so-called reverse culture shock.<sup>91</sup> This experience may be compared to returning from a long trip. Veterans return to the society in which they used to live, but during their service, not only they themselves have changed, but also the society to which they return transformed. And it takes time to get used to these changes and relearn how to live in the civilian world. It takes time to restore simple everyday knowledge that becomes automatic over time when we live in a community: how much it costs, how much you need, where and what kind of food to buy, when to pick up a child from kindergarten, who is close and whom to trust, what is the daily routine, how to get to a place, and so on. On the day of the end of service, everything changes for veterans: the daily schedule, the available food and water, housing, and social circle. The life they were used to during their service is no longer there, as well as the life they lived before the war, and a completely new civilian reality takes its place. Having certain expectations about their return, veterans face reality at home as it is. For some, it will be a return to security and understanding, stable relationships and their own homes, for others – to their parents' homes, or even to another region where they will have to rebuild their lives as internally displaced persons. Some will be divorced, while others will be met with misunderstanding. Each experience of returning is different.

*«It's hard to get used to certain relationships in civilian life, yes, because for many of us, including me, the war was like a second birth of a personality. I mean, everything that I had before, some skills, some of them were lost or simply erased, and now we're back and we're like, wow,*

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<sup>91</sup> Bergman, B. P., Burdett, H. J., & Greenberg, N. (2014). Service life and beyond the institution or culture? *Armed Forces & Society*, 159(5), 60e68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.969946>

*why is that? There is black and white, you can go to anybody and say, "Brother, I have a problem here. But here you can't do that, you have to keep an official distance, and what will he or she think if I... Anyway, there are too many unnecessary things for us, and they were really hard to get used to. Perhaps it wasn't so difficult to get used to them but to accept them.» – Male Respondent 16.*

Even under the best of circumstances, it is worth remembering that the soldiers' loved ones are also going through their own journey<sup>92</sup> and come to the point of returning from service with their own set of experiences and expectations. A meeting after service is the first opportunity to observe the changes that have taken place on both sides and to reestablish a new normal.

*«I: Do you remember who you met when you returned from the service? R: My family, of course. And also a friend who was discharged back in 2016. It was a coincidence, basically. He quit... Well, he has a disability of the third group.» – Male Respondent 1.*

After the joy of the first few minutes at home, the desire for solitude, rest and tranquility often comes. Naturally, one of the first things warriors begin to feel is tiredness. Sometimes – on the verge of exhaustion.

*«I: What did you want most at that moment?  
R: It's hard to say, probably a break from it all.» – Respondent 35.*

*«I wanted peace, I wanted to calm down my brain, which is still looking for something to worry about.» – Male Respondent 30.*

*«At first, I just rested, not thinking about anything, you know, as if it were a vacation, such a long vacation. Pretty much.» – Male Respondent 35.*

Some respondents mentioned that it was important for them to have time alone, to have time when no one «pulls them around.»

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<sup>92</sup> The Journey of the Warrior's Beloved One. (no date). Veteran Hub. [kohana.veteranhub.com.ua](http://kohana.veteranhub.com.ua)

*«I: What were you most looking forward to in those first days when you came back?*

*R: Just to rest, not to see people, not to see anyone, just to be in silence.»*  
– Male Respondent 11.

*«But I wanted to go on vacation, just a small vacation, where my first desire would be to run away somewhere, leave my wife and child, I have a daughter with my wife, she is two years old, two and a half to be precise. I wanted to be somewhere alone, just to be alone in my head, to calm down a little bit and relax.»* – Male Respondent 8.

When a soldier returns home «forever» for the first time, and not for a short-term vacation or for treatment, another transitional phase begins, accompanied by an identity crisis. Respondents often described it as the most difficult.

*«It was like that, yes. Physically exhausted. It was a feeling that for some time, well, actually, there was no strength to do anything. Well, maybe psychologically, I don't even deny it, but my own feelings are that while you are there, you are so mobilized, constantly under some kind of pressure, and when you come back, it somehow goes away... When you carry something heavy for a long time, then you take it off, it's gone, but you still feel it.»* – Male Respondent 7.

*«Well, perhaps, if you look at the whole experience of life, this was probably the most difficult period compared to all previous stages of life.»*  
– Male Respondent 3.

Ultimately, life at war was completely different, starting with the schedule, responsibility, subordination, and ending with the style of communication, values, and rules. In contrast, the constant threat of death and other factors shape up an understandable dichotomy in the wartime: «good vs bad», «friend vs foe» – such a duality does not exist in civilian life. At war, the rules and perceptions are clear to soldiers, but when you return, you have to get used to your new state, new reality, rules, and interactions.

*«In the Army, everything is very simple: you have your friends, you have your enemies, you have a right decision, a wrong decision. It cannot be any other way. It can't be any other way, quite the opposite... They say that in the civilian world you have to get used to the civilian world. I'm used to black and white, yet Sasha, my partner, tells me, he says, "You need to learn, my friend, there is no black and white, there is a little bit of gray, and here it is difficult to accept it.» – Male Respondent 26.*

The journey of veterans is a continuation of the path of soldiers. By choosing to join the army, soldiers agree to the full scope of their experience – not only to serve and participate in war, but also to return from it. However, paradoxically, in our culture, the experience of soldiers and veterans seems to be separated. It may seem that we are even talking about two different persons. But this is not the case. The military also rarely think about future challenges when they start their career. This can be explained, in particular, by the narrowed planning horizon at the beginning of their service and priorities of soldiers, who stand up to defend the country in war. The experience of the Veteran Hub in communicating with veterans in recent years shows that such expectations often lead to disappointment in the reality that veterans face many more challenges upon their return.

The soldier now has to return from military reality to civilian life. In addition, as mentioned above, personality changes during service, so a soldier may return with new values, habits, and beliefs. Returning, according to the soldiers themselves, is a difficult period.

*«Well, the war does not make you stronger, it is the time after the war that makes you stronger. I mean, the war itself, taking an assault rifle and going there, it's very easy.» – Male Respondent 2.*

A civilian future may be very desirable, but it can also be frightening or anxiety-inducing. There is a lot of work to be done as veterans begin to rebuild their civilian lives upon their return. It may seem that you are somewhere in the middle or at a crossroads. Among the interviewed soldiers, there was a common desire to return to service, where things are more straightforward.



*«I: What did you want most of all?*

*R: To go back.» – Male Respondent 37.*

*«I: And if you remember, what did you want most when you got home?*

*R: To sign a new contract.» – Male Respondent 16.*

*«I think it's quite stressful, because at that moment there are a lot of thoughts, and you could have served, or maybe...» – Male Respondent 14.*

*«It seems like you are already here, but still a little bit there.*

*I: There, you mean in the military service, right?*

*R: Yes.» – Male Respondent 35*

*«I wanted to go back very much, it was hard for me, because there are my people out there, everything is familiar, everything is clear, and here you have to build everything from scratch.» – Male Respondent 10.*

*«It was more of a time drag and helped me adapt more. You don't get stuck, you don't think that you're on the edge of a cliff. Or rather, not at the abyss, but at a crossroads, and you don't know what to do with yourself. You just don't dwell on it. I think all this helped.» – Male Respondent 1.*

A feeling of confusion may follow, as if you don't know where to start. This uncertainty and anxiety often relates to material needs and other aspects of life: for example, what will happen with work, will they be able to find income, what will happen with finances, will they be able to provide for their family, and so on.

*«There was such a confusion, it was impossible to determine where to start.» – Male Respondent 27.*

*«Well, everything is comfortable, much more comfortable than there. You are loved and respected and all that, but there is still no certainty, yes. I mean, on the one hand, everything seems to be fine, there are... Perform and that's it, but it was taken away from your life, you have to build a new one.» – Male Respondent 16.*

*«More likely, it's the fear that there might be some health problems there. At that time, you cannot provide for your family. At that time, my child was three years old, probably under three. My wife was on maternity leave, and when I changed jobs, in a way, it turned out that I was in the service. There was probably some kind of financial uncertainty, uncertainty about my health. These are probably the main ones.» – Male Respondent 3.*

Unlike military life, in civilian realities, a person makes decisions on his or her own. The respondents mentioned a sense of freedom at this stage, a long-awaited opportunity to do what they want without blindly following a schedule, without responsibility and subordination.

*«Well, first of all, it was just me coming in, turning off my phone. And I realized that no one would call me, no responsibility, no one would forbid me to do anything. I'm just a free man, I do what I want, absolutely. If I didn't have a family, I would have run for the hills, I would have rushed off somewhere. I would have loved to vagabond somewhere in Africa for a month or so. Just because you won't get a call, because there's some kind of anxiety, you won't be told that you need to go somewhere. They won't tell you, I don't know, that tomorrow, when you expect it to be your holiday, but they will tell you that tomorrow you have to go on duty.» – Male Respondent 1.*

*«Well, probably, it's a little calmer there, you know that no one will call you, that you have to go on a day off... You can plan your schedule a little more confidently, because you don't know what will happen in two weeks, what orders you have, what business trips you have, what else.» – Male Respondent 3.*

For many veterans, it became an important need to discuss their combat experience. However, often they could discuss it only with their brothers or sisters-in-arms or with a small number of relatives, and felt misunderstood by civilians.

*«There is a huge need for me to talk to someone about my military experience. That's the problem, there is a great need to talk about what we've been through, not only to understand it better, but to realize it, but there is no one to listen to it.» – Male Respondent 13.*

At the same time, there is no universal time frame for transition. Everyone needs their own time to get used to new circumstances: some people need a month, some need a few months, some need a year.

**Among the veterans we interviewed, the transition phase lasted on average from one month to one and a half years, but for some other veterans, it took a longer period.**

*«I: And if we look at this stage in your life, the transition from military service to civilian life, how long do you think this stage lasted, is it still going on, how do you feel about it?*

*R: I would say that it has already ended. It lasted about a month for sure.»*  
– Male Respondent 27.

*«I: For example, how long will the transition to civilian life take?*

*R: About a month, maybe a little more.»* – Male Respondent 1.

*«I: And when did you realize that you had returned to civilian life?*

*R: Well, maybe three or four months later, although it hasn't fully come yet.»* – Male Respondent 35.

*«I: Okay. When did you realize about civilian life, did you come to this realization?*

*R: Maybe a year later.»* – Male Respondent 36.

*«But the period of returning to normal, let's say, life was quite long. I imagine that it took me about a year. About a year. I mean, it was hard. Even the fact that I was actually at home and on military service at the same time was difficult for me.»* – Male Respondent 22.

*«I was in the war for a year and four months, so it took me about a year and a half to realize where I was.»* – Male Respondent 13.

## **Change of Personality**

During the service, soldiers undergo changes that affect their personality. At the beginning of civilian life, these changes become more noticeable. The respondents said that participation in combat and

military service affected their perception of themselves and changed their work, communication with others, and other aspects of life.

Below, we have highlighted some of the changes mentioned by respondents. These changes will be different for everyone.

- **They began to value themselves more:**

*«I: How did your combat experience affect your self-perception as a man?*

*R.: I started to respect myself more.*

*I.: Uh-huh...*

*R.: Yeah... More than before enlisting. I started to appreciate myself more... And I felt as if I were a part of something substantial, something important, not just part of some online store or some supermarket chain. But something really important, big, powerful. Something that so much depends on it.» – Male Respondent 37.*

*«R: Well, I'm saying that when she saw me, she said that you, well, yes, son, you communicate, you hear them, but you are a completely different person in terms of worldview, let's say... I mean, you are different. You have some other understanding of all this, some other values, not that they are inadequate or anything like that, but they are just different.*

*I: Uh-huh.*

*R: They say that I became more self-oriented rather than oriented on someone else or for the sake of someone else. In that sense.» – Male Respondent 7.*

- **Have a stronger desire to take care of others, to protect:**

*«I: Do you think your combat experience has had any impact on your relationships with other people, both close and distant? If so, how did it affect you?*

*R: Well, I... Well, yes, yes, of course it did... I have more anxiety, I mean... the desire to protect.» – Male Respondent 33.*

- **Decision-making has become much faster:**

*«I: How did your combat experience affect your self-perception of yourself as a man? Because there is probably a certain image of a man, well, each*

*of us has a certain image. Did your combat experience change your perception of yourself in this role in any way?*

*R: Yes, it did. Because combat experience makes a man more resolute. That is, because when you are in the Joint Forces Operation, you need to perceive some actions and react to certain situations clearly and quickly, and this helps a lot after returning, after completing military service in general. That is, even to react quickly in some emergency situation.» – Male Respondent 27.*

● **Desire for justice:**

*«I: This impact of such consequences of the war, is it recurrent? Is it wave-like or is it permanent?*

*R: Well, let's put it this way... If you take a straight line, it is permanent, but sometimes it goes up like a wave-like line on a graph. Sometimes it jumps up like that.*

*I: So you can always feel it, but sometimes it gets even more aggravated there?*

*R: There is always this feeling of hyper-justice. The desire for everything to be right, according to the law. This also brings a lot of discomfort and strained relationships, not only with the family, but with many people around you. It happens with peers, with friends, with veterans to a greater extent, with the officials around us, let's say, very often. And it exacerbates and brings things to such a mental, emotional state.» – Male Respondent 37.*

Respondents said that they changed their attitude towards bribes and dishonest behavior. Most are fundamentally opposed to corruption and fraud because it goes against what they fought for:

*«My spiritual and moral beliefs have a significant impact on me, on my environment. Because many people have been in the army for a long period of time, participated [in the service]. They have a slightly elevated attitude towards honor and valor. And then they adapt to civilian life. It has a very strong influence. My wife often does not understand me. She often makes some remarks. Well, to put it bluntly, if you took bribes, you know, we would live better. And I say, "Why?"» – Male Respondent 1.*

- **Changed approach to planning, daily routine:**

*«I: Okay, and how do you feel about, you talked a little bit about the daily routine, about some kind of routine, do you have rituals or something that you do all the time, or maybe it came after the service?*

*R: Yes, while serving in the Armed Forces, we had such a thing as 'park and household cleaning day', which is a massive cleaning of the entire territory. And I have this habit of cleaning my apartment once a week, so I do everything in the complex. It's not like I vacuumed one day, or washed the floors, or did something else, but once a week I do everything in the complex.*

*I: So you think that this is an acquired quality of yours, that you...*

*R: Yes, it has become my habit.» – Male Respondent 27.*

- **Stress resistance increased, a greater mental strength:**

*«I: We have two final questions that are both general and personal. What do you feel, did your combat experience have any impact on your rethinking of yourself as a woman?*

*R: It's hard to say. I mean, maybe before, due to the fact that I lived by my parents' side for more than 20 years, I felt like a girl-girl. After the army, I feel the same way, but I know that in principle, to some extent, physically and morally, I have become stronger, and maybe earlier I wanted to be that defenseless, weak girl, but it's not interesting for me anymore.» – Female Respondent 18.*

- **Different attitude towards the family:**

*«I: Are you satisfied with your parenting function? How do you feel about that?*

*R: Yes. Even when the kid got bigger – he's three and a half years old, he'll be four soon – he's already capable, let's say. At least you can communicate with him, negotiate, tell him something, and he will listen to you. Well, even if he doesn't, if you're lucky. It's interesting with him. When he was younger, it was useless to communicate with him, because he wouldn't understand, wouldn't even appreciate your impulses. And now*

*that he's older, it's more interesting with him. I even enjoy it now<sup>93</sup>.» – Male Respondent 39.*

*«But maybe time has passed. Different age or something else... I just realized that the "top priority" and what should come first is the family, its needs, its support. Then the service, no, sorry. Then civic duty and only then service. That is, the family should come first, which will be directly linked to these social and civic responsibilities. A family that will understand... well, in terms of patriotic and educational upbringing. And you will be able to provide for this family. If, for example, there is no house or place of your own, but only children. You will say that here, we have to live here in our country. And they will say: "Why? We have nothing."» – Male Respondent 1.*

● **There are more demands on others when it comes to communicating with them:**

*«You know, I've become more angry. Not just angry, maybe not angry, this is not correct, but more demanding of myself and others, of course. More... More demanding and angry, yes. Because well...» – Male Respondent 12.*

● **Emotional Changes:**

Many people noticed that it became more difficult for them to restrain themselves. Previously, outbursts of aggression could happen only if a person was exposed to stress for a long period of time, but now it happens instantly. Such fury erupts are often difficult to control. However, it is worth noting that respondents often talked about this at the beginning of civilian life. During the Rooting phase, they reported less emotionality:

*«...I have become more aggressive in a way that the transition between a calm state and an aggressive state is almost instantaneous. I'm not saying that I just flash something somewhere and immediately jump at it with a knife; no, it's not like that, but if earlier I had to pump myself up in order to get this explosion of aggression, now it happens almost instantly.*

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<sup>93</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

*I'm not saying that I'm more... oh, no, it's just that somehow, instead of the phase where you endure it and gather strength to tell someone to fuck off, this endurance is almost gone, almost instantly, like you say "fuck off" and turn around and walk on calmly. Sometimes, of course, there are panic attacks when you come to a store and they put in a new system where there are no cashiers, and you're just poking around, scanning, throwing money in and it starts messing with me, giving me some bullshit, like if you have cigarettes, you have to call a cashier. The cashier came and started saying that if you didn't scan all the cigarettes at once, but pulled out one pack, it would be cheaper, so I got offended, told him to fuck off, turned around and left the store. Then, my wife caught up with me with all the purchases, said I was a hysterical person and took me home and I felt better. Then I got used to it and I can shop there easily now.» – Male Respondent 8.*

- **Creating environment in which others share veterans' values**

*«I: Have your job requirements changed since you returned from the war?  
R: Requirements? Well, probably, it is necessary, it is quite important that I feel more comfortable emotionally and that the people around me are of the same opinion, are at least of the similar mindset to me. I mean, I understand that we are all different, everyone has to have... but more pro-Ukrainian nationalist sentiments are important for me, they should be present in the mindset of my interlocutor for me to feel comfortable.» – Female Respondent 10.*



## Well-being: Transition

### Health

### Priority of the Stage

Serving and participating in combat, living in the field, and the abrupt change of environment – from the military to civilian – have a significant impact on the mental and physical health of veterans after their return to civilian life.<sup>94</sup> During the transition, respondents began to notice the effects of service on their health and overall well-being.

### Physical Health

In civilian life, with a sharp change in exercise, diet, daily schedule, and other factors, the physical health of veterans, particularly those who have not been injured or traumatized, begins to show problems and changes accumulated during their service.

Although the study included respondents who had suffered injuries and traumas that caused their discharge from service, it was not among the objectives of the study to distinguish between the journeys of wounded veterans and those who did not sustain injuries. In our conversations with them, we found that the transition to civilian life for wounded veterans might have taken place in a hospital environment, but we did not observe any substantial dissimilarities across all other subsequent stages of civilian life. For more information about the experience of wounded veterans, see the study «From Wound to Return: An Ethnographic Study of the Journeys of Veterans and Their Loved Ones» by the NGO Pryncyp (Principle).

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<sup>94</sup> Thomas, M. M., Harpaz-Rotem, I., Tsai, J., Southwick, S. M., & Pietrzak, R. H. (2017). Mental and Physical Health Conditions in US Combat Veterans. The Primary Care Companion For CNS Disorders, 19(3). [doi.org/10.4088/pcc.17m02118](https://doi.org/10.4088/pcc.17m02118)

The focus of our study was to examine the longer-term effect of military service over veterans' physical health and overall well-being. Many of the physical health conditions began to manifest shortly after completion of service and caused discomfort for veterans. Yet, once such conditions are discovered, medical examination or treatment does not necessarily follow immediately.

Among the respondents, the most common health problems they reported after their service were the following:

- **Problems with Back**

*«I: ...Did you have any visits to the hospital with any illnesses that may have appeared after the service?*

*R: There... I had a fairly high level of physical fitness before the war, I tried to maintain it more or less during the war and after... But probably it was the emotional load... the constant wearing of all these heavy things... there... body armor... weapons... equipment and so on. My body did give up, even for me.» – Male Respondent 22.*

*«It was only my back that gave me a problem. And the curvature of the nasal septum. That's basically it.» – Male Respondent 1.*

## **Problems with Legs**

A very heavy load on the musculoskeletal system and legs leads to problems that require further treatment.

*«.....I really had problems with my legs... I had an operation, I had to go there... I injured my knee in the ATO zone, and I just had to endure it until it began swelling... and I had to go to a military hospital... they cut out the entire miniscus... it's a bone... so... then there was a very difficult adaptation period... for more than a year I could not walk properly... I walked with a stick... with crutches. I also had problems with my back... my eyesight became worse. Yes... it was quite a challenge for me». – Male Respondent 22.*

- **Problems with Eyesight**

*«Well, I had all the necessary health check-ups, like cardiovascular diseases, hearing, eyesight, and so on. I didn't consider it separately, but there were certain problems that needed to be addressed, but they were not urgent, and I thought I would do it when I have time and money. It's like solving problems with my eyesight. It's not that it's a big problem, it's enough for me to live, I just noticed my eyesight started getting worse. It was a little bit of a problem to do what I was doing, it's a little bit of a strain that it became harder to aim like with a rifle at 100 meters, but for everyday life it's enough». – Male Respondent 17.*

### ● **Dental Problems**

Respondents mentioned that during their deployment they often had to deal with very poor water quality. Therefore, due to the poor quality of water used for personal hygiene, as well as poor hygiene due to lack of access to personal care products, dental problems began to occur. As a result, later there was a need for dental treatment or prosthetics:

*«Yes, I had my teeth done. I had my teeth done, in a clinic... In '19, when I came on vacation, my teeth were all crumbling because of the water. Many people have this problem there, because they bring such water. They take it from a mine somewhere. There is bottled water, but that's it. You can't wash with that, with those bottles, so you save that bottled water. And they say you save it like the apple of your eye. You hide a bottle somewhere, it's for me for later. That's basically what I'm saying. The driver said, "I got it from the mine, because I poured this water into a bottle, it's not like tea, it's [of] lighter [color]. You can see that it's muddy. You brush your teeth once, twice, three times, and so on, so it's not like it's there right away. The period that, let's say, the period that I was in [service] for three years, my teeth were crumbling, two fell out. And I found out about these [dental treatment] benefits, when I talked to someone. He said that ATO veterans can get their teeth done in a clinic. I went there, and they said yes. They created a card and wrote "ATO" on the card with a red pen or red marker, the doctor wrote it in short. And they did it properly. I didn't pay anything at all. I had to have an X-ray of my teeth, so I came and showed him this card. "Do I have to pay anything?" He said: "No, you*

*don't, you don't, it's free for you." Now, of course, I don't know if this program still continues.*

*I know that there are dental prosthetics offered within this program, but not everywhere. Not in all cities. That's it.<sup>95</sup>» – Male Respondent 15.*

### ● **Blood Pressure Problems**

Hypertension or hypotension is quite common among the population of Ukraine<sup>96</sup>, but it can also be the result of prolonged stress and exertion<sup>97</sup>. Especially if a person was worried about blood pressure before enlisting, this condition can be exacerbated and complicated during the service, just like all other chronic diseases:

*R: Well, my heart started to feel like, well, this blood pressure started to go up, well, I had it before, but not like this, maybe with age». – Female Respondent 31.*

### ● **Hearing Problems**

*«I: Do you know the consequences of the war your physical health? You mentioned your hearing.*

*R: Well, definitely. It definitely affected my hearing. I think that to some extent it affected, well, it's not just me, I'm talking about the whole, I think, all the joints, I mean, knees, elbows, whatever, back, I mean, the whole musculoskeletal system was definitely affected, hearing definitely affected.» – Male Respondent 28.*

### ● **Sleep Problems**

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<sup>95</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

<sup>96</sup> Ulyana Suprun about blood pressure. (no date). Ukrinform.  
[ukrinform.ua/rubric-culture/2502512-suprun-rozvincala-pat-mifiv-pro-visokij-tisk.html](https://ukrinform.ua/rubric-culture/2502512-suprun-rozvincala-pat-mifiv-pro-visokij-tisk.html)

<sup>97</sup> Arterial hypertension (no date). Center for Public Health of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine.  
[phc.org.ua/kontrol-zakhvoryuvan/neinfekciyni-zakhvoryuvannya/sercevo-sudinni-zakhvoryuvannya/arterialna-gipertenziya](https://phc.org.ua/kontrol-zakhvoryuvan/neinfekciyni-zakhvoryuvannya/sercevo-sudinni-zakhvoryuvannya/arterialna-gipertenziya)

Sleep problems should be addressed separately, as they directly affect not only physical but also mental health. Sleep problems in veterans can be cyclical and depend on the time of year:

*«I: Doesn't it happen that the manifestations, consequences of war affect the psychological state: insomnia, intrusive memories...*

*R: Well, it happens... and recurrent dreams happen. I have sleep problems in the fall, usually I have difficulty going to sleep for three to four days, for three or four days I stay awake. It happens... in the fall... in the spring...»<sup>98</sup>*  
– Male Respondent 29.

Veterans may experience not only poor sleep quality, but also bad dreams.

*«R: I mean, I didn't sleep, I might wake up a couple times a night.*

*I: So intermittent, restless sleep.*

*R: Yeah, intermittent, and I had these strange dreams.»* – Male Respondent 27.

*«I often dreamt of gunfire. I could hear a gun firing very clearly in my dreams. And it happened that I would wake up and I tell my wife that someone is shooting? She says no one is shooting. I thought I was going crazy.»* – Male Respondent 15.<sup>99</sup>

*«Well, those dreams, I had dreams about dogs, guns. It was as if you were trying to reload a gun, and you can't do that, they climb on you, you get hit, and you wake up in such a terror, so it's just one dream, but recurrent one, today and tomorrow you will have the same dream.»* – Male Respondent 31.

## ● Consequences of injuries/traumas

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<sup>98</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

<sup>99</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

While participating in combat operations, soldiers experience a high risk of being wounded, which may lead to consequences of varying severity: amputation, chronic pain, problems with the limb functioning, and others:

*«I: And... Did your health condition bother you after your return? Back then, you had a knee wound, not serious, you said. Six years have passed, so how does it feel, does the knee bother you, or did some other sores come out after the service, which were purely due to the service? But at first they kind of didn't bother you.*

*R: Well... in terms of the injury, I don't know, I felt the consequences within a year or so.» – Male Respondent 20.*

During the transition, bad habits may develop: smoking, drugs or alcohol. In addition to smoking, the use of stimulants, such as coffee or energy drinks, may also increase.

Some habits may become stronger, while others may disappear after service.

*«I mean, I have a wife, and at that time I was already married. I spent those three weeks mostly in deep drinking and partying, that's it. But then somehow, I don't know, maybe my wife, probably, thanks to my wife, I somehow realized, like, how much longer can I go on like this.»<sup>100</sup> – Respondent 39.*

*«I: Ahhh... life habits. I mean, you mentioned that we used to get up at a certain time, so that somehow the body, regardless of the day, like, whether it was a day off or not [you still get up at the same time]. Is it still the case now, or are there any habits there: going to bed, getting up, any specific patterns during the day, anything like that?*

*R: Well, as for smoking, it has increased. Comparing it before I went to the service and after the hostilities – definitely, a lot.*

*I started smoking a lot more, because, whatever it is, it's still kind of calming, you think. I even have a kind of physiological need for it. I have this problem.» – Female Respondent 25.*

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<sup>100</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

*«I: You mentioned bad habits, so again, I want to compare whether they have increased after the war or not? You mentioned smoking in particular.  
R: I think they have decreased.» – Male Respondent 28.*

*«I: Do you have any bad habits? Did you have them before the war or did you acquire them during the service?*

*R: No changes. Everything is the same. I've had bad habits and they are still with me. I started smoking more and drinking coffee a lot. I didn't drink coffee at all before the war. I could have a 3-in-1 (instant coffee with milk and sugar – translator's comment) there once in a while... And then I started drinking and still do.»<sup>101</sup> – Male Respondent 29.*

One of the respondents said that when applying for disability status after service, she had difficulty proving that her physical health was affected by the war.

*«I: Were there any difficulties with the disability group itself?*

*R: Yes, well, there were certainly difficulties.*

*I: What kind of difficulties?*

*R: Because to prove that you are sick and that these headaches are related to this, well, there are some bureaucratic issues there, too, to prove that it is connected.» – Female Respondent 30.*

## **Mental Health**

Transitioning from one culture to another, re-adapting and getting used to it is a big challenge for any individual. The experience of war and combat operations, as well as the significant difference between military and civilian life, can exacerbate this challenge. Although we recorded evidence of respondents who spoke negatively about their psychological state during the transition, it is important to emphasize that not all mental health challenges lead to lasting negative consequences in the

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<sup>101</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

form of mental health disorders or post-traumatic stress disorder. It is normal to experience difficulties after discharge from service, and most veterans, under favorable conditions, will successfully overcome them.

*«I: How would you describe your psychological state immediately after returning from service and today? Let's make a distinction, too: 2014 and now. Or when you were injured and in the hospital.*

*R: Back then... it was a mess. A total mess. Worst ever.»<sup>102</sup> – Male Respondent 29.*

Upon returning, veterans may experience:

### ● **Survivor Guilt**

Some respondents shared memories of experiencing survivor guilt. It could be a feeling of guilt towards fellow soldiers that they are still fighting or may be dead while you are back to civilian life.

This phenomenon occurs not only among veterans, but is quite common among eyewitnesses of stressful events that result in injuries or death<sup>103</sup>:

*«During those first days, when night fell and I kept having dreams that I was still there, that my colleague hadn't returned, I kept dreaming about a guy who was still there, and he was being killed in my sleep. I had such a dream almost every night, and at that moment I blamed myself for it.» – Male Respondent 6.*

*«I: Now, if we're talking about mental health, do you remember how you felt psychologically when you came back?*

*R: It was bad. It was bad, the transition from black depression to just depression and then back to black depression again. I mean, it was very hard. A constant feeling of unfinished work. It's called the "excellent student" syndrome. When you realize that in the year '14 you were in the Zhovtnevyi district of Luhansk and were going to celebrate the New Year there, and in the summer we were going to the Crimea to have a vacation. And where are we now? What's going to happen next? This feeling, it*

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<sup>102</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

<sup>103</sup> Murray, H., Pethania, Y., & Medin, E. (2021). Survivor guilt: a cognitive approach. The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist, 14. [doi.org/10.1017/s1754470x21000246](https://doi.org/10.1017/s1754470x21000246)



burns. And to be honest, thanks to a psychologist, it's getting a little easier. If you can't change the circumstances, change your attitude to them. But you still have a feeling of incompleteness, a feeling that the guys are somewhere else, and you are here, warm and cozy. Once at work, you may think, "Oh, I got so cold on the way to work." And then you may remember how you spent four hours at -32°C at the military post because they simply forgot to replace you. They forgot to change your shift, it happens, you know. You may think, what are you complaining about, if someone complains that they waited for a trolleybus for 15 minutes at -9°C – it's not cold, it's warm, believe me, I know what cold is. And so on...» – Female Respondent 19.

- **Irritation or aggression at the initial stage:**

«I think I've noticed that I was very irritable at first. It was very easy to get angry, and even though it was so strange that in some important things, I don't know, when someone had an accident – well, it happens. But if somebody drops a spoon, I don't know, and I can explode. What is it doing here? Who put it here? Why did it fall? Such moments, yes. I remember being very scared of fireworks on New Year's Eve. There was such a moment. I did not expect it from myself.» – Male Respondent 14.

«But there was a problem earlier. And the same problem exists now. If I am crossing the road and the car does not let me pass, and I am crossing on the green light, I realize that it can end very, very badly if the person there is in good physical shape.» – Male Respondent 2.

- **Flashbacks:**

«I: This, this feeling of being here... When do you think you started feeling this way?

R: I don't have this feeling even to this day. I mean, in my mind, I may be returning home with the help of a psychologist, and I begin to realize that I need to build something here, but still, for the most part, I wonder what's going on over there? How are the guys, how are our positions, how are they? How will it all end? It's still impossible to completely return home in your mind. There is still this moment, a flashback of returning.» – Female Respondent 19.

According to our study, veterans who have sought mental health counseling, said that it helped them to transition back to civilian life faster and better:

*«Basically, it was very cool, I had a very good psychological rehabilitation there. I mean, even now I look at myself and my brothers who have not gone anywhere, it's like heaven and earth.» – Respondent 16.*

## **Relationships and Recognition**

## **Priority of the Stage**

Returning to civilian life does not happen in a vacuum. Getting used to the new civilian life is primarily reflected in the everyday communication between veterans and their surroundings. Immediately after returning, veterans and their environment change the established format of communication: relationships with loved ones and other civilians become a live, everyday thing, while communication with fellow soldiers can abruptly diminish or be cut off altogether. These changes represent challenges for both veterans and people who care about them. We have identified three groups of relationships that are key to veterans' well-being: 1) family and close circle; 2) brothers and sisters-in-arms; and 3) civilian environment.

## **Family and Friends**

An extended separation from family, different experiences of family members may become a significant challenge for both the family system and all its individual members, especially considering the prospects of reuniting and rebuilding a common life after a veteran's return. A returning veteran may experience some tension even with the immediate family or friends, reacquainting with them or revisiting relationships. As already mentioned in the Service section, participation in the war and military service makes a person rethink their values, life pillars and worldview.

When we talk about family and the inner circle, we do not mean the nuclear family<sup>104</sup> – a typical model of family relationships in Ukraine, but rather people whom veterans consider their close relations.

At the stage of transition, relationships with the family are tested by newfound intimacy, and veterans begin to join the family system and play a prominent role in everyday life and joint decision-making.

*«Well, when I was back home in civilian life, I don't know, it seems like we had to learn all over again... to be a family, to share responsibilities.» – Male Respondent 20.*

At the same time, respondents said that they needed support from their loved ones. They wanted their conditions to be understood and accepted. The lack of this support from friends and family was perceived as painful.

*«The hardest thing for me was to hear from my family, well, from some, not from all of them: “Well, you're back, ok, good for you, go and have fun.» – Female Respondent 18.*

Family and close friends served as an important support during the transition.

*«If I did nothing, it would have lasted much longer (a transition period – Editor's Note). I would have thought about it, I would have been obsessed with it. But with all these factors, with my wife, child, family, comrades, friends. In addition to it, my individual tasks, constant movement. Let's take the issues with the employment center, for example, or resolving the questions with the military enlistment office. Although they were quite minor, it took time and helped me adapt. You don't get obsessed, you don't think that you're at the abyss. Or rather, not at the abyss, but at a crossroads, and you don't know what to do with yourself. You just don't focus on that thought. I think all this helped.» – Male Respondent 1.*

*«I: And who were the people who helped you the most at this stage of transition from military service to civilian life?*

*R: Well, probably my mom and girlfriend.*

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<sup>104</sup> A nuclear family is a social group consisting of a married couple and their children.

*I: Uh-huh.*

*R: Well, the closest, the closest people, the closest environment, well, a friend. Friends... some, well, just, there are three people, in short.» – Male Respondent 33.*

During the transition, it can be difficult for veterans to cope with close attention of their loved ones and promptly reintegrate with family activities. While the desire of loved ones to share the accumulated burden of responsibility is understandable, at first the expectation of relief may not be realized.

For some respondents, pets also were an important support.

*«But really, really, a dog is a cool thing. So this is another thing that I, just in 2018, I was released, and in 2018 I got a dog... literally... After four months... It helped me relax, to be honest. So, basically, in terms of psychological rehabilitation, you can write as a recommendation that you get a dog.» – Male Respondent 22.*

*«R: I'm saying, unfortunately, I have much less now than I used to have, here. And, well, more than a year ago, I got a puppy. Well, you've seen him. I: Yes, we saw him.»*

*«R: That's my personal rehabilitation doctor, because I'm with him every day, 1.5 hours in the morning, 1.5 hours in the evening, so if you count it as a sport, then I guess so.» – Male Respondent 32.*

### **Brothers and Sisters-in-Arms**

During their service, brothers and sisters-in-arms become an important and constant part of a soldier's life. Relationships with them are valuable, and the bond that soldiers feel among their peers is unlike any other. However, after the end of the service, relationships with fellow soldiers also undergo changes. There is less communication, and gradually less shared experience. Veterans often live far away from their closest brothers and sisters in arms, or the latter may choose to continue serving. Sometimes, comrades-in-arms are killed in action or die after completing their service, and the impact of these relationships

and the grief over their loss accompany veterans in civilian life. In particular, at the stage of transition and the beginning of civilian life, respondents noted the influence of sworn brothers and sisters. They are the only ones who can truly share each other's past combat experience and face similar challenges after returning.

*«I was trying to overcome this myself, I tried. A friend, a classmate, advised me. He also retired from the Armed Forces a year ago. He told me that he went through the same stage, so he advised me not to worry, it will pass. That is, over time, you adapt more and you get used to military service and realize that you are already in civilian life.» – Respondent 27.*

*«Well, it seems that the biggest support came from my parents, of course. In a way, from my brothers, because many of them, many of them gave all the negative examples of what not to do. That's it. That's what you could learn from.» – Respondent 18.*

During the transition, veterans may feel a shortage of communication with brothers and sisters-in-arms. Veterans may feel deprived of their «pack».

*«Well, the biggest cases, the biggest feelings that no one understands me except my brothers-in-arms. I was, I was certain that no one could have a conversation with me. I saw fear, I saw regret, I saw hatred. And many other things, yes. But the understanding was only among my comrades, so it was hard.» – Male Respondent 16.*

*«There is probably more understanding among people who are close in spirit, so to speak. Very often, every day, 5 to 10 times, we would call our comrades, talk... What? How? With whom? We lack such communication in our circle... the usual one.» – Male Respondent 37.*

## **Civilian Environment**

For the veterans we interviewed, recognition of their experience, contribution and needs by their civilian surroundings was also important, but they often encountered devaluation or belittling of their experience.

*«In the area of relationships with others, I thought that in this area the most important thing that was needed from people was understanding, understanding that everything was not in vain.» – Male Respondent 14.*

*I probably needed that kind of support, that your efforts were not in vain, to have someone to tell you “Well done”, that you did something good...» – Female Respondent 10.*

*«And it was, well, nice, but the way some people treated it, like, why do we need it... well, it's very unpleasant to hear, well, it's still unpleasant when someone says, “Well, he fought... and what's next?» – Male Respondent 14.*

Respondents said that they wanted peace, but they also wanted support.

*«Back then, I wanted everyone to leave me alone, to stop bothering me, to just leave me alone. And now, after analyzing the past four years, I realized that what I wanted most was support, some kind of understanding.» – Male Respondent 6.*

Another female veteran said something similar. Although she needed support, it was difficult for her to reach out to others:

*«I needed more... Probably some warmth, you know, from the people around me, but at the same time I realized that I had wrapped myself in a cocoon and I was like a hedgehog. It was difficult for me when there was some physical contact, some hugs, and I was not comfortable at that moment. Some things that used to be simple and understandable change later, and you start to treat everything a little differently.» – Female Respondent 10.*

Some veterans said that if they do not get adequate support at this stage, they may give up, and return will become more difficult:

*«Well, it's... as they say, not to give up, because many, I know, who return, hang themselves. Or shoot themselves. Basically, it's like suicide, I think it's because there is no support. Even if this person wants to find support and talks to someone about it, he or she realizes that he/she is not*

*understood. If a civilian person were to talk to him or her, they would want to understand him/her. But they cannot understand him or her. No matter how much they want to. And many people give up, and this starts a kind of delirium in their heads. So, what can I do? What, go back there and find that there is no one there, I don't know anyone there. Well, many people return, yes. But those who return, they just don't come back. And the one who does return, well, I mean, he is always there in his mind.<sup>105</sup>» – Male Respondent 15.*

It is important to mention that the pity is irritating and needless for veterans:

*«Perhaps in all areas, I needed understanding, understanding and support. And in that order: first understanding, then support. Because support is useless without understanding. And this was the most important thing I needed for literally many years. In the year '15, it was extremely difficult to find it. Because if you're not with your brothers-in-arms, you meet civilians, well, you meet some new people, they say, you say, I'm someone who recently returned from the war. And that's it, and there you see people's reactions, either fear or... or pity, you know, like the cat from the Shrek cartoon, eyes, or something else, or just something like "I don't care". And this "I don't care" is probably the best reaction possible. Like, okay, I don't care, it's okay, it's okay, because the pity was the worst part. Why, why feel sorry for me, like nothing super terrible happened, I don't know, my arms and legs are still there, everything is fine. There is nothing to feel sorry for. And this kind of understanding, this deep understanding, could only be found among my brothers-in-arms, volunteers. They are the real volunteers, those who went to the east. I don't know. Probably no one else. And this is what my soul needs very much.» – Male Respondent 16.*

Military and civilian cultures differ significantly. This difference can be exacerbated in times of war. It can be difficult for civilians to imagine, comprehend and understand the experience of soldiers, and soldiers may feel disconnected from the civilian world.

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<sup>105</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

Different experiences affect the relationship between civilians and veterans. When returning to civilian life, veterans and their environment gradually find the understanding necessary for quality coexistence. However, at the beginning, finding a common language may be difficult, and veterans make efforts to feel comfortable in the civilian environment:

*«You come to realize some things that, in my case, when I lived for 11 years in a community where everyone understood some military things, some military jokes, some military topics, yes. Then you realize that when you are surrounded by civilians and surrounded by your colleagues, you have to choose how to say a joke, what topic to talk about, and what not. In this regard, there are differences in communication.» – Male Respondent 3.*

*«Even so, I try very hard to keep myself in control and all that, often just things like that. Often I can just tell some bad military joke, and the military will laugh and everything seems okay, but a gentle civilian female soul does not accept such jokes. So it's hard, and if I restrain myself, it's not me anymore. It is very difficult to constantly think about it, to filter it, and it turns out that any relationship, more or less a serious and deep relationship, either leads to acceptance of the person you are or not.» – Male Respondent 16.*

*«If you talk to civilians, there are always scandals and intrigues, someone owes something to someone else, someone has something to tell. The army men meet, they don't like something, they say it to the eye, or laugh, or give each other a hard time, and it's over and everything is fine again. Everything is so simple. No one ever discusses anything behind your back, I don't know. And civilians lack some kind of openness. That's the way it is.»<sup>106</sup> – Male Respondent 39.*

*«Well, I went to work. I mean, I tried to settle into this normal life, kind of, and it was difficult to establish communication with people.»<sup>107</sup> – Respondent 39.*

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<sup>106</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

<sup>107</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.



*«I'm not a very sociable person at all, I mean, with some of my own people... I have no problems, I have communication and so on, but with civilians it's hard, I don't know what to talk about with them.» – Male Respondent 11.*

*«We left this society to change it. This corruption, this lie, and so on, was the biggest thing that worried us. We went to war to change it. We did it in the war because it was impossible to keep the Russians there without changing ourselves. And I managed to do that. And here, nothing has actually changed. And that's why rehabilitation is not the right approach here at all, but rather development, acculturation, and things like that. That is, we actually come to a society where we do not find understanding, and the only thing we have to do is to create something new and offer it. If it's interesting, do it like we do, if it's not interesting, stay in the past, and we will move on. This is the philosophy.» – Respondent 13.*

Civilians' perceptions of the military are often unrealistic, but rather shaped by works of art, books and movies, the media, or social media. Lack of personal experience leads to stereotypical thinking and fear of strangers. As of 2021,<sup>108</sup> 55% of Ukrainians said that they knew at least one veteran, and 10% indicated that it was a family member.<sup>109</sup> Among the veterans we interviewed, there was often evidence that civilians relied on stereotypes when dealing with them:

*«With my civilian friends, somehow such casual acquaintances disappeared almost instantly, half of them would look at you and think immediately, "oh, a military man, they are all like that," and I am a military man, so when you come home, they disappear, and they look at you like that, and they think you're going to rush at them and shoot them all or*

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<sup>108</sup> As of 2023, according to the Twenty-fourth National Wartime Survey conducted by the Sociological Group Rating, 49% of respondents said that among their relatives and friends there were those who participated in hostilities on the territory of Ukraine between 2014 and 2021. 65% said that among their relatives, there are those who have fought or are fighting at the front since February 24, 2022, and, compared to the results of previous studies, this percentage is increasing. This could potentially differentiate the journeys of veterans after the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

<sup>109</sup> Veteran Reintegration Survey (2021). IREX.

[irex.org/sites/default/files/Survey%20Methodology%20-%20Ukrainian.pdf](https://irex.org/sites/default/files/Survey%20Methodology%20-%20Ukrainian.pdf)

*blow up a grenade, so they disappear, except for people who become very interested in you, or if they are not very interested, they disappear, too.» – Male Respondent 8.*

*«Just imagine, as far as I understand now and from my observations and communication, you as a veteran, as someone who was in captivity, you are treated as a sick person, as a psychopath. A veteran is already a psychopath in a person's mind, and he or she expects you to be a psychopath, and no matter what you say, what is so psychopathic about it. Even if you raise your voice a little bit, you are a psychopath. And so you have to watch yourself very carefully in order not to give an opportunity to draw such conclusions. This, by the way, annoys your interlocutors. When you are calm, and the question is acute, and he or she starts to get nervous, it makes him or her even more nervous, so... They may say he is sick because he is too calm, imagine that, that's why he is sick. He is calm in such a situation, so he is sick. In fact, when the situation with those buses arose, that bus driver said, "I also fought, I'm an Afghanistan veteran, I'm all that." I look at him calmly and ask him in which city he fought in Afghanistan. And he says, "What city?" In which city did you fight, because I know, I talked to Afghans, I know where everything was, that is, these moments. And immediately he was quiet, quiet, quiet, because most likely he had not fought. Those who have fought do not shout, and everything is quiet, like that.» – Male Respondent 13.*

Government representatives and service providers have revealed the same prejudiced attitude to veterans, which represents an obstacle to them as they are trying to get state support.

*«And then you come across such an attitude in the society that: it turns out there are police forces or police that are supposed to protect the public interest. I mean, we had a quarrel with a neighbor, you can't just go up and hit him in the face... or just hit him somewhere... you have to go to the police, for example. And the police would come and say, "Well, what's the problem? Oh, you were in the ATO? Are you contused? That's it". And that's it. Although I just wanted to protect my interests.» – Male Respondent 22.*

*«I mean, here, like, here, they are looking at you as you are walking into the Employment Center, as if you were not a person with military experience, not a person who has just returned from the front, but a homeless person. A stinker... That's how it was. I mean, you could see it in their eyes.» – Male Respondent 33.*

People who are not involved in military service may ask insensitive questions, for example:

*«R: With civilians it's not difficult, but after the war it's just that you can't talk about something, you try to avoid it, and they start asking questions, what happened there. You just try to avoid those stupid questions.*

*I: If there is anything else you want to add to this, what was the communication with civilians like? Did you make any civilian friends after you returned?*

*R: No, nothing. The ones I had remained the same. As for communication, I mean, those friends who asked stupid questions, like what happened there, who did you kill there, what did you shoot there. And you realize that you have nothing to talk about, and you even delete their number.»<sup>110</sup> – Male Respondent 15.*

*«And then he asked me right away, as soon as we sat down at the table, he started asking these questions: "How is it there? What's going on there? Did you kill anyone? Did you see anything?" I was laughing at all of this, and once I told them that I had seen death, they were like, "Oh, this time has come," and then everyone else just ate in silence, it literally took half an hour to finish the meal. Everyone ran away and I was left alone in the room.» – Male Respondent 6.*

*«Well, these are standard, expected questions. From civilians to the military. "How did you serve?», "Was it scary?», "Did you kill or not?», "What did you see?» – Respondent 37.*

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<sup>110</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

However, sometimes veterans reported experiences of discrimination by civilians:

*«The only time was when I went to the passport office to get a passport, and there was this announcement: “For war veterans, there is a special priority.” And at the entrance, they just started blocking my way, like, we’re waiting and you’re going to wait. I said: “Well, I’m a combat participant, it says so.” – “We don’t care about that, just wait.» – Male Respondent 6.*

*«I: How did your colleagues perceive your status?*

*«R: In its peculiar way, I... at first it was very funny when I, like everyone else, had an extra 14 days of vacation... and they were like “oh, of course...” and I said: “Well, who was stopping you? Who was stopping you?” well... and there was also an attitude that they didn’t even want to give us 10 days of vacation, to put it mildly... someone went on vacation for 6 days, 8 days, those who had worked for a long time, for 10 days, and here you come at any time and take 14 days, so... and many... they were like “oh, these ATO members”, and I said “Why? Zhenya and I came to work here, we need a vacation!” We came in and wrote an application to take vacation, and the boss was like, “Well, Semen and Zhenya are going on vacation! Guys, your vacations are postponed!” They were like, “Wow!” So what? So what? We have to use it! I can use it! That’s it! In this respect, yes, they were jealous in some way, because you have 100 percent sick leave, 100 percent vacation, and 14 days of additional leave. But who was stopping you? We were all in the military registration and enlistment office together!» – Male Respondent 14.*

*«And our Department of Internal Affairs has these round faces: “Who are you? What are you doing?” And they especially asked me if I faked it, because I was old, they believed I couldn’t fight, and I said: “I was at the frontline...” I had to explain these things, and people who clearly did not deserve to be explained would sit there quietly.» – Male Respondent 13.*

**Veterans we interviewed reported the following difficulties in communicating with civilians:**

- **Different Values**

The military may not understand some actions or values of civilians. For example, one of the veterans said that he had a strong desire to change something and did not understand those who work only for money.

*«I still don't understand some people. I have civilian friends, acquaintances. But these are people who have known me for a long time. Two of them used to serve in the army. Well, back then, in the year '13... I talk to them, we have a common language. Only their vision of life... their life path is a little different. We can discuss some sensitive topics with them without any problems, in general, we can talk about anything. Sometimes there are situations when we simply have nothing to talk about. Because for some people, their whole life is about making money. And that's it. So for me, first of all, I think about what I want to change in my life in principle, or in this country. To finally come to this. To finally do something. I don't care if it's just four words in a history textbook. I have a desire for this. Somehow I try to stick my nose in somewhere to influence it.» – Male Respondent 1.*

*«It was unusual, just, well, again, solving the problems that were happening at the time, it seemed to me somehow insignificant. People who, well, also live in a beautiful city, have jobs, have housing, and complain about some everyday things, it seems ridiculous to me, when there are really much more serious things. That's why I still feel a little uncomfortable in such situations.» – Female Respondent 10.*

*«I didn't fly anywhere, people are not at war, healthy men are sitting there, drinking beer and coffee and so on. I couldn't understand why some guys, exactly like me, are out there, kind of, risking their lives every day in the trenches or somewhere else. And others are here, and they are fine, and, by the way, I know they have received summons from enlistment offices, and they have dodged them and feel ok, sort of.» – Male Respondent 13.*

*«And with those people who are interested in this, who are following it closely, it is clear that it was easier to establish communication. It was difficult to communicate with those people who didn't care about what was going on. I mean, it's more on the inside.*

*Accepting the fact that people, by and large, don't care about it was, by and large, a struggle with yourself, not with the environment. You can't prove anything to them, so there's no point. So, beating their faces? It's no use either. So it was more of a struggle with myself initially, after the rotation.» – Male Respondent 39.*

● **Different experiences and lack of topics of conversation with civilians.**

*«I have no problems, I have communication and so on, but it is difficult with civilians, I don't know what to talk about with them.» – Male Respondent 11.*

*«Well, at work, for example, I had my own group of people, let's say, with whom we constantly talked, went for coffee, and here, when I first came back, the first thing I did was to go back to this group. Well, I think I wanted to do exactly the same as before, to recreate everything as it was before, but it didn't work out that way. For example, before the war, we used to go to lunch together all the time, and we used to talk. The office remained the same, the people were the same, and I went there again for a couple of lunches, and I realized that if everything changed, I would not be on the same path with those people.» – Male Respondent 20.*

*«I think that the attitude of these people had a great influence, and then, roughly speaking, you don't talk about these topics with these people anymore, you realize that there is, for example, some topic, the ATO, the army, or something else, you immediately realize that there are a few people with whom you can talk about it, and with everyone else, you just never even bring it up, you don't get into it, because you know that they won't understand.» – Male Respondent 14.*

This section may suggest that civilian society is hostile to veterans. Therefore, we would like to caution against jumping to conclusions and emphasize that the relationship between veterans and civilians upon return is a joint endeavor, where everyone has their part of responsibility to ensure mutual understanding.

Military and civilian cultures, environments, and communities are different, and sometimes it may seem as if they speak different languages. However, we are all part of the same country, military and civilian alike, we rely on each other and our society would not be complete without any of us. There are many examples of civilian friends, close associates, colleagues and neighbors supporting veterans, trying to understand them and not asking unnecessary questions. Moreover, according to the experience of Veteran Hub consultants, the civilian community often cares about veterans and their families, and makes efforts to ensure quality support for them upon their return and at further stages of their journey. Essentially, the return to civilian life takes place in everyday communication with people around them. And each of us is an important link.

## **Vocation**

For some people, military and combat service is perhaps the most meaningful experience of their lives that gives them a sense of fulfillment of their vocation and an opportunity to try to change their lives fundamentally, and thus can influence how veterans perceive their civilian employment and what opportunities they seek after returning.

However, at the transition stage, veterans still have a rather short planning horizon, and with work and vocation, as with other elements of well-being, it takes time to understand and choose their new aspirations.

Upon returning from service, veterans have the right to resume civilian employment. At the time of the study (2021–2022), employers were also obliged to keep paying the average salary of the military for the period of service,<sup>111</sup> but this rule was simplified after the outbreak of the full-scale invasion.<sup>112</sup> At the same time, according to the IREX Veterans

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<sup>111</sup> Labor Code of Ukraine, Code of Ukraine Number 322-VIII (2023) (Ukraine). <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/322-08#Text> and On Military Duty and Military Service, Law of Ukraine Number 2232-XII (2023) (Ukraine). [zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text](https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2232-12#Text)

<sup>112</sup> On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine on Optimization of Labor Relations, Law of Ukraine Number 2352-IX (2022) (Ukraine).

Reintegration Study (2021), more than 60% of ATO/JFO veterans chose to change their employment after service.

*«I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to find a job for a very long time, which would be very sad for me. And when I was lucky enough to find a job so quickly, in a couple of months, I was kind of mega happy, and now everything is even better. I'm really happy now. I can't say that something is gnawing at me. Not at all, actually. Not everyone is like me.»<sup>113</sup> – Male Respondent 39.*

## **Education**

It goes without doubt that education is an important element of the veterans' well-being. However, for the veterans interviewed it was not the priority immediately after completing their service. Yet, it became more essential at later stages of their journeys. This may be due to general fatigue and confusion during the transition, which are naturally not the most resourceful states for learning.

## **Work or Other Occupation**

During the transition, veterans may either start looking for a job or choose not to work for a certain period of time, depending on their personal capabilities and needs.

*«Well... I first registered at the military enlistment office at the place of residence, then I registered at the employment center, went and, of course, if I was looking for a job there... I would have written a CV there... if I was more interested in what I could... do, so I would already... earn money.» – Male Respondent 21.*

Some veterans said that after their discharge they would rather keep themselves busy, they would not need to rest:

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<sup>113</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.



*«Because I don't really know why, but it was very difficult for me to do nothing after, after my discharge. Ahem, ahem. I mean, I had to do something all the time, keep myself busy, move somewhere, grow, and so on.» – Male Respondent 16.*

*«There was no such thing as a desire to lie down, bask in the sun, or something like that. I just wanted to do something quickly. We wanted to do some work. That's why we started working right away. We went to the village and put things in order. I mean... household work, household work.» – Male Respondent 12.*

One of the respondents said that he opened his own business one month and a half after his return:

*«Then something came to my mind, I went to the sanitary service, to security, and met people there. A month and a half later, I started a security company and then I opened a security company.» – Male Respondent 26.*

Having a job or other meaningful occupation helped respondents switch focus during the transition and get distracted from heavy thoughts.

*«The biggest need was to keep myself busy, to distract myself, to switch two hundred percent from the war, that is, it was very difficult to switch to, let's say, the civilian mode when I arrived home, well, that is, today you are a military man – tomorrow you are a civilian. That is, this transition – switching, that is – is the most difficult transition, so I tried to load myself as much as possible at that time, no matter whether it was work or something, well, even household chores, spending time with my family, as much as possible to switch as soon as possible.» – Male Respondent 24.*

*«I mean, I arrived, and I realized that yes, I needed to distance myself from everything. I had just moved into a new apartment, so it needed minimal repairs, and I was doing that, plunging into everything. I knew that I had a younger sister to take care of, because when I left, she just started first grade, and so for some time I would come home only once a year, so I had to catch up with all this, kind of». – Female Respondent 18.*

At this stage, respondents would often want to return to service or were simply thinking about continuing to serve.

## **Material Needs and Security**

Priority of the stage

During the transition phase, the legal status of a person changes, as does the procedure to receive benefits and services the veteran is eligible for. To register a veteran's status and the right to government support, a veteran will have to go through a number of bureaucratic challenges and obstacles. All this requires significant efforts from veterans and their families. However, legal security, which includes the right to government support, is crucial during the transition phase and beyond. The end of service also means the end of an activity that provides a certain sustainable income. Therefore, veterans face financial challenges almost immediately after returning. Hence, financial security, ownership of property and assets are important factors of well-being during the transition.

## **Property and Assets**

Financial security is an important aspect of veterans' well-being during the transition. A large number of respondents mentioned that they are concerned about their financial needs as they are resuming their civilian life. In particular, they worried that they did not have enough money or that they would run out of money. They were particularly concerned that they needed to provide for their families, so they were afraid that they would be strapped for cash.

*«Returning to civilian life means returning to the family and, accordingly... Well, usual problems arise... financial problems, because you need to provide for your family, and the financial compensation from the armed forces was quite high compared to what you can earn in civilian life, in simple jobs. Therefore, the first problem is financial, the search for... let's say... financial support.» – Male Respondent 22.*

*«That's why the need for finances was simply enormous. And what I got when I was discharged was really not enough.» – Male Respondent 1.*

At the other end of the spectrum, there are volunteers who did not receive financial compensation for their service:

*«I: What challenges did you face immediately upon your return?*

*R: Probably, well... I had financial problems. Because we were volunteers, we didn't actually have any salary, my mother is a pensioner and she didn't manage to cover all the expenses. Therefore, I had quite a few financial issues that needed to be addressed immediately, and at that time I had to think about how to do it and what to do for that. And that's the first reason why I actually came back from the war, because I realized that I needed to earn money. That was the big problem.» – Female Respondent 10.*

In some cases, a significant portion of funds will have to be spent on post-service medical treatment:

*«I: Do you remember what you needed the money for, was it enough for some basic needs? Were there any difficulties?*

*R: Do you mean when I came back in 2014?*

*I: Yeah.*

*R: It was fucking hell then... Well, there was a problem then, because a lot of money was spent on medicines... on rehabilitation... it was a nightmare...»<sup>114 115</sup> – Male Respondent 29.*

Respondents mentioned that financial literacy would have helped them better manage their financial resources.

*«At that time, I would have done it better, that is, if the model of financial management had changed, I would have gone to study, to pursue a second higher education, I would have worked a little less, but more efficiently, I would have worked, would have had better rest, would have taken care of my needs more, I would have had the opportunity, I would*

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<sup>114</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

<sup>115</sup> You can read more about returning after being wounded in the study «From Injury to Return: An Ethnographic Study of Journeys of Veterans and Their Loved Ones», conducted by the NGO Pryncyp (Principle).

*have joined some kind of decent veteran environment right after my return, probably something like that.» – Male Respondent 4.*

Those who had some financial savings were in a better position upon return and those without the financial cushion felt the opposite:

*«Unemployment allowance, yes, they paid me, so somehow it helped me a little bit for a while, plus I had some money saved up, from the service, and therefore I did not feel such a strong financial need.» – Male Respondent 21.*

*«The financial cushion was there, but it would last no longer than three months. So, knowing that in three months this “safety cushion” will no longer be there, you instinctively turn on to... to keep this cushion.» – Male Respondent 24.*

*«Well... after returning, after completing my military service, it was difficult, to be honest. In terms of... there was no financial cushion that could help me.» – Male Respondent 22.*

Some respondents mentioned that it was the lack of money or lack of funds that would prevent them from satisfying their needs such as recreation or implementing some ideas, like changing their activities. Lack of funds would force the veterans to prioritize earnings over their own needs during the transition.

*«I wanted to spend more time with my family. But at the same time, I resigned, received some payments, and that's it. All these amounts are quite small, and usually during the service, I have accumulated some debts somehow. I paid them off, and that was it. Almost zero. For example, it is quite difficult to go somewhere to rest with your family, to unwind yourself.» – Male Respondent 1.*

*«I have not had my medical examination yet, because there was no money for an MRI, and all these... I went to a family physician, they all told me that the state does not cover this, not at the expense of the state. So ...» – Male Respondent 2.*

*«I started looking for a job, what I wanted to do, I wanted to go on vacation, but... it happened only recently, we went on vacation with my family, I had to work somehow. I wanted to go on vacation with my family, but we did it just recently.» – Male Respondent 8.*

The transition to civilian life involves a change in social status: a former military service member becomes a veteran.<sup>116</sup> The change in legal status means new responsibilities. Veterans become eligible for new benefits. Among the veterans we interviewed, many applied for their veteran's status at the early stages of their civilian life.

For some, the process was quick, for others it took a long time due to bureaucracy.

Veterans may face the following barriers or have the following needs when applying for and receiving benefits:

- **Lack of information and complexity of the process to obtain a veteran's status and benefits**

*«I got two hectares of land, but I can't get ten acres. I know how to get this land lot, but I need a lawyer for that, because, unfortunately, I have no right...» – Male Respondent 26.*

*«I'm telling you, I still don't know them in full. I mean, what benefits do I have?»<sup>117</sup> – Male Respondent 9.*

*«I: Could you tell us please what knowledge or support did you lack at the time when you were preparing any of these documents?*

*R: Yes, knowledge, from a legal point of view, such as what to do in case of some kind of refusal or incorrect attitude, that's what I lacked.» – Male Respondent 27.*

*«Well, to be honest, I currently enjoy one benefit – free travel in the subway and public transportation. I don't have any other benefits as such from the*

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<sup>116</sup> From a legal point of view, a moment when a person acquires the status of a veteran is the moment when the authorized body makes a decision to grant such a person a status of a combat participant. He or she should receive a certificate in person. As a rule, military personnel receive a status of combat participant while still in service (if they have the relevant documents), but if this is not possible, it can be done after discharge.

<sup>117</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

*military, except for disability from military service. I don't even know all the benefits, to be honest, which may be available somewhere, some subsidized utilities – I don't use them». – Male Respondent 5.*

*«I: Have you tried to get public housing?*

*R: I don't know what it's like.*

*I: You as a combatant [are eligible to receive one].*

*R: I didn't even know that you can get a privilege like that.» – Male Respondent 7.*

*«I did not receive land, I did not even apply for it, because of bureaucracy, I do not like bureaucracy at all.» – Male Respondent 6.*

*«The military enlistment office, the social security center, medical commissions. Basically, there is so much nonsense. It's just unbelievable. It was all very undiplomatic.» – Male Respondent 1.*

*«I: What challenges did you face immediately after your return or after your discharge, or rather, maybe your final discharge?*

*R: The most immediate challenge for me, for everybody, is, well, this is my personal opinion, well, it's a little bit like that of my friends and comrades there – the bureaucracy of all those social services and all that. I took a few steps to apply for some benefits or something else, then I just, well, I didn't have enough strength, as they say, I broke down. I said: "I'd rather earn this money and I wouldn't need anything from you." That was it. I mean, what's on this certificate, bring that certificate, while you're collecting this certificate, the other certificate is already outdated – get a new one, you have a new certificate with a new number, this one is not suitable, so it's a circle, like a cycle, endless.» – Male Respondent 7.*

### ● Denial of benefits

*«And in terms of land issues, I have... I have not registered any land lot, in principle, because again... I do not understand it, I have... I tried to register land a couple of times, but... the thing is that I do not know how to go there and ask. A couple of times... I don't have any acquaintances in the village council who can choose land, tell me that there is land there. Basically, at the same time when I was doing this, it happened like this:*

*First, I got on a waiting list for a land plot, somewhere there... I was registered under the number two thousand in the waiting list, and then I was told that I was entitled to a couple of hectares of agricultural land, and there were all kinds of cadastral maps on the websites, showing different land lots freely available.*

*So, it went like this: I called several village councils. I would call and the head of the village council would answer the phone. I would say, "I am an ATO participant, I have the right to land, I would like to get the land. I look at the map, you have land. They answer me, well, there is no land and in general we have enough ATO participants from our village waiting to receive free land plots. I would say, "Who am I then, if..." Don't I belong here? Or if you use this logic, that someone from our village is "one of us" versus "not one of us," then what did I have to do with Donbas? I had never been there before the ATO, so I can't say that I am "one of them," but I didn't ask this question, you know, when I was in Donbas. At the end of the argument, they told me that you can write an application to receive land... land lots are available on paper, but we will refuse you, you can go to court, while the trial is going on, we will still manage this land lot and assign it to someone who we want. After that, I got angry and decided that I would not go there and beg for that land.» – Male Respondent 20.*

● **Discrimination and negative attitude from civilians or service providers such as «Why does veteran need these benefits»**

*«And in the end, it's all done right there, you order it, and you have to wait. I don't want to go back to this now. I went to those institutions, to those offices, I would stand, listen, and listen to them saying different things, including: "You're so young, why do you need benefits? We didn't send you there. Why should we give them to you.» – Male Respondent 7.*

*«Because when I go to the military enlistment office, they always give me some excuses. So now I'm registered in another region, because we sold everything there. My mom sold everything and bought a house in another region. And I went to the military enlistment office there, and I went there*



*twice. And I was told that I won't get any benefits for this or that reason, I won't get benefits for electricity or anything. But I can't come and beg. So, I provided all the documents the first time. Still, they wouldn't give me the benefits, I won't come back for the second time.» – Respondent 2.*

## **Housing and Physical Environment**

Priority of the stage

One of the first questions that arises at the beginning of civilian life is «Where to live?» Veterans are returning to the civilian life they left behind when they started their service. When returning, they discover all the changes their civilian environment has undergone during the time of their absence. We observe that the veterans at this stage prefer to have certainty about their living conditions rather than to be a house owner.

When returning, veterans may not be fully aware of their personal needs and tend to look for their own housing as a «roof over their heads.» They express concern when they have none.

*«I: You said that you live in a dormitory, you rent a room there, right?*

*R: Well, it's free of charge.*

*I: Oh, well, yeah.*

*R: University dormitory.*

*I: Yes. And how is it, are you happy there, comfortable, or would you like to change?*

*R: I would like to change it, but the first time I came to the dormitory, when I looked at that room, I was like: "Oh, my God!" Our trench was cleaner and tidier than this room.*

*I: Yeah, you said that.*

*R: I was like, well, I didn't have suicidal thoughts before, when I came to the dormitory, you look at all that, you want to cut your veins there. And you think, how can you live in this mess? How do people live in this? And then somehow I came to terms with this fact and it seemed to be okay. Well, there was no refrigerator, no big deal. There was no electricity in our neighborhood. And here, even though it happens to be on the sunny side, it's always warm. I like warmth, well, I like warmth, but not heat, and I also don't like it when it's very cold, but I like cold at times. And so I just got*

*into this climatic shell in which I feel comfortable. True, there were four of us in one room, so, one might say, three times smaller than this one, four of us lived, but now two of us have moved out, so there are only two of us remaining here. And this is just enough space for two people to live in this room. So, we are craving not just for better conditions, but for much better conditions.» – Male Respondent 6.*

Interviewed veterans who had their own housing enjoyed greater confidence as regards their returning. The opposite was true for those who had nowhere to return to:

*«I retired from the Army like everyone else. Of course, I was preoccupied with heavy thoughts, that's for sure. First of all, in my condition, what should I do next? There were thoughts that I was determined to do, and how well they would be realized by me, well, in terms of my socialization, was very much in question. I mean, I have no roof, in fact, I'm cut off from my family, because my wife and I are divorced, and I had no contact with my child. So I came here, met with my daughter, then came here, started the process of socialization.»<sup>118</sup> – Male Respondent 9.*

*«I: Another question: What did your housing look like? Did you have, let's say, your own space, or did you need it?*

*R: Well, thanks to my relatives, perhaps, there was no such urgent need, but there is always a feeling that you owe someone something, that it is not yours, and you make some compromises with yourself, and I cannot say that we lived in some not very good conditions there. There were comfortable conditions there, but it was uncomfortable, so to speak, from the outside, that it was not my home, that I could not change anything there. Well, when you live in a place that is not yours and you owe someone something for that, it is not a good feeling.» – Male Respondent 3.*

Many respondents expressed a need for their own space. If you share the space with somebody else, the need to be alone is not always prioritized or possible. It was difficult for veterans to find conditions for privacy.

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<sup>118</sup> Translated from Russian – Editor's Note.

*«In general, there is always such a need. I didn't have my own place, I had nothing. I didn't have any place of my own. If I needed to be alone for an hour or two, I would go there. I would choose the kitchen. But I didn't have a place to myself, I just didn't have a corner. I dream of having my own office there, but it's just a dream for now.» – Male Respondent 1.*

*«I: And when you returned, did you have any space of your own?*

*R: Yes, in principle, I still had it, my place on the couch in the corner. It was the most comfortable one.*

*I: Well, but a place where you can stay alone...?*

*R: No, basically not. Basically, there was no such place. People could find me everywhere.*

*I: Uh-huh... Did you feel the need for such a place?*

*R: Well, sometimes yes.» – Male Respondent 37.*

## **Life Skills and Knowledge**

## **Priority of the stage**

Ultimately, it is the veterans who follow their own path and take actions necessary to feel good in their own civilian life. We have recorded the information on the veterans' life skills, decisions and memories that served as support for them at the beginning of their civilian life. This list is by no means exhaustive, and each veteran will find their own support along the way, but it can serve as a hint and guide when looking for their own solutions.

Again, all veterans are different and what works for some will not necessarily work for others.

### **● Discussing experiences**

Speaking out and discussing combat experience with someone else helped our respondents:

*«You know, I advise you to talk as much as possible. In fact, as strange as it may sound, it really works. The more you talk about it, you just tell the same stories, day after day, and it comes out of you. And so I call it, it comes out of you... the war comes out, and there is a certain emptiness*

*that is filled with normal, calm civilian life, and it's cool. If this person wants to return to civilian life, of course.» – Male Respondent 16.*

- **Take time to adapt**

Giving yourself the opportunity to adapt and not taking on anything important and taking your time can help veterans get through this stage:

*«When I was already demobilized and was on my way home, I met a fellow soldier who had been in civilian life six months earlier, because he had been transferred from this unit to the headquarters, and he had been in civilian life for six months already. And he said something to me that I didn't hear at the time, but it was exactly what I was saying [later], that it makes sense. He said, when you come back, he said, don't rush to enter anything, don't do anything particularly important. If you think that everything is cool, that everything is fine, that everything is super, still don't rush to do anything.» – Male Respondent 28.*

- **Understanding the stages and what can happen in civilian life after end of service**

One of the respondents said that his friends warned him about how the transition stage might go, so it helped him to go through this stage more easily, to find out what to do:

*«And I... well... it was easier for me to return from the war, because my friends prepared me before the war... They at least told me what problems would appear after the war. Basically, when I was in the combat zone, I realized that there are different stages, there may be problems, and my goal was probably to do something right away. For eleven months in the army I was solving the problems of my unit, because I was an officer, I understood that I needed to invest all my energy in something quickly, otherwise I would go crazy, so after the war I quickly proposed and my first project after the war was preparing for the wedding.» – Male Respondent 4.*

*«After returning, there should definitely be a period of adaptation. A psychologist or a social worker should work with a person to help them adapt, considering their state of mind during the service and the fighting,*

*and explain to them how it may change, or what he or she may face in civilian life. They should give some instructions, explain some basic things. I don't know if there should be such people in military enlistment offices where guys return, or maybe in units, but in general, if this picture of preparation for civilian life, some kind of at least minimal instruction, I think it would be very useful, and I think it would be cool.» – Male Respondent 28.*

### ● **Self-Reliance**

The veterans' ability to plan, define tasks, goals and objectives helps them to understand where to go and set a clear reference point. One respondent said that he would set tasks for himself every day, and that would support him immensely as he was settling in civilian life:

*«For the first two weeks I didn't know what to do. I made up tasks for myself, for myself. It may be extremely stupid, but I was inventing tasks for myself. And I would set myself a to-do list.» – Male Respondent 1.*

*«I mean, I'm going to do this because I need to resolve an issue. I don't want to fall under the fence, get discharged from service, receive payment, get drunk and fall under the fence, and freeze to death – I don't want that. I have a future, I have a daughter.» – Male Respondent 9.*

The ability to keep going despite the circumstances, as well as self-reliance, helps veterans overcome difficulties.

*«In fact, support from yourself is the most important thing. I mean, when you give up, when you say to yourself, everything is bad, I can't do anything, well, that's how it will be. And when, despite the circumstances, you give yourself some vector of movement and start in a useful way. You support yourself, and you are telling yourself, okay, we will succeed, then everything will work out just fine. Even if it doesn't work out, it's not standing still, which is very important.» – Male Respondent 16.*

## Conclusions: Transition

1. Returning to civilian life takes time. It can last from one month to one and a half years on average, but, this period should not be considered a complete integration into civilian life, rather the beginning of a long journey which we will describe in more detail in the following sections.
2. Transition is an inherently difficult period and difficulties upon return are part of the journey, regardless of a veteran's actions or personality.
3. The feelings and emotions that often accompany the transition phase are confusion and anxiety about the future. «What's next?», a sense of freedom through the ability to again plan one's life independently, a desire to return to civilian life and survivor's guilt.
4. At the beginning of civilian life, soldiers move from military culture to civilian culture and their identity has to be «reconfigured» again. Military culture is different from civilian culture, and it takes some getting used to. Civilian life may seem strange and veterans may have changed during their military service.
5. When transitioning, there can often be thoughts and desires to return to war because everything was clear and familiar on the battlefield.

6. In the early stages of their return, soldiers might not feel like veterans and for some time they might be caught between two worlds: military and civilian. During wartime, legal transition from one status to another can significantly change in time from the inner transformation the veteran is experiencing. Soldiers' feeling that they are now living a civilian life may indicate the end of the transition phase and the beginning of civilian life.
7. During their service as well as at the beginning of civilian life, veterans had a vague idea of the future and were prone to form unrealistic expectations of their civilian life.
8. At the beginning of civilian life, veterans could feel tired to the point of exhaustion and need time for rest and solitude.
9. Part of a veteran's journey is finding support and encouragement in the civilian world. After completing their service, veterans rebuild and re-establish their civilian life.
10. Veterans' lives are among civilians and relationships with them have a significant impact on the experience of transition back to civilian life. At the same time, there may have been difficulties in establishing connections between veterans and their civilian environment and civilians may experience misunderstanding and prejudice. Recognition of their experiences and contributions and needs by the civilian environment is also important for veterans; but, they often encounter belittling of their experiences in the return to civilian life.

11. Respondents often did not have sufficient information about available benefits, and also noted the process of obtaining benefits and state support is bureaucratic and unattainable. Veterans often faced discrimination regarding their benefits, both from state service providers and from society.

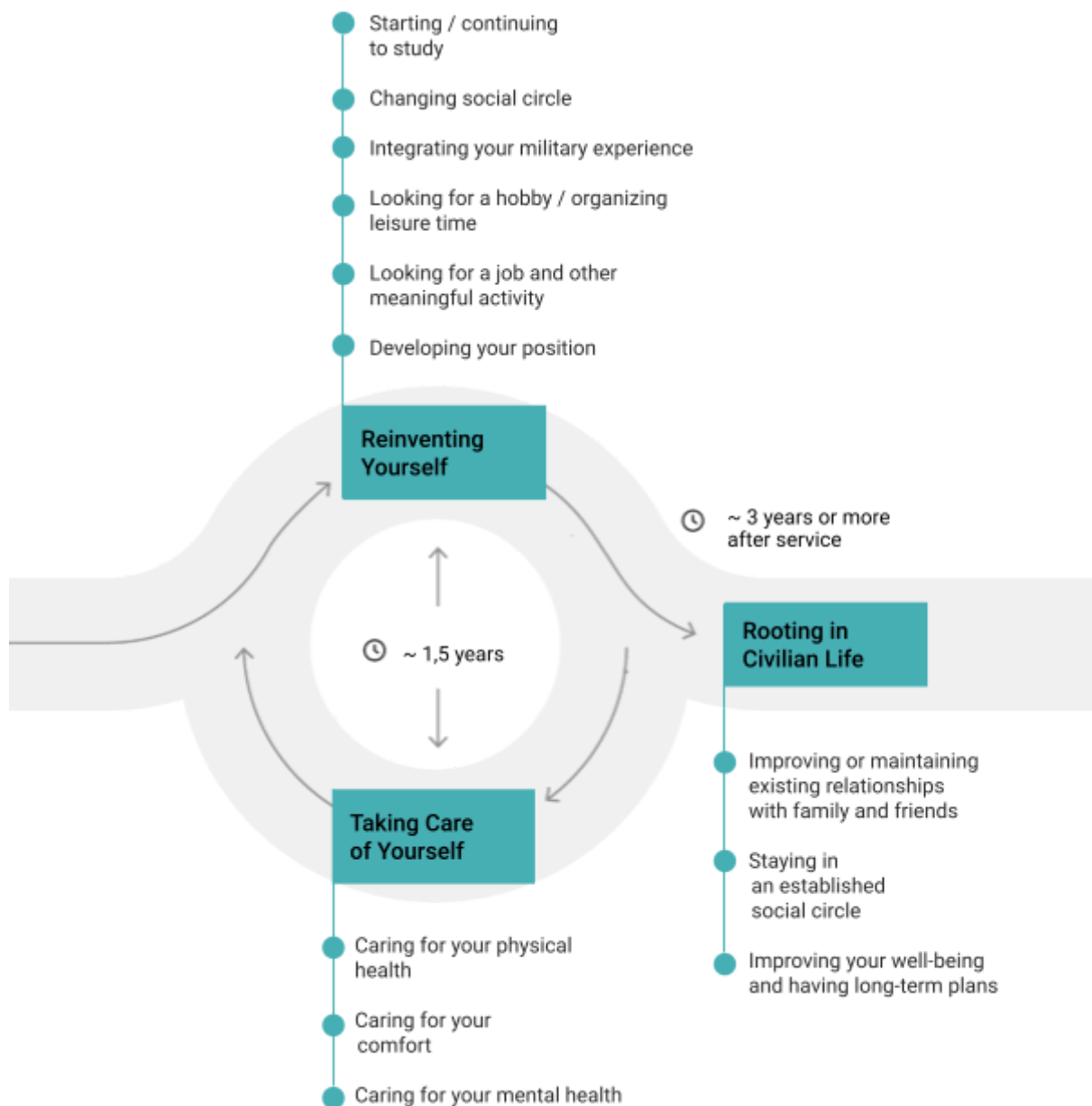


Before Enlisting  
Service  
Transition

## Civilian Life



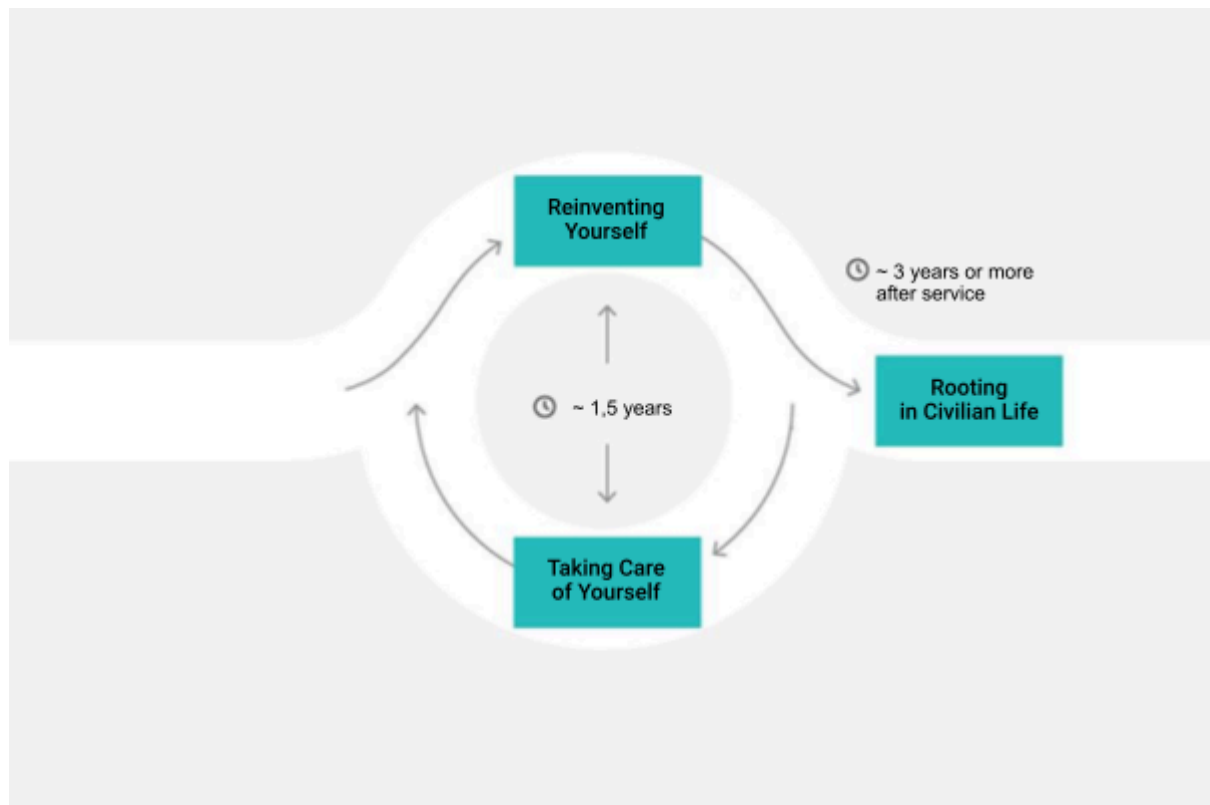
Retirement and Aging



## Civilian Life

When veterans already feel that they are part of the civilian world rather than the military, it is time to build their new civilian reality. Unlike in the service, in civilian life, veterans are free to choose what their life will be like in the future and make significant efforts to create it.

Civilian life is different for everyone. Everyone follows their own path and creates their own civilian reality. However, it is worth highlighting several similar stages that proved to be typical for Ukrainian veterans. We have found that Transition is most often accompanied by the stages of Taking Care of Yourself and Reinventing Yourself. When they are successfully completed, veterans are rooting in the civilian life they have rebuilt after returning.



However, returning is a long process that does not necessarily end with rooting in civilian life. In our research, we have encountered cases of re-signing a contract or returning to the military. For some of the veterans, this choice also became a rooting. They made a conscious decision, with a long planning horizon, and realized that the military service is their vocation.

Some of the stages can take place sequentially, while others can overlap. It is important to remember that from 2014 to the present day, Ukrainian soldiers have been returning to civilian life during the war, while some of their comrades-in-arms remain at their positions. They are depressed by the feeling of incompleteness, and civilian life can hardly be called peaceful.

In this section, we will describe each stage of civilian life: from taking care of yourself to rooting in the civilian world.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Taking care of yourself is the stage when a veteran's own needs come to the forefront. This is manifested in all areas of well-being, in particular through the desire for increased comfort, prioritization of private time and concentration on one's own interests.

When a veteran is getting used to the environment he/she returned to and begins to realize his/her own transition from war to civilian life, his/her body and psyche gradually begin to relax.<sup>119</sup> In particular, various health effects of service may begin to manifest, and their manifestations may have a significant impact on the overall well-being of veterans. These factors encourage them to take care of their own health and comfort. Simply put, the body starts to hurt, and health conditions that were previously ignored turn into chronic health problems.

Veterans may start taking care of themselves at any stage of their journey. This stage can occur simultaneously with the stages of Transition and Reinventing Yourself. We noticed that many respondents started taking care of themselves about a year and a half after the start of civilian life, and successful completion of this stage contributed to further rooting. At the stage of Taking Care of Yourself, veterans prioritize their own well-being and health. Through that they become the

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<sup>119</sup> Приходько, І. (2021). Профілактика та контроль бойового стресу у військовослужбовців: систематизація досліджень. Вісник ХНПУ імені Г. С. Сковороди «Психологія» [Prykhodko, I. (2021). Prevention and control of combat stress in military personnel: systematization of research. Bulletin of H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University «Psychology»], (64), 193–215. [doi.org/10.34142/23129387.2021.64.12](https://doi.org/10.34142/23129387.2021.64.12)

most effective allies for doctors and mental health professionals, because they become primarily interested in treatment and therapy.

Taking care of yourself is a multi-level process that involves not only looking after mental or physical health, but also arranging personal comfort or creating your own rituals. Respondents said that these might include new hobbies, looking after yourself, doing what you love, taking time for yourself, or reducing the amount of unnecessary communication with others. Taking care of yourself also includes legal security, the ability to enjoy benefits, good living conditions, and in some cases, having a personal vehicle for better mobility.

At the stage of Taking Care of Yourself, veterans begin to be more aware of their bodies and needs, take care of their diet and regain a sense of taste: what I like, what tastes good, what I would like. They may be more attentive to their environment, prioritize their own habits and rituals, and defend their behavior and rules in a shared space.

*«Well, every person has their own treats that they give themselves as a reward. And even if I don't want to live without them, without these perks, still, on the other hand, there is something so vitally important. I mean, if I have to, yes, I can give it up, I can give it up. It's a way of saving money. But again, the question here is not about saving anymore, but, as I said, not about the targeted use of funds. It comes back to financial literacy, it comes back to that.» – Male Respondent 16.*

*«I: I see you wear a bright, beautiful color, too.*

*R: That's the way to raise my spirits, no?*

*I: Well, it's very cool, very expressive. And your nails, everything is so stylish.*

*R: Yeah, we are trying our best.» – Female Respondent 38.*

This means setting aside a day for themselves or a time when the veteran takes care of himself or herself, eats delicious food, and allows himself or herself other rituals or processes.

*«I: And do you think that you, perhaps, developed some new habits, and by the way, how do you try to take care of yourself to stay in a more*

resourceful state?

*R: No, well, Ms. Olena and I came to the conclusion that we should have time for ourselves. My time for myself is Tuesdays, Veteran Hub, and every time I go to work, I spend five minutes before entering the subway, where I buy coffee, even if I'm late for work, it's my five minutes, it's the time I stand there and don't think that I have to run, that I'm late, that I didn't finish my expert evaluation, my child, whether I have or have not given her a change of clothes, it's my five minutes...» – Female Respondent 19.*

In their search for optimal methods of self-care, veterans may resort to those that are rather controversial. A variety of habits and practices are common among veterans, as well as among the civilian population. In particular, we came across evidence of potentially harmful self-care practices that, although intended to relieve pain or cope with stress, often were coupled with health risks and long-term consequences for veterans' well-being. For example, some respondents deliberately exhausted themselves, used alcohol, drugs and other substances to alter their minds.

There is insufficient data to make assumptions about the reasons for this choice, as among veterans who are prone to addictive behavior, such behavior can be formed at different stages of life: before, during, or after service. Among the generation of American veterans who joined the service after 9/11, addictive and potentially harmful behaviors are associated with a general state of stress, when a veteran is disoriented and does not understand what to do to help himself or herself, and therefore may engage in risky behaviors that, in turn, can do more harm than good.<sup>120</sup> Among the survey respondents, we recorded cases when veterans resort to drinking alcohol to improve sleep or fight insomnia, which they believe will relax the nervous system, or push themselves to exhaustion:

*«I: Please tell me one more thing, did you have any problems sleeping after returning from service? If so, how did you deal with them?*

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<sup>120</sup> Markowitz, F. E., Kintzle, S., & Castro, C. A. (2022). Military-to-civilian transition strains and risky behavior among post-9/11 veterans. *Military Psychology*, 1–12.  
[doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2022.2065177](https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2022.2065177)

*R: Well, I still have them now, here. Well, one of the things, as I told you, is a small glass of a good drink, then I can, there is a chance that I will fall asleep. But, let's just say, another method: I don't go to bed until my body says that it's over and I just pass out, and I often had a day or two of not sleeping and only then I managed to fall asleep. The body was already exhausted.» – Male Respondent 32.*

## Well-Being: Taking Care of Yourself

### Health

### Priority of the Stage

#### Physical Health

The body undergoes changes during and after service. It is not only about injuries, traumas and scars, but also about changes in weight, muscle tone and endurance. The impact of military service and combat may last for the rest of the veteran's life.

We have previously noted that during service, soldiers tend to overlook and fail to treat conditions that they believe are not critical or serious enough. If they want to remain in the defense forces, they would rather choose not to report conditions that could potentially lead to discharge from service. In some cases, soldiers may not have access to timely and quality medical care, or the care available may not meet their needs or take into account their specific requirements. However, ignoring and concealing problems does not help to solve them. Should the veterans choose not to take care of themselves during service, or should they be forced to do so by circumstances, it will not help them to eliminate the consequences of such a dangerous health condition.

Simply put, after a certain period of time after service completion, the body begins to fail. Detection of chronic conditions, their correct diagnosis and treatment take time.

From the moment veterans choose to seek medical care and improve their physical condition, health becomes one of the priorities for their well-being. Taking care of yourself is not only about visiting a doctor or having regular health check-ups. It is about other actions aimed at improving your own well-being, such as massage or warm baths to



relieve pain, exercising in the morning, and a well-planned daily schedule. Veterans often go in for sports and thus maintain their physical condition.

*«I: ...How long do you think this transition from the military service to this civilian life lasted?*

*R: Well, I don't know... somehow... On the one hand, I joined in right away, on the other hand, I constantly... I brought some habits that I still have there that are constantly haunting me. For example, I don't know, getting up in the morning at the same time, doing exercises, jogging every two days, exercising on these... physical training on the simulators, and so on, I kind of took it with me and carried it with me all the time...» – Male Respondent 20.*

A well-planned daily schedule may become an effective tool in restoring the necessary routine.

*«I: And are there any physical health consequences that you have acquired as a result of your service that may affect your daily life?*

*R: The only thing is my back. At one point, when we were not prepared, we were thrown into a march with all the ammunition, and then I broke my back a little bit. It took me some time to somehow restore it, but from time to time there are moments when I realize that my back hurts, just the lower back is sore. In this case, I have to get into a warm bath, or just sit down, or lie down and ask to have my lower back massaged, because sometimes it can become so painful that my eyes just crawl up my forehead. This is the only such health issue. And I had a scan, and in general, everything is fine there. Nothing showed anything that would require any kind of surgery or anything else. So in this case, the only thing I came to logically was that if it's a sport, then I must either isolate the back or strengthen the body as much as possible. That is, to keep some kind of balance. That's all.» – Female Respondent 18.*

*«I: Tell us a little bit about your physical and psychological state. When you began to realize this moment of transition from military service to civilian life, what were the needs of your health and your psychological state?*

*R: Well, health... I go in for sports, being a psychologist myself, I need to go in for sports, too, it's one of the methods of self-regulation that helps me to recover, and I also have problems with my back. Since I got discharged, to feel good and be able to walk, and not to have such pains, I just need to exercise and do this and that... Sports is necessary, something that is physical is necessary.» – Female Respondent 30.*

Some respondents said that in civilian life they have a better sleep schedule, which improves the sleep quality:

*«I: How do you assess your health now and what do you do to support yourself?*

*R: Basically, I try to keep a stable schedule, in terms of going to bed at 11 o'clock and waking up at 6 in the morning. It doesn't always work out, but at least it's something. In addition to it, I realized that I was very tired during this year of work. I really don't have energy, I'm depleting my energy resources. So although I didn't want to, I didn't want to, but I took a week off, additional holiday as an ATO member...» – Female Respondent 18.*

It is worth mentioning that taking care of yourself depends on the presence of bad habits. Alternatively, veterans may start developing new, more useful habits.

*«I: If we talk about bad habits – smoking, alcohol – how are you doing with this?*

*R: Well, let's just say, honestly, I smoked until I was 20, then at one point I just got tired of it, plus I've had migraines since I was 10 or 8, so it's quite a long period of time. All these tobacco products or something else are contraindicated for me, because my head starts to hurt, my blood vessels narrow, and it's just the end of the line.» – Female Respondent 18.*

## **Mental Health**

Participating in war and rebuilding one's life after service requires a lot of inner strength. During this period, veterans may face both the impact of traumatic experiences they had during service and the challenges in the process of returning to civilian life. Mental health is a part of overall

well-being and health. Mental health consequences of military service are often referred to as moral trauma or moral injury.<sup>121</sup> As with physical health, mental health care may take place in different formats: some may want to visit a psychologist, or start exercising, or try to cope with their inner issues through reflection, meditation, and other practices. There is no single universal coping mechanism that would help you to overcome stress. Yet, taking care of your own mental health after return may overlap with physical health care. Remember that some practices to improve physical health also affect psychological health, such as proper nutrition.

Other methods to help you to take care of your psychological state may include individual consultations with psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists, or engaging in the family, couple or group therapy.

After a traumatic event, such as death of a comrade-in-arms or a family member or a breakup, a veteran may visit a psychologist in order to improve their psychological and mental state. Another reason to turn to a psychologist may be usual fear of not finding a place in civilian life:

*«I: ...Have you seen a psychologist? Do you have to if you are in a hospital...?*

*R: One and only time on the phone, it was when my brother died...*

*I: Uh-huh. Did you... did you have the telephone number of a specific psychologist, or did someone...?*

*R: Yes, a specific one.*

*I: Yeah, so you called and...*

*R: Yes, I personally know this person, we... We talked on the phone for an hour and that was it.*

*I: So basically, you didn't go there anymore? What about support groups, any other topics like that?*

*R: No.» – Male Respondent 24.*

Alternatively, veterans may choose to work with a psychologist on a regular basis to maintain their overall psychological state:

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<sup>121</sup> Barnes, H. A., Hurley, R. A., & Taber, K. H. (2019). Moral Injury and PTSD: Often Co-Occurring Yet Mechanistically Different. *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 31(2), A4–103. [doi.org/10.1176/appi.neuropsych.19020036](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.neuropsych.19020036)

*«I: And... did you go to a psychologist there, a psychotherapist after you returned from the war? Well, it's been almost three years now, right? Two and a half, two and a little bit.*

*R: Well, I worked with a psychologist... both in the sanatorium and so... I attended certain classes that were held at the Hub a month ago. I have also been... I... I go to them whenever possible.» – Male Respondent 21.*

In addition to individual work with a psychologist, veterans can attend group therapy because there are other veterans there who share similar experiences and may understand each other well:

*«I: The support groups, almost from the beginning, how were they held here, for example, right? And... is this your first support group, or have you been to some similar groups somewhere else?*

*R: No, I haven't been to any similar ones. This is the first one that I started... I started going to if... the people who were there... you can just talk to them... and if we... if we were interested in the military... if we were not indifferent to the war. If only we had people who would understand me and I would understand them...» – Male Respondent 21.*

However, not all veterans go to psychologists or support groups. This may be due to various reasons:

Some veterans believe they can cope with their stress on their own without the psychologist's help:

*«I: Well, from what you said, I understood that you did not go to psychologists, right? You didn't believe there was a need?*

*R: As a matter of fact... you know, a psychologist... as far as I... can say about a psychologist. A psychologist is a person who helps you to understand yourself. They cannot solve your problems. They just help you to perceive them differently... to try to see either positive or negative sides in them... to change your attitude to all these events I don't know. I probably have an ability of self-regulation, and it is strong enough so that I can cope on my own. Without a psychologist.» – Male Respondent 22.*

Veterans may find themselves in a passive search for «their» psychologist whom they can tell about their problems and thoughts, because it is important to have confidence in a psychologist you work with:

*«I: You've already touched on mental health a bit, how did you feel after the military service? Did you have any experience of working with a psychologist/psychotherapist?*

*R: I wanted to, but I never got to it. I don't know, I was looking for one and then, let's just say, either I gave up early or I didn't find the specialist I would trust, I just didn't.*

*Especially since now I can talk about something so openly, and it's okay. When I still had some problems at that time, I realized that I was not ready to tell someone about them, even if they were a person who could help me professionally, but I still had to come to that point somehow. Again, I don't understand what to pay attention to, so to speak. That's why I had such plans, but they didn't materialize.» – Female Respondent 18.*

To improve their psychological and mental state, veterans spend time in the outdoors or go in for sports.

*«R: And for me, if it's summer, there is an apiary, I go to the apiary, I turn off the phone, I'm gone, I'm gone... and the process [of relaxation] kicks in naturally... cockroaches... when you give them a little bee venom, they disappear.*

*I: And when it's cold?*

*R: The birds. I now have a small birdhouse where I can spend time as well.*

*I: So, a hobby...*

*R: Yes.» – Male Respondent 24.*

*«I go in for sports, it is one of the methods of self-regulation that helps me to recover somehow.» – Male Respondent 30.*

## **Relationships and Recognition**

### **Family and Friends**

In civilian life, families have to reacquaint themselves with each other, re-establishing a common life, agreements, and responsibilities. Some time after the end of separation, you can still feel its effect over your family relationships. New habits and traditions that you acquired during the service are not always welcomed by your family members. While taking care of themselves, veterans may have limited resources to build/rebuild relationships, and may be more immersed in themselves and their needs rather than restoring family ties and friendships.

Veterans who have not had relationships may avoid forming them.

### **Brothers and Sisters-in-Arms**

Over time, relationships with brothers and sisters-in-arms change. It may happen that veterans' civilian interests differ significantly, so that they never come across their former peers.

Veterans may experience distancing from their brothers and sisters-in-arms in different ways: for some, it can be painful and sad.

### **Civilian Environment**

Caring for their own comfort and needs is reflected in their relationships with others. After service, veterans noticed that they began to value meaningful and comfortable communication much more, so they avoid those who disrupt their composure or cause discomfort:

*«R: And first of all, it's not cool, and secondly, it's my depression, which was already very strong and unpleasant. I have limited my circle of*

*contacts to people with whom I want to talk about other things besides the war, or with whom I have more than a common military experience.*

*I: Uh-huh. There is a clarifying question here, what are you talking about now... you said that these are different topics, not only about your experience?*

*R: Well, yes, absolutely about everything. Travel, politics, the last thing we talked about was theater. For example, My brother-in-law has a wife who works in the theater, and we talked a lot about theater, and about IT, and we talked about other interesting things, I don't remember. Well, absolutely... There are just people, yes, fellow soldiers, with whom you can communicate as with civilians, not necessarily about the war-related issues, and it's cool. Because I actually went to another city not so long ago. And I met people, my subordinates, who have been working there for 2.5 years, but I've never seen them in person. And we got to know each other that way, we were sitting in a cafe talking about this and that, and we started talking about the war. And I said, you know that sooner or later there will be a big war, that's all. They were like, I mean, the war is over, it's almost over, it's almost over. So, I... to put it mildly, I would avoid them, let them live as they want, that's all.» – Male Respondent 16.*

### **Material Needs and Security**

In this area of well-being, some respondents could identify the need for funds to take care of themselves. For example, there were respondents who could not seek mental health care due to lack of money.

*«I: It was, let's say, provision from the state, you mentioned hospitals or you were looking for psychologists on your own...*

*R: No, I found and communicated with them personally, but, let's say, the most professional and serious help I could find was only from you. So. And I'll tell you this, this psychologist was recommended to me even before the Veteran Hub opened, but, well, I'm sorry, it was very expensive for me.*

*I: So you found out how much the services cost and you couldn't go?*

*R: I couldn't pay, because it was too expensive for me, that's it. And the*

*less professional options that I had, well, they didn't suit me. Although they did bring me some benefits. Because, let's say, it was still some kind of help.» – Male Respondent 32.*

## **Housing and Physical Environment**

## **Priority of the Stage**

The physical environment is one of the important components of comfort at the stage of Taking Care of Yourself. At this stage, veterans talked about their need to have their own space, things they like, and clear rules of interaction with their cohabitants. Veterans would often say that the comfortable housing means their own housing:

*«Well, we just don't have our own housing, we move from one apartment to another... or to my mother-in-law's... or to my parents'... Well... It's true. Basically, it's about housing...» – Male Respondent 36.*

Most respondents said they were planning to have their own housing. However, they lack resources to afford it.

*«Yes, it is understandable, clearly. Because paying 30% [of interest] per annum and 300% of the cost of housing is really too much. That's what I would have done. I rushed to this program. It's like building a house in the countryside. I wanted to build a house in the suburbs. To satisfy my needs and my wife's needs. And the program is like this: you build a house, you get a loan of up to 500 thousand hryvnias. You build a house and start paying it back in five years. After five years, you start paying back the loan. But this program does not work, it is not funded. And OschadBank says, "pfft, it just doesn't exist." This is very problematic, but many people have taken advantage of it. This would really cover the needs of many veterans and military personnel. I'm not saying that housing should be free. But...» – Male Respondent 1.*

The respondents mentioned the need for a loan or other program that would work and allow veterans to get/buy their own housing.

*«I was looking for some kind of assistance programs, maybe, to get housing. Well, I didn't count on any kind of housing there. I am still on the*



*waiting list, as I am dismissed for health reasons, but as far as I understand, every time I request a place on the list, I am given a number on the waiting list. Previously, as far as I know, we had a unit there on the garrison's waiting list, but now we have somehow separated it. The Main Intelligence Directorate. They now have their own waiting list. And that waiting list, as I understand it, is a waiting list without numbers. That's why I don't have high hopes there. And since I was looking for some housing programs, I found programs... I found programs – these are for IDPs or military personnel who are IDPs. But I'm not looking for some kind of freebies, as they say. I understand that there are people who need it more. I would be willing to pay some kind of mortgage, but only if it was under some kind of suitable conditions. But so far I have not found such a thing. So I guess...» – Male Respondent 3.*

*«I: ...Did you have your own private space, or did you feel the need to change your housing, to increase, to expand the area of your housing?  
R: Well, yes, we did. The four of us were in a two-room apartment, half of the house. It was private. Almost forty-one square meters in total. That is, we and the children were there, well, yes, it would have been necessary. But again, it's a completely different kind of money. I'm starting a business, and, again, is there any kind of loan program, well, is there an affordable mortgage program, or something?» – Male Respondent 7.*

In addition to house ownership, veterans may have other needs related to the environment and mobility. Some respondents mentioned the need to have their own transport vehicle to ensure comfortable movement.

*«I: And has your perception of traveling changed, compared to before the service and after the service? Has it changed or has it not changed?*

*R: Well, in principle, yes. It has changed, I appreciate it more... what... perception.*

*I: Uh-huh, it's perceived differently? And did this affect the number of trips you take?*

*R: Traveling has decreased... because transport... everything depends on transport...» – Male Respondent 34.*

The stage of Taking Care of Yourself focuses on life skills to help you meet your needs, such as the skill of taking time for yourself, to have rest or enjoy other activities. Respondents said that they plan their schedule to have sufficient leisure time:

*«I try to follow my schedule. Well, I try to study every day. I understand that especially in complicated matters, like math, it should be, let's say, like training, a little bit, every day. It's not very effective to storm through some tasks, it's more efficient to use this time if you break it down into small parts. Now I'm reading some literature on how to study more effectively. I have different areas, some subjects, different types of areas in which I want to study, and take different courses. I'm trying to somehow build this schedule. It turns out differently, there are other people's plans, my plans, which also interfere with it. Weekends, birthdays, or something else throws me off track. I try to get back, even if there is a specific time to study, if I find time, at least time to study, to study every day, it's not, I'm still working on it. But in general, I don't have, as I know many people, and it used to happen in my student days, when my schedule was off, that I would stay up until 3 a.m., you know, it happens. I mean, I sleep more often at night, I try not to wake up late, to somehow keep the daylight hours. In short, I wouldn't say it's a tough schedule. But I try to stick to it.»*  
– Male Respondent 15.

Among self-care practices mentioned by respondents there were book reading and learning something new:

*«Mentally, again, books, articles, some kind of self-development, just sitting down to talk to yourself, "Yes, why are you nervous? What's bothering you now?" And until you answer these questions to yourself, you cannot carry on.»* – Female Respondent 18.

Another example is more diverse leisure activities:

*«Besides these projects, veterans' projects, I made it a rule to go to a theater. I mean, theaters have turned out to be such a useful therapy for me, and I've been buying theater tickets for the last few years, and I've been sticking them on my wall, and I've got more than a hundred of them. And this is how I support myself psychologically, socially, ethically, and so on. And yet, we have serious, professional theaters, and theaters are generally about ethics. It is theaters where ethics come to the fore. If you don't... you fail right there, you won't make it. Well, like Lesya Ukrainka [theater], Franko [theater], new theaters and such classical theaters. In the theater, if you hear a lie or something like that, it becomes immediately obvious. Well, ethical standards have been formed in those who come [to the theater], this lower bar of ethics is much higher than the higher bar of ethics in the ordinary people, peaceful people.» – Male Respondent 13.*

## **Conclusion: Taking Care of Yourself**

- 1.** At the stage of Taking Care of Yourself, veterans have a need and desire to take care of their body and mind. This can be manifested in all areas of well-being through monitoring their health, wanting to increase their comfort, creating self-care rituals and taking time for themselves.
- 2.** Veterans need to take care of their well-being to care for others in the future.
- 3.** Priority areas of well-being are physical and mental health, housing and physical environment, life skills and adaptability.
- 4.** This stage may overlap with other stages, such as the beginning of civilian life and Reinventing Yourself.
- 5.** When taking care of themselves, veterans seek help from specialists and cooperate with them for the benefit of their own health.
- 6.** Taking Care of Yourself can take on destructive forms and not contribute to the long-term well-being of veterans.

## Reinventing Yourself

We change throughout our lives and the experience we gain influences our self-formation. War and service and returning to civilian life are rich layers of life experience. In a relatively short period of time, people witness and experience life-changing events, form a unique environment and overcome challenges that were unimaginable.

However, war is only a segment of life. Faced with changes in themselves in civilian life, veterans experience a stage of reinvention – creation of a new identity that is built on all their experiences before, during and after service. Veterans are looking for an answer to the question: «Who am I?», which leads to many other worldview questions: «What is important to me?», «What kind of environment makes me feel good?», «What is my value?» and «What do I want to do?» These searches are an integral and difficult part of civilian life.

This stage is characterized by a veteran's constant search for everything, ranging from looking for a business or hobby that brings satisfaction to identifying a community in which they feel comfortable. Gradually, veterans' social circle becomes more civilian than military due to their own activity and desire to learn.

Combat experience is very different from civilian life. Upon returning, it is impossible to simply pretend that this experience does not exist.

Veterans rethink their past experience and learn to integrate it into their new civilian life and identify comfortable ways to express it. They take off their uniforms and look for comfortable civilian clothes, stop calling themselves by their call signs and introduce themselves by their first names, and express themselves through writing books and speaking out.

This stage can occur simultaneously with other stages of the post-return journey, such as the beginning of civilian life and taking care of oneself.

At the stage of Reinventing Yourself, some respondents came to the conclusion that military service was not an episodic phenomenon on their path, but a life calling. Hence, some of them made a conscious choice to continue service. To a certain extent, re-service for such people

could become a way of self-realization after returning to civilian life. Hence, it became an element of the journeys of veterans. Further research is needed to determine whether returning after such re-service would have similar stages.

The study respondents were people of all ages. Since the beginning of Russia's war, all age groups of people were covered by mobilization campaigns: younger people and those who were in their 60ies and close to the age of demobilization. Given this age range, we might conclude that some veterans were studying before enlisting, while others completed their higher education a long time ago. Yet, some veterans decided to continue their studies after service to reinvent themselves.

## Well-Being: Reinventing Yourself

Reinventing yourself is a period of search and change that manifests itself across all areas of well-being. These changes, being a natural part of the journey, enable veterans to rediscover their new normal and to understand how they want their lives to unfold.

### Relationships and Recognition

### Priority of the Stage

Upon returning to a familiar civilian environment, veterans may face difficulties in interacting with family, friends and colleagues. At the stage of Reinventing Yourself, veterans may deepen or conclude relationships, and form new social circles, considering their personality shifts. Interaction with other people is more thoughtful than at the beginning of transition.

### Family and Friends

After returning, partners rediscover each other, while recognizing changes in personalities of both veterans and their loved ones. The same can be true for children. While this reacquaintance takes place at the Transition stage, at the Reinventing Yourself stage, relationships may improve, deepen, or end.

*«I: We also touched upon the psychological state after the return, and what... Can you tell us again what it was like after the return and maybe what it is now, right? Is there any kind of dramatic difference?*

*R: Well, there is definitely a difference. Because, well, in terms of family. My wife and I are gradually going through some problems, learning to understand each other, and with each passing month, our relationship is just somehow stronger and stronger, calmer.» – Male Respondent 20.*

Partners may want to try finding common activities to spend more time together:

*«R: Yes. There is almost no free time. People used to laugh at me. My wife once said to my sons: "At least you came to visit us sometimes." They said: "Yeah, do you ever come home? You are wandering around. I call you and want to visit, and you answer: "We are in the Carpathians." I want to come again, but you are somewhere else.»*

*I: So you travel a bit?*

*R: Well, around Ukraine a little bit, if I have the opportunity. When I have a long weekend, like a four day weekend, I always try to go somewhere with my wife during this time, just to move around a little bit, and usually it is connected with nature, so... Something like that.» – Male Respondent 32.*

*«It would be better if I could solve domestic issues with my wife... if earlier all the domestic issues, let's say, were dumped on her, because she was actually dealing with them, because I was dealing with my own problems, tanks, IFV and unfinished trenches, then almost all domestic problems were solved by my wife. Now we are slowly starting to solve them together... If we are getting involved in solving these problems... so I am trying to win my place in the sun... ahhh... What would happen... Well, two years before I finished my service, I started to communicate less with my friends, with all of them... After marriage and the birth of a child, all my free time was spent on my family, I hardly ever go out with friends, well, I still try to meet friends, go out, but I try to either take my family out, since I have a child, it is not always possible, I also try to spend time alone with my wife, I mean, with my child... I mean, take my daughter Sarah to a kindergarten or leave her with her grandmother... ahhh. To spend time with my wife... and-and-and... if only.» – Male Respondent 8.*

Veterans and their partners visit psychotherapists to improve their relationships and restore communication:



*«I: Why did you decide to see a professional counselor?*

*R: Because there were big problems in the family, well, we had them before, but somehow... There were suggestions for us to work with a psychologist, I was skeptical about it. Skeptical and cautious. And then the mobile office, the Veteran Hub, appeared, and somehow it turned out that there were some people there related to us, close to us, so I took a chance and went in.» – Male Respondent 37.*

### **Brothers and Sisters-In-Arms**

At the stage of Reinventing Yourself, veterans develop a circle of fellow veterans or become part of the veterans' community. To be closer to their peers, respondents were looking for contacts of nongovernmental organizations and veterans' unions as a space for communication and mutual assistance.

*«There are youth centers, cultural or educational centers, arts groups, and our veterans' center, and we are already joining together somehow. We hold various events and fundraisers. We organize movie screenings or concerts for young people.» – Male Respondent 37*

### **Civilian Environment**

During the transition to civilian life, a veteran may undergo changes that are very different in nature. Different is the degree of awareness and focus.

Veterans may have the feeling that the civilian environment cannot understand everything they have experienced. This feeling is exacerbated as a result of transformations and differences in values. There is a need to find or form a new circle.

*«It's hard for me to communicate with civilians because the topics that used to unite us have disappeared. Prices in stores. Oh my dear, can I change anything? Not at all. Yes, yes, it's bad, the prices are*

*high, yes, I agree with you, but I'm not going to discuss it for, say, an hour and a half or two hours. This is a fact that we have confirmed, that's all. Why discuss it? This topic has exhausted itself.» – Female Respondent 19.*

*«I just understand that they are good people, but unfortunately, I am not interested, and they feel it, and I feel it, so we go for a walk, that is, if they want we go together, sit somewhere and talk, I say okay, I don't want to just sit there.» – Female Respondent 18.*

At the stage of Reinventing Yourself, veterans realize how the combat experience may affect their approach to relationship building or interacting with people around them:

*«So in this respect... it's carried over into the present. Yes, you quickly get ready to go, let's go out together. "I don't want to" is not even an option. We're going to go out together. Maybe it's a little bit... authoritarian, but I don't know... For now, we all live together.» – Male Respondent 22.*

## **Vocation**

## **Priority of the Stage**

Changes in personality after returning are reflected in what a person does, what they want to study, what they want to do professionally or as a hobby. Even those veterans who initially return to their pre-service jobs may change their job position, specialty or occupation over time. By changing the work, veterans also change their environment and meet new people, expanding their social circle. They may seek new knowledge and experience. Therefore, at this stage, some respondents go to study, take courses, change their profession or place of work, and find various hobbies that would bring them pleasure and/or meaning.

## **Education**

Education is one of the possible ways to reinvent yourself. Based on the respondents' answers, we have identified several areas for veterans to pursue education after they end the military service:

- **Decided to continue my studies to improve myself**

*«I: If we go back to the topic of work, education, do you feel the need for retraining or maybe...?»*

*R: Professional development? I am constantly studying. I came back after seven years, and it turned out that... Well, I have... I have five diplomas in total at home.*

*I: Wow! Are you serious?*

*R: Yes, I am. It took me a long time to find myself. I started with healthcare and came back to it, but it was such a long way, a long, long way. And it turned out that one of my occupations, and at one time I was a pretty good IT specialist, has changed almost everything... I mean, I'm constantly learning. I read something, study something, do some cramming along the way to get myself back on track.» – Female Respondent 19.*

Some of the respondents also wanted to start their own business after completing their service, so they took courses in entrepreneurship, and some even received specialized education:

*«R: That's right, yes. I took courses on entrepreneurship for ATO veterans, it was organized by the KSE, Kyiv School of Economics, and you also had courses there (note: in the Veteran Hub). Well, it was good to develop an understanding of how things should go, how to organize them correctly. Well, it's still a little bit rather large-scale, more for some organizations that sell something or provide some services, sell goods. This is a slightly different industry, but it is still theoretical knowledge, and knowledge will never be too much.*

*I: Uh-huh.*

*R: So, then I went to study for a master's degree... This is specialized training, let's say... It's to get specialized education in order to license businesses, because you need specialized education. Because there are*

*some projects that you can't do without having a permit and license.» – Male Respondent 7.*

- **Realized that something needs to change in life, so I went to get another degree**

The process of reinventing yourself involves a reassessment of previous experiences, and a desire to change something in life, either slightly or dramatically. For some respondents, it means a change of occupation or trade. In order to do this, they either go straight to the desired job and undergo the on-the-job training, or they first complete their studies and then start looking for a job:

*«I: Uh-huh. What were your needs in terms of training or professional development? You mentioned education, maybe you chose a different occupation or trade, or did you finish that... education?*

*R: I was... at that time, well, I was trying my hand at ecology... I wanted to work in the environmental field.*

*I: Uh-huh.*

*R: I went to the university to pursue a degree, but it didn't work out so well. A year later, the university was cut down, the funding was completely cut off, and they said, "Dude, I'm sorry. Kind of."*

*I: Yeah.*

*R: They returned the money and that was it.*

*I: But they returned the money.*

*R: Yes, and that was the end of it. Then the moment came when I could go to the cooperative institute to study law, I could use the scores obtained at the subjects which I did previously. So I did it, I went to the university and graduated from it. Then... When was it? A year and a half ago, I went to the military chair, because I had already completed my higher education. At the polytechnic university. And six months later I was registered.» – Male Respondent 33.*

Veterans would pursue a new education with the aim to expand their knowledge in the field, which they already know, or in the entirely new field of study.

*«R: We've dropped our studies a little bit, but we'll continue. It's an interesting area and interesting in general. And plus I went to college.*

*I: To study what?*

*R: To become a lawyer.*

*I.: Uh-huh... And now this process is ongoing?*

*R.: Yes. I'm studying right now. I thought to myself that, in principle, I felt like an adult at the time.*

*I felt like an adult at the time. I work, I earn money, and I'm studying. I was stupid enough to give up my studies earlier. And now I realize that I still need it. Sooner or later...» – Male Respondent 37.*

### **At the stage of Reinventing Yourself, veterans choose the following types of education:**

#### **● Formal Education**

At the stage of Reinventing Yourself, veterans may decide to continue their formal education by attending university or continuing an academic course they started but interrupted, due to participation in combat, or learn a new profession. Formal education involves a long period of study; so, a decision to enter university should be a carefully considered choice.

*«Yeah, that's when I forgot everything. Then the moment came when I could enter the cooperative institute to study law with an academic difference, so I did what I was doing and graduated.» – Male Respondent 33.*

#### **● Taking courses**

Short-term courses, which usually last up to a year, represent another alternative solution for those who seek to obtain a new education in a short time. Through taking such courses you can improve your existing skills or acquire new ones.

*«I: You mentioned massage courses as additional training. What did you do after you left the service? Were there any other courses besides the current university, massage courses... driving courses?*

*R: There was a course in acting... public speaking... barista training...*

*That's it. There was a first aid course.*

*I: Okay. Do you plan to get a full higher education now?*

*R: Yes.*

*I: That's your goal, right? And is this your first year of study?*

*R: Yes.» – Male Respondent 6.*

One of the most common types of courses taken by veterans among the respondents is those related to information technology (IT):

*«R: If only there were some courses at the very beginning. I mean, there was even such confusion, it was impossible to determine where to start, because when you serve in the Armed Forces, everything is clear, you know how to act there. If you want to go to a military university, you know, you have to do a military report, prepare the documents, pass the military and medical commission, you have to pass it, but in civilian life, you don't know what to start with. So I started by signing up for an IT course, which I'm currently taking.*

*I: Are you satisfied with your choice?*

*R: Yes.*

*I: I realize it's a start, but do you like it?*

*R: I am satisfied, yes.» – Male Respondent 27.*

*«Well, and like, just believe that some tasks took more time than others. But, uh, I don't think it's related to the service, I think it's related to the specific task, uh, well, I think it's normal that people perform all these tasks in different ways, well, it was hard for me, so because of this work schedule, it was stressful for me to have to study at the same time, to continue learning math and programming was hard, and at the end, about a month before the end of it, I already felt burned out. It was really hard for me to get up, to go to work in the morning, and everything else, but I had this, like, a deadline, I just had to meet it, and I did. I don't know, it's hard to compare, but I can easily compare my studies, because I'm studying now, so okay, I think that among the things that have changed is that I'm more persistent, that I make more effort, it helps a lot when it's really hard.» – Male Respondent 17.*

- **Self-study**

Veterans that were interviewed may pursue a formal education at the university, take the training courses, or study on their own, relying on publicly available training materials:

*«It was in my work plan that I started learning English. But this happened after I moved to Vinnytsia. Perhaps, here, the fact is that I was taken back to the same job without additional exams and, well, I simply did not need to know a foreign language there, and this is... I have a strong anchor, and I do not speak English well. I mean, I already thought about it and started learning. Well, literally six months ago.» – Male Respondent 20.*

*«I: You mentioned education, that you are currently studying. Tell us, is it more informal education... or is it at a university?*

*R: It's ... kind of, self-study.» – Male Respondent 29.*

Self-study is not always caused by a lack of opportunities to take a course or enter a university, but is also resulting from combat experience. Some veterans say that it is difficult for them to be in groups with a large number of people:

*«I: And if, for example, we take the topic of training, education. Were there any needs in this area?*

*R: On the one hand, I wanted to do it very much. I felt like I couldn't do it as much and still can't. I mean, I understand that I can't study, I don't know what this is about, this trigger. Maybe I'll ask my psychologist, but this is a very difficult topic. I mean, there are many different educational programs, but it's very difficult to force yourself to sit down at a desk and study. It is especially difficult today in these conditions, when you have to study not in a group, but by yourself, listening to lectures, studying at home. This is true. For some reason, it is very difficult for me.*

*Despite the fact that there is a need. I'm trying to force myself somehow, but so far it hasn't worked. Unfortunately.» – Male Respondent 16.*

### ● **Military Chair**

Some veterans chose to go to the military chair at a university when reinventing themselves. After all, not all veterans had a military specialty or were otherwise involved in the military sphere, so after returning to

civilian life, they chose to study with the possibility of graduating from a military chair that gives an officer's rank (junior lieutenant in the reserve).

*«A year and a half ago, I enrolled in a military chair because I already had a higher education. I studied at the polytechnic university. And six months later I was registered as a military officer in the reserve.» – Male Respondent 33.*

### **Work or Other Occupation**

At the stage of Reinventing Yourself, veterans either continued their current activity or started a new one by changing their profession, place of work, or starting their own business.

In addition, regardless of the field in which the respondent worked before joining the army, after returning, he or she may sooner or later have to change jobs or the field in general. This may be due to the fact that he or she was absent for a long time and another person has already been found to take his or her place, or upon his or her own wish:

*«As I said, I didn't choose, I just got a call, was offered a job, and I came. And as it turned out, if you look back at the 2.5 years I spent working at this company, with my responsibilities, it's like heaven and earth now. It just so happened that after the war, many of us were unable to perform a certain task, let's say, we had to work, this and that, and that's it. No, you always have to do more, always fulfill, always develop, and basically develop what you do, improve it. And these efforts of mine were seen, appreciated, and gave me more opportunities to develop something else, something else. And what I've been doing for the last year as an intern, it has given me a very strong motivation... Now, let's say, all those improvements have stopped not because of me, and I find it increasingly difficult and uninteresting to work, because I can't develop anything, I can't improve anything, and therefore I can't develop myself...» – Male Respondent 16.*

There are also cases when a veteran has never worked anywhere else before military service, so he or she has only combat experience. This



creates additional fear for a veteran when he or she is looking for a job, because not everyone takes their military service into account:

*«I: Weren't there any fears or concerns about your civilian life, any worries?*

*R: Of course there were some.*

*I: If you can, can you share a little bit about what you were worried about?*

*R: We were worried because, unfortunately, when a person has just served in the army, he or she gets discharged, and not every employer wants to hire that person.*

*I: Why?*

*R: Well, because everywhere they write that you need work experience, a year or two, but what if...» – Male Respondent 27.*

For some veterans, work became a vocation, they found themselves in it. For example, one respondent shared that teaching at school became her vocation:

*«Well, that's the only thing in which I rediscovered myself, that is teaching. I come and see, you see the interest of these children. In reality, distance learning is a disaster. It's not, you don't feel that return... there's no return from your students, you know. But when I deliver a lesson live, I'm like, I start there, oh! I feel useful. And so one of the lessons I would always devote to the series. It works out just fine. A new episode is released every month, correct? I do it well, we watch all these episodes. The children enjoy watching them. Well, I stop them when they don't understand something, and I explain it to them. So, we've watched it, I stop them, what are your questions? Well, just so you understand, the question of collaborationism was difficult for them, the Maidan, a lot of things, the separatists – what is it? I mean, it's very simple to explain to children what these words mean. And what they mean in this particular context. Uh, maybe... I don't know, I've never been to their history lessons, I've never been to their other lessons, but they really have zero knowledge. You know? I don't know what they were taught.» – Female Respondent 25.*

Despite the desire to try themselves in new areas and at new jobs, not all veterans have such opportunities. Quite often, the reason is the deterioration of their physical or psychological health as a result of their service, which is the main obstacle to doing what they want.

*«I was trying to do it, but, let's just say, my physical condition led me to refuse. I tried to take part in some events, training courses and so on, but it's very difficult for me, it's just physically very difficult, that's the thing. I participated in a grant program and received a grant, to buy a piece of equipment, a very interesting and useful machine for me, but, let's just say, if it wasn't for my stubbornness, I probably wouldn't have survived, because it's really very hard, just physically. So there is no point in changing anything, because I know everything here.» – Male Respondent 32.*

In addition to changing their job or field of activity, respondents also mentioned their desire to start their own business. Some of them implemented this idea already, whereas some other are only contemplating it:

*«I: And as of today, do you have a desire to change any of your IT activities to some other activity? Or to combine activities?*

*R: Well, I had ideas there... I had ideas to change, to become this or that... and a mountain guide... I even worked on it, I had an additional job for some time, and I still have an idea to open my own place, to open a coffee shop, but just to leave IT... well, it's... moreover, I'm trying to develop a little bit now. Because it brings, sort of, money, and money is a means to realize your dreams, your own and your family's dreams.» – Male Respondent 20.*

*«Now I work as a private entrepreneur, I have two university education degrees.» – Male Respondent 22.*

*«I: Okay. So you mentioned a little bit about your own business, so maybe you could share how you decided to start your own business? Why did you choose this field? Did anyone help you, advise you?*

*R: Everything is very simple. I was the chairman of the condominium in my building, and the residents asked me about installing some water vending machines. Instead of inviting someone, I just bought and installed a water*

*vending machine. Not only in my own house, but also in another one, so that it would be according to the request I got.» – Male Respondent 28.*

Given the number of respondents who have established their own businesses as private entrepreneurs or are planning to do so, the question arises as to what this might be due to. If we turn to the respondents' statements about their comfort with being in formal communities, as well as their fear of biased attitudes from employers, we assume that owning a business is an alternative that allows you to choose your own team, manage your own working hours, and not depend on the opinion of management. However, the interviews conducted as part of this study do not provide enough information to refute or confirm this assumption.

To illustrate the above, the SCORE survey results show that many veterans believe that the military prepared them well for running a small business by developing such skills as persistent hard work (75.6%) and leadership skills (57.7%). About 9.1% of all small businesses in the United States as of 2021 are veteran-owned<sup>122</sup>. According to the SBA, veterans are 45% more likely to start their own business than the general population. In fact, in 2021, the number of veteran-owned businesses doubled, accounting for 10.7% of new business owners – compared to only 5.4% of new entrepreneurs in 2019<sup>123</sup>.

Some respondents said that they had worked abroad after returning. However, they did not indicate the main reasons why they were looking for work outside Ukraine, so we cannot speculate on the motivation for this decision.

*«I: Regarding the legal side, did you feel any legal support when you went to work abroad? I mean, like, this office there, this company there, will they not abandon you? Or the transport carrier? I mean, of course, there is some way to get to that city, and to communicate with people there, whether it's official or not. From our experience, from experience of other*

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<sup>122</sup> Reintegration of ATO and JFO Veterans (SCORE Ukraine Analytical Report) (2022). Identifying and overcoming challenges using the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index (score) in Ukraine [api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/REP\\_DGEUkr21\\_Vets-Report\\_FIN\\_UKR.pdf](https://api.scoreforpeace.org/storage/pdfs/REP_DGEUkr21_Vets-Report_FIN_UKR.pdf)

<sup>123</sup> Agency Financial Report (Analytic Report). (2021). US Small Business Administration. [sba.gov/sites/sbagov/files/2021-12/SBA\\_FY2021\\_AFR-508.pdf](https://sba.gov/sites/sbagov/files/2021-12/SBA_FY2021_AFR-508.pdf)

*countries, human trafficking is rampant in the world, well, yes. So that you don't end up in some kind of trafficking center where they take your documents and you work for a little bit of money, almost for free?*

*R: No. It didn't happen, because I had officially done everything, the visa, the work visa, the documents, so...*

*I: Uh-huh...*

*R: No one will abandon you here, so... because you have to work officially. There are some who work unofficially, but one day the special police for foreigners, I mean, that's how they're called, will come and check the documents and deport you...*

*I: And that's it.*

*R: I mean, yes. It is preferable to work there officially.» – Male Respondent 21.*

Some respondents took up jobs related to their service experience. For them, it was about applying their experience and integrating it into civilian life. This manifested itself in conducting training for the civilian population, working in the security forces or in a similar field.

*«R: I conduct training. For civilians and veterans.*

*I: On what?*

*R: Different areas. From basic engineering to healthcare.»<sup>124</sup> – Male Respondent 29.*

*«I: Do you think you have found a vocation in your work?*

*R: I want to believe that I have, although I'm not sure.*

*I: We are talking about the union now.*

*R: Yes. Yes. I consider it more of a job, even though it doesn't bring any profit. Because of the job of municipal guard, it doesn't bring much profit either, unfortunately... unfortunately.» – Male Respondent 37.*

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<sup>124</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

The respondents said that an additional advantage of such work is that it is much easier to find a common language with colleagues, because they are also military and will understand each other well:

*«I: To add a little bit more to what you said earlier, what resonates with you about this field in which you are working now, why did you decide to choose it?*

*R: Well, because it's military. I mean, I'm telling you, there are people at work who were at war in the year '14, '15, '16. They sort of understand who you are and who they are. That's it. And what I chose, well, because it's military service, you've already gotten so involved during the period I was there that you just need these commands "Attention!", "At ease!" and so on.»<sup>125</sup> – Male Respondent 15.*

Another way to integrate combat experience is to work in a civil society organization or a volunteer movement to provide professional assistance to others and to grow professionally:

*«I: We've mentioned this a little bit, but can you remind us or elaborate on whether you participate in the work of any public organizations, if so, which ones, how often, whether this involvement is enough for you, or do you need more?*

*R: Well, I'm currently involved in a non-governmental organization, but I don't work there on a permanent basis, that is, the head of the organization or the director, I don't even know, he knew I was leaving, especially since we served together before, he offered me to work as a psychologist, but not on a permanent basis, and since they come, he says, there is a request for a woman, they have a male psychologist, and there is a request, there is a need – I go out, there is a request – I go out, I am not there permanently, but at the moment it suits me, and also this NGO I mentioned, this one from the British, too, I mean... they will also work in the regions, and when we talked to their leaders, they said it was very good that I have experience in reintegration, so it will also include a psychological security center... They are also organizing their branch here and I was offered to head it here. I don't know how it will work, because they have only recently started working... well... and I am a combat*

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<sup>125</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

*psychologist there, so there is a professor, there are university professors... the same psychologists who worked in this area directly.» – Female Respondent 30.*

Civic engagement can be an alternative to participation in combat operations. As respondents cannot go on rotations anymore due to age and health conditions, they may try to help by volunteering:

*«Well, in recent years, not so much. I mean, volunteering happens too. I can't say I'm a great volunteer. I'm a volunteer, because... well, I always help out. Sometimes I come home and look for uniforms and boots for the guys all over Ukraine. Imagine, we had a soldier who was more than two meters tall and needed size 58 boots, and I found them for him in Kharkiv. 60 uniforms, 30–40 pairs of boots. Well, as I said, I helped a lot. Well, I can't say... I'm more of a volunteer. Although a lot of things are tied up.» – Female Respondent 38.*

At the stage of passive job search, not all activities veterans reported to us were within the law, so there were problems with the law and imprisonment:

*«I: You said that there was a period when you needed to rest for a few months. When did you start feeling you need to return to some kind of activity? What was it? How did you feel? Where did you look for this activity?*

*R: After I... felt the need for activity? Well, how can I say, let's just say that until the year '20, from the year '17 to '20, I was basically playing. Well, yeah, like, sometimes I went to work, sometimes I got money in some illegal way, sometimes I did this and that. I mean, well, there were all kinds of things. I can say that I was a member of nationalist organizations. And then there was a moment when, because of one political action, I was... imprisoned in a pre-trial detention center for 60 days. I was imprisoned. Because of, uh... political games, that is, I was a political prisoner. By the way, recently, on January 12, there was a holiday dedicated to all political prisoners in Ukraine. Here. And-and-and, well, they let me go, everything was fine, all that. But it was such a turning point, when it made me realize that I had to, so to speak, turn on and establish [myself], because I would*

*continue to be a scapegoat, so to speak, for all these little things.*

*I: Uh-huh.*

*R: Well, it was not good for me to be in that isolation ward with the... children, to put it bluntly.*

*I: How did this whole story end? Did you need to...*

*R: It hasn't ended yet, I still have trials going on... Two years... Almost two years. I'm still in court. Well, it's okay, it's okay, everything is fine. We will resolve this issue. I think.» – Male Respondent 33.*

Yet, making money illegally is an exception rather than a trend.

### ● Hobbies

In search of a new and renewed self, veterans turn to work or study, and also find new hobbies. Some respondents say that this is an opportunity for them to become more rooted in civilian life: attending clubs, courses, and classes create opportunities for new social connections.

Respondents mentioned the following types of hobbies:

- Sports
- E-sports (playing games and participating in team competitions)
- Cooking and eating
- Hunting
- Shooting
- Sledding
- Outdoor activities
- Trekking
- Mountaineering
- Learning about other cultures
- Swimming
- Traveling

This list is not exhaustive, but is presented here to show the diversity of veterans' hobbies.

*«I: What new interests and hobbies have you developed since returning from service?*

*R: Well, yes, I became very interested in Scandinavian culture. I'm also interested in Old Slavic cultures. Roma, I study them for myself. I'm currently performing searches with a metal detector. I mean, it's a hobby that has come along with psychology, and I also read books.» – Female Respondent 10.*

*«Basically, I started looking for different things like sports, I started trying myself, because work, work... Work is a way to make money, and so on. I started in sports, I liked it, and I'm still doing it.» – Male Respondent 36.*

Sometimes hobbies are related to the use of military experience, for example, shooting or the desire to jump from a parachute:

*«I: Did you develop any new hobbies or interests after returning from the war?*

*R: Hobbies and interests are probably, as my wife says, "continuation of the war." Because of my hobbies and interests, I came back from the ATO and I have a couple of friends there, one of them got a permit for a gun, and the other one was in the process of getting one. And he said to me, let's buy a gun and go shooting. I said, "That's a hassle." Why is it a hassle? It's a simple matter. I was suggested how to do it, so I also got a gun permit, bought a gun, and sometimes on weekends, mostly on Saturdays, we go out with these guys. We go out, drink coffee, and shoot targets. We don't go hunting as a matter of principle. That's why we go out to shoot, that's why we have this hobby.» – Male Respondent 14.*

*«Well, I don't know, I mean, I'm interested in military affairs, but not in weapons, that's what's left, skydiving, I haven't done it since I got out of the service, but I still want to, I encourage my friends and so on. Oh, well, that's what's left, that is, interest in military affairs as a hobby... So that new, like, new areas of interest appeared, that's actually where I'm moving in a professional direction, but it's not really related to the service.» – Male Respondent 17.*

Extreme hobbies are worth mentioning separately. Respondents noted that after returning to civilian life, they lacked the feeling of adrenaline, so they sought it elsewhere. An example is riding a motorcycle:

*«I: Are there any other new hobbies and interests that you have developed since returning from service?*

*R: Yes. I love riding my motorcycle. That's probably my main hobby.*

*I: So it's something new, something that hasn't been...?*

*R: Yes, I haven't done it before...» – Male Respondent 28.*



According to researchers, the need for adrenaline is another consequence of combat experience. And to fulfill this need, veterans can choose extreme sports. Such sports, which go beyond psychological or physical treatment, can be effective for physically injured veterans (or people with disabilities, amputations) as a way to show that they are still capable of new achievements or physical accomplishments.<sup>126</sup> In addition, there is also the concept of «combat addiction» (a common condition that manifests itself in the fourth cluster of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder), characterized by changes in arousal and reactivity, when aggressive, reckless or self-destructive behavior arises as a positive emotion and cognition of oneself and one's own emotional state.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Serfioti, D., & Hunt, N. (2021). Extreme sport as an intervention for physically injured military veterans: the example of competitive motorsport. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 1–9.

[doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2021.1985630](https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2021.1985630)

<sup>127</sup> Bowen, M. (2017). Combat Addiction: Revisited and Reaffirmed. *Journal of Psychology & Clinical Psychiatry*, 7(6). [doi.org/10.15406/jpcpy.2017.07.00463](https://doi.org/10.15406/jpcpy.2017.07.00463)

## Conclusions: Reinventing Yourself

1. Participation in combat operations and being a member of the Security and Defense Forces of Ukraine influence a review of one's life, reassessment of values, change of social circle, search for one's purpose, and when transitioning to civilian life, veterans look for ways to integrate their combat experience into a new civilian identity. We call this process, Finding a New Self.
2. The stage of searching and exploring in the civilian world is a normal part of veterans' journey and is one of the steps to rebuild their new reality.
3. According to our observations, self-care and finding a new self-overlap in time lasts, on average, a year and a half.
4. While gaining new civilian experience, veterans form a new environment for themselves.
5. At the stage of finding a new self, they may change their relationships with loved ones and look for ways to improve or conclude relationships.
6. In our study, the process of finding oneself was different for each veteran; but, we identified natural processes that are common to most, although they occur in different ways.
7. Reinventing themselves, veterans prioritize the following: relationships – changing the circle of communication to a more comfortable one, and vocation – through study, work, and hobbies.
8. Veterans seek to reinvent themselves in order to continue living a meaningful life and doing what they enjoy, to have people around them with whom they feel comfortable.

## Rooting in Civilian Life

Eventually, civilian life becomes a new normal for veterans, as it becomes more sustainable, and veterans regain the skill of long-term planning. We define Rooting as a stage in which a person is able to make important long-term decisions consciously and determinedly. To a certain extent, ability to make such decisions is a marker that a person is on a positive trajectory of return and has actually rebuilt a new civilian life in which he or she feels sufficiently confident and independent. Although we previously assumed that Rooting could overlap with Taking Care of Yourself and Reinventing Yourself, the data analysis suggests that this stage is an independent part of civilian life and usually occurs later than the previous ones.

During the Rooting stage, veterans tend to have a longer planning horizon and envision their lives years in advance, and thus make more informed decisions that will have lasting consequences in their lives. They feel secure enough to invest their resources in more sustainable initiatives. In a very generalized, stereotypical manner, this Rooting stage **can be described in the context of «having a baby, building a house, and planting a tree.»**

«Well, I would like to have my own family, my own apartment, I would like to achieve this.» – Male Respondent 35.

At the Rooting stage, veterans begin to feel satisfied with what they have in their lives:

*«I: Yeah. If you look at your career path, for example. Do you think it is successful and if yes, or if no, why is that?*

*R: Well, I believe it is successful. Of course, not everything is as I would like it to be, but it's better than nothing at all. Basically, I am satisfied with everything. I am satisfied with my work, my life, what I have behind me, my family, I am satisfied with everything.»<sup>128</sup> – Male Respondent 15.*

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<sup>128</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

Civilian life is becoming a new normal for veterans, they got used to it and have rebuilt their desired level of comfort. The things and phenomena that veterans perceived with criticism at the beginning of civilian life are gradually becoming more familiar to them or even changing for the better: they form a new civilian environment; they no longer perceive negative things from others so sharply; and they get used to the loud sounds and rhythm of the civilian world.

*«You get used to the people, you get used to the cars, you get used to someone blowing up a firecracker. That is, over time, that's it.» – Male Respondent 15.*<sup>129</sup>

*«But then, you know, somehow, you can say that you lose your vigilance. But you relax, make it easier for yourself, and it kind of goes away, and you come back to the way it was before the war.» – Male Respondent 12.*

Another important characteristic of this stage is the ability to live with the combat experience in civilian life. When this experience does not interfere with veterans' everyday life or goals. While at the stage of reinventing themselves, veterans are looking for a manifestation of their military past, during the Rooting stage they have already rethought their experience, and understood its impact. This experience becomes an integral part of their history and themselves.

*«I turned my combat experience into a tool for my future life, my productive future. Because in fact, I make it useful, it's up to me how I do it, how I use it. That is, I make use of it, I accept the benefits and combat experience.» – Male Respondent 13.*

*«Because combat experience makes a man more decisive. That is, because when you are in the JFO, you need to perceive some actions and react to certain situations clearly and quickly, and this helps a lot after returning, after completing military service in general. That is, even to respond quickly in some emergency situation.» – Male Respondent 27.*

However, the state of rootedness does not mean that veterans forget their experience of service and war or devalue it. Rather, this experience

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<sup>129</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

becomes part of their history and identity. War cannot be forgotten, but it is possible to learn to live with the memory of it. Rooting is a state in which previous experience is perceived as an asset and serves as an additional resource in civilian life, because even after decades it can resonate in beliefs, memories, and reactions.<sup>130</sup>

*«The fact is that these events that took place, let's say, the war, yes, it is staying with me, it's not going away, it will stay until the end.»<sup>131</sup> – Male Respondent 9.*

*«I don't know how it goes for other people, because many people choose to live both here and there at the same time, and they are like, "Yay, a veteran and a civilian. Well, I didn't manage to combine it like that, I tried to do it too, it's very difficult for me. I'm here, I'm there. And so, probably until the end, oh, I mean, until the middle of last year, I was still trying to sit on both chairs. But I chose civilian life and I'm very happy with it. I mean, it's cool actually, I'm still a veteran there. I don't know, I train people, I teach military affairs, but I'm happy with it, everything is fine, and I wear the uniform.» – Male Respondent 16.*

On average, the Rooting stage, according to respondents, arrives three years or more after the end of service:

*«It definitely became easier for me in the third year, and I... there are Americans, they say... that the third year is easier than the second, that is, after two years we somehow normalized family relations, relations at work, somehow it was easier... It's somehow, because of my specifics of work, that I have been working since the return from the army, I worked with students let's say for three years, and now I have returned to work with war injuries, it is subconsciously or unconsciously drawing me back there again, it is a new stage, a round of my return.» – Male Respondent 4.*

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<sup>130</sup> Thompson, J. M. (2017). Veterans' identities and well-being in transition to civilian life – a resource for policy analysts, program designers, service providers and researchers : report of the Veterans' Identities Research Theme Working Group, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2016 / James M. Thompson ... [et al.]. (VAC Research Directorate technical report). P.E.I. : Veterans Affairs Canada.  
[publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf)

<sup>131</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

*«I was at war for a year and four months, so it took me about a year and a half to realize where I was. And some kind of more or less adequate understanding of new realities comes three years later. That's another year and a half.» – Male Respondent 13.*

However, we would like to emphasize that three years is a very broad estimate. Each veteran follows his or her own path, and there is no single correct time frame for going through its stages. We can assume that three years is a positive trajectory of return under the most favorable conditions. That is, the more difficult the previous stages of the path are for veterans, the more likely it is that rooting will occur later or not at all. The length of the journey can be affected by lack of support, inability to find a job or other important activities, lack of communication, and low levels of well-being.

*«I locked myself in and didn't go out... Because it's hard to get out. I said. It's been four years since I ended my service and I still can't get over the fact that... here...» – Male Respondent 27.*

In our opinion, it is important to study negative trajectories in order to identify audiences at higher risk of experiencing difficult return and to develop appropriate preventive steps and support programs.

## Well-Being: Rooting in Civilian Life

During the Rooting stage, a veteran may seek to improve his or her well-being. This can be manifested in different areas: a job that brings not only income but also satisfaction, an apartment not just to have a place to sleep but also to spend time there comfortably.

*«We have already raised our standards. I don't want my family to live in an apartment in, let's say, in a modular house. It is important for me that it is a modern housing, with normal panoramic windows and, preferably, that my children, when they come home from school, do not walk through a muddy and cluttered entrance, but in a well-maintained, clean one.» – Male Respondent 20.*

In addition to the desire to improve one's well-being, at this stage, it is important to have good relationships with family, friends or the environment, life skills that contribute to a quality life, and an occupation that is enjoyable and meaningful.

### Relationships and Recognition

Priority of the Stage

### Family and Friends

The desire to have strong relationships with family or a partner is an important marker of the Rooting stage, when a person seeks to develop and improve their relationships. This can be manifested in starting a family or deepening relationship with their existing partner; creating new family traditions; spending time with children and loved ones:

*«If I have the opportunity, I try to show my children our military traditions. I try to pass on to them the attitude towards the country, traditional Ukrainian holidays, and everything related to Ukraine. Independence Day and Unity Day. We try to start our own family traditions. Just to go out*

*together at least once in a while. So that the children would be interested and understand what exactly happens on this day.» – Male Respondent 1.*

*«I had one vacation, I was at my parents' place for 4 or 5 days. I mean, it's clear that we have phones, we call each other, I'm alive, everything is fine there, how are you doing, everything is okay. But now, when you come back, you want to communicate more, because you realize that your parents are quite old, let's say, and it's not the communication with your parents that changes, probably, not because of military service, but because time goes by and you begin to appreciate these relationships more, because you already understand that, unfortunately, there is not much time left.» – Male Respondent 5.*

*«I: How can war affect the experience of fatherhood?*

*R: Well, only in the way that maybe you appreciate it more, but yes. I don't know, my daughter, for example, is proud of the fact that I fought. And when she talks to her friends, even if there are any discussions, she always emphasizes that I fought. Well, probably, it's like a parent-child relationship, it probably becomes a little bit stronger in this sense, it goes to another level a little bit. It's not just that I have to provide you with food and a warm bed, but it also gives you some other values, probably influences you somehow, yes.» – Male Respondent 5.*

## **Civilian Environment**

Another characteristic of the Rooting stage is the presence of a stable environment in which a veteran feels comfortable and safe.

*«My close social circle has narrowed. I still communicate with everyone else. I mean, I used to have a large close circle, and the circle with whom I just talked was even larger. It somehow... it merged into each other. That is, I didn't have any clear lines. And now I have a clear personal circle with such rigid boundaries that I will never cross, that is, I will never connect these two circles of communication with each other. That is, I have a*



*purely my own, my comfort zone, roughly speaking, a close circle of friends. There are friends, relatives, a few close friends there, family, relationships there, and so on, and then there are all the others. I don't really categorize them, they are just there.» – Male Respondent 33.*

## Vocation

## Priority of the Stage

## Work or Other Occupation

Having an occupation that brings pleasure and benefit is important for a person and affects their well-being and happiness. When rooting in civilian life, veterans begin to pursue their vocation through a meaningful job or other activities:

*«I: Do you think you have found a vocation in your work?*

*R: I think I have, because I have a very good reputation in the printing community, not only in Vinnytsia, but in Ukraine. There are enough people who know me. Well, if I do my job well and people are satisfied, then I guess it is a vocation.» – Male Respondent 32.*

*«R: Well, to be honest, there was simply no space. This science in this area is very serious. I mean, bicycles, skiing, sports, it remained, there was still room for art, and then it was just physical activity, I mean not some physical activities or diving to the bottom of the ocean, there is just no part of life to do this. So far, that's what I'm talking about regarding my profession. The vocation, it's all combined. And this is my life now and for the time being. Maybe I will write a novel. I have such ideas.» – Male Respondent 12.*

Rooting is characterized by the fact that a person has an occupation or activity that he or she enjoys, in addition to his or her immediate responsibilities. This can be manifested as a desire to spend time with family and friends. It can be a hobby or self-education.

One of the respondents was reading a lot to broaden his horizons:

*«When I resigned from military service, well, when I was working, it was about waking up, eating and going to work. Now I wake up, shower, personal hygiene, have breakfast, prepare for classes, between classes or even during classes I read something, I read something, well, I start after classes, not as if I was reading for the classes, but I read to broaden my worldview.» – Male Respondent 6.*

## **Life Skills and Spirituality**

## **Priority of the Stage**

Among the life skills that are markers of successful rooting are the veterans' ability to create a daily schedule and/or some kind of occupation/task/activity during the day. It is important that veterans do not isolate themselves and do not engage in destructive activities.

*«Well, there are probably some blocks that are always like this, like Tuesdays are usually always the same, I have to work and then I work until two o'clock, usually my schedule is like that, it all depends on my family, on my children. At 9:30 I take my child to the kindergarten, then I have time until 13:30 for my work, personal things, it's usually like that, then I pick them up from the kindergarten, then they go to bed. I guess I try to plan my week, at this stage of my life I realize that when the children are sleeping, I have working hours, work meetings, moments after 9 p.m., more at night.» – Male Respondent 4.*

At the Rooting stage, veterans can already plan for a long period of time – they are regaining this skill. They also have dreams or plans for the future, which means they see their future, want to do more, and regain control over their lives.

*«I: Are you involved like this, or do you need to be more involved in the life of the community, the fellows? Or less involved?*

*R: I need more, I have political plans and I'm going for it.» – Male Respondent 26.*

*«In general, I have this tradition of writing things down to have an idea of my next day or week or even month, to have some kind of picture, yes.» – Male Respondent 28.*

In addition, veterans have a desire to implement something that involves long-term plans, such as getting animals, or buying and planting flowers – projects where long-term involvement is needed.

*«Well, I can't get a job (Note: respondent mentioned he cannot get a cat because of this). A day or two. I just don't want to torture the animal, to have it meowing or barking. So I planted some flowers.»<sup>132</sup> – Male Respondent 15.*

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<sup>132</sup> Translated from Russian. – Editor's Note.

## Conclusions: Rooting

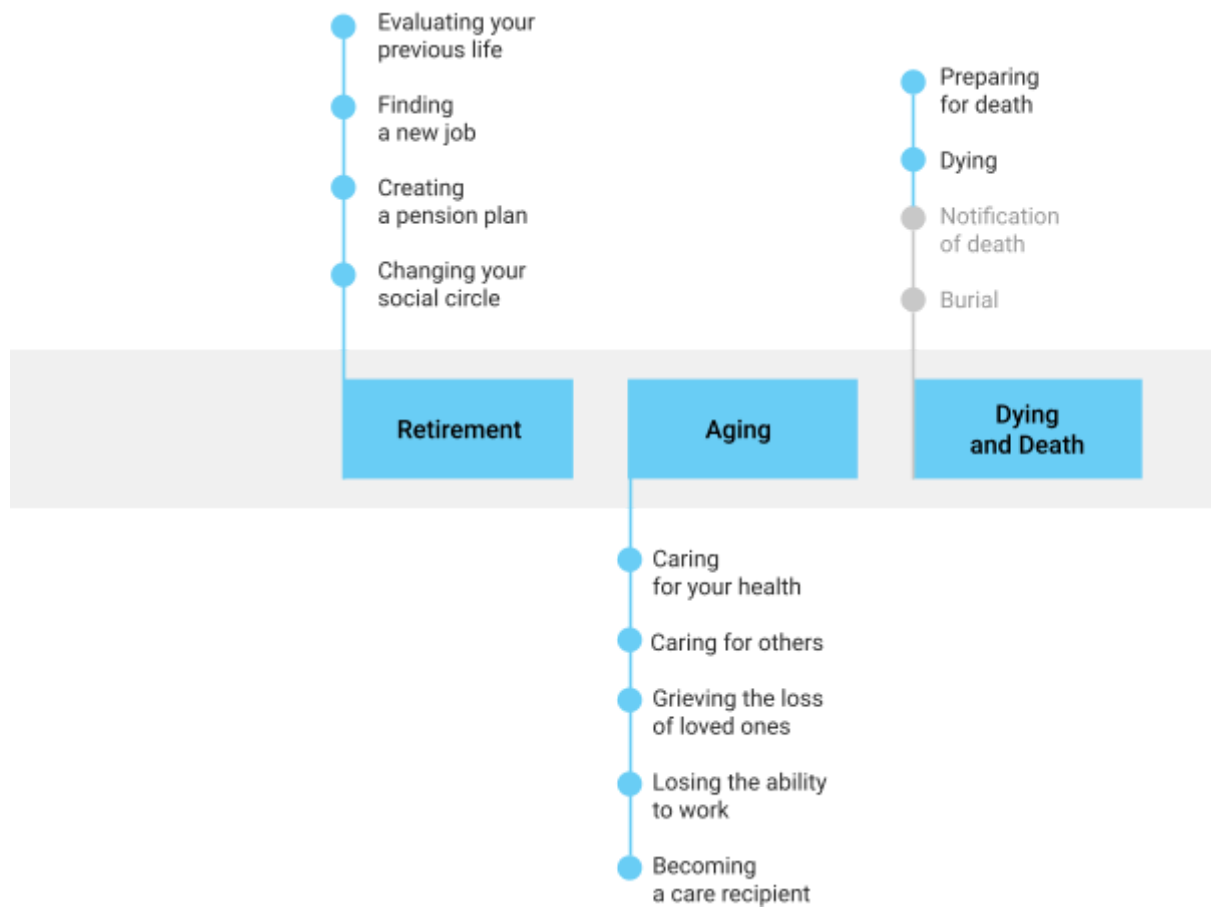
1. Rooting is a stage that begins on average three years after the end of service, in case of a positive trajectory.
2. At this stage, veterans tend to have a more extended planning horizon: they can envision their future for years to come and feel confident enough to make long-term plans and stick to them.
3. At the Rooting stage, veterans feel more comfortable with their own identity and have a sense of «Who am I?» and «Where am I going?»
4. This stage is characterized by a desire to care for others, deepening relationships or new relationships, and a stable social circle.
5. During the Rooting stage, veterans are more likely to have stable work routines and have a job/work/project that brings them satisfaction.
6. In all areas of well-being, we recorded the veterans' desire to improve their condition for a better quality of life.
7. The Rooting stage can serve as a kind of marker when integration into civilian life has taken place and the veteran enjoys stability and a certain level of comfort. This stage is also characterized by the deepening or emergence of relationships, a stable social circle and a job/work/project that brings satisfaction.

8. As discussed in other chapters, in Ukraine, the entire journey is affected by the fact that the war is ongoing, so Rooting during wartime may differ from similar phenomena in other countries, where veterans rebuild their civilian lives either after the war ends or in a country that is not affected by the war.
9. Contrary to the initial assumption, the Rooting stage is sequential and does not overlap with the other stages described above.
10. During the Rooting stage, veterans are already accustomed to civilian life. They have an awareness of who they are and where they are going, they are satisfied with what they have now, and at the same time, they have dreams, plans and long-term commitments.
11. Rooting in civilian life does not guarantee the absence of difficulties, but we define it as a state in which veterans have enough inner strength and support to face the challenges of civilian life and move on with their lives.
12. The impact of war remains for life until the person dies. Integration does not mean that a person has forgotten about the war or will not remember it. Integration means that a person who has changed because of the experience of service and has not been in civilian life for some time has finally returned to it, including on a psychological level.
13. For some veterans, rooting may be manifested in their decision to continue serving in the military as they believe this to be their true vocation.

Before Enlisting  
Service  
Transition  
Civilian Life

## Retirement and Aging





## Retirement and Aging

Aging, illness, accidents, dying, and death are integral parts of life. It is impossible to predict exactly when they will happen, but it is important to talk about the needs of people at all stages of their journeys. Ukrainian veterans today represent different age groups, including those who started and completed their service at a fairly mature and even elderly age. For some of them, the return to civilian life may begin later in life, and in this case, the natural processes of aging and slowing down will occur in parallel with the corresponding stages of taking care of yourself, reinventing yourself, and even rooting.

After completing the most active and productive stage of life, the path of veterans gradually begins to unfold in the opposite direction. If, after completing their service, veterans, step by step, rebuild their planning horizon and regain the ability to care for others, then after retirement, the planning horizon may begin to narrow again, and the person gradually changes from someone who cares for others to someone who needs care. These processes do not happen overnight, but rather over years and decades.

The stages of retirement, aging, dying and death are underrepresented in our study, so we do not present the areas of well-being and needs at these stages. However, the needs of people in the later stages or at the end of their life may differ significantly from those in other stages. The experience of previous generations of Ukrainian veterans, as well as numerous international studies, shows that the experience of war and service can have a lifelong impact, and the final stages of life are no exception. We strongly believe that in order to develop a comprehensive system of support for veterans, it is necessary to study in more detail the experience of older veterans, veterans with terminal conditions, and to formulate assumptions about the potential long-term consequences of service in the lives of modern veterans of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

## Retirement

From a legal point of view, veterans in Ukraine may acquire the status of «pensioner» at a fairly young age. Yet, they may continue to be employed or do social work. This section is not about them. Rather, we focus on



those who stop working due to age or other circumstances. In this section we consider retirement as an age-related stage or a veteran's choice to change the activity from employment or proactive work to pursuing his or her own interests.

At the same time, retirement can be about finding or discovering new hobbies, taking care of yourself, or spending time with family.

The retirement age and experiences of veterans largely overlap with general trends across the country. Veterans go through similar experiences and states in this process as other people. However, some respondents were demobilized from the Armed Forces due to their age, as they had reached the age of 60. After returning to civilian life, they began a period of retirement, so their path is somewhat different from younger veterans. They don't have to go through the job search and education process, yet they go through similar stages. It is necessary to study in more detail what resources are available to them. Among the interviewed respondents who are over 60 years old, no one decided to just relax in retirement: some went on to study, some went into freelance work, and some sought new channels of communication with family members.

In this study, the retirement stage is less represented. In order to develop a better understanding of this stage, further research is necessary.

After retirement, respondents said that there were more opportunities for recreation:

*«I: Has your life changed since retirement, in what ways?*

*R: Well, I'm not doing anything.*

*I: Are you looking for any activities?*

*R: No, I mean, of course, yes, I try to find something, I'd bake some cakes, I'd go and sell them somewhere, I found this job for myself. They call me whenever they need me, I go and work for them, I mean, I work very hard, but even though I pray there, they grumble, they say, "What are you grumbling about," I say, "It's nothing.» – Female Respondent 31.*

One of the respondents decided to go into business with his kin and repair other people's electrical appliances:

«I understand that you've stopped doing this a little bit less, are you doing something else now that you're retired?

R: Now I'm with my mate, we're working on electricity. Seriously. Our first big project lasted about six months... We were there for half a year... that is, we had to start before the new year... we were pulling wires like that... in the cold, fixing them... and that's it, the power was connected... and now there are two facilities here as well. So, we take electric cabinets... connect the line, and then we install it. He is in charge, I help, that's how it works now.» – Male Respondent 34.

## Conclusions: Retirement

1. It is important to understand that for some soldiers, the end of their service may coincide with retirement and aging. Stages of transition, taking care of yourself, reinventing yourself and rooting will go hand in hand with these processes.
2. During these stages, there may be more health barriers and a shorter planning horizon.
3. After retirement, key activities may conclude, and the person may turn from a caregiver to a cared-for person.
4. During this period, there may be more attention to oneself and family as well as new hobbies.
5. These stages are not sufficiently represented in our study. Further research is necessary to consider them in more detail.

## Aging

The aging stage has no clear boundaries and is characterized by a rather high level of activity among respondents. At this stage, veterans are focused on traveling, work, hobbies, and searching for new information to keep up to date with everything that is happening. At this point, family, physical environment, quality healthcare, and social circle are prioritized.

*«R: No, my wife has relatives... her son and daughter-in-law and grandson are there. And mine are all here. Yeah... My daughter has her own family, my son has his own... he has a job there... They say they have their own plans.*

*I: And what about your friends?*

*R: Well, I'm more with my buddy... I told my granddaughter recently... try to find out more about... what your grandparents were doing... because... unfortunately, we were taught in the Soviet Union... Well, on the contrary, we should not know our roots. So I learned about my relatives at the stage when I couldn't find out... who they were... where they came from... and where they lived. Because my mother's father left for Russia back in the 1930s. She was angry with him for leaving her. So she had such a life... she prioritized community over herself... In short, gloom and doom. And my grandfather on my father's side died before I was born. And my grandmother on my father's side, she was not interested in us... and she was busy too... in short...» – Male Respondent 34.*

Not all respondents share the idea that the time period after a person reaches the age of 60 should be called an old age. For them, age is simply a number that does not reflect on their interests or employment. On the contrary, they try to be more interested in new trends to keep up with innovations:

*«When you retire or end your full-time professional career, I understand you are doing something different now... why did you make this decision? To retire and do something easier, maybe different?*

*R: Well, it's not easier, it's just that I used to work in equipment repair, and now the scope of business is less and I have less income. Why? Because there is nothing to repair. I have a son who is an IT specialist and... well, he*

*sometimes teases me, he says: “Dad, if you were engaged in programming, you would be in golden heaven, but now... tinsplate is not a source of income,» and I tell him: “If I hadn’t been engaged in the industry, I don’t know what you would have been...” – Male Respondent 34.*

Although veterans may be eager to learn, their physical health does not always allow them to realize all their plans. Regardless of their age, the respondents had more illnesses and increased fatigue as a result of participation in combat operations:

*«All this... Because I’ve been examined now, but over time, every year, I feel it’s getting harder and harder, worse and worse and worse. I mean, this process is going on, when it is going on, even if there is a fairly satisfactory treatment, rehabilitation and everything else. The condition is still getting worse. Well, because age takes its toll, that is, the damage caused to health also takes its toll... And for me now it is important to live, to do what I have planned, that is, to put my child on his feet, I want to take my grandchildren into my arms. Well, at least to put my child on his feet... I have had two clinical deaths and I don’t have to brag about anything to anyone. I tell it like it is, how I feel.» – Male Respondent 9.*

## Dying and Death

People are mortal. Soldiers and veterans die. Some die on the battlefield, some die of illness, some die of older age, some commit suicide, some die in an accident or become victims of violence in the civilian world. Dying and death are important elements of everyone’s journey, including veterans. Although this life stage is not represented in our study, we believe it is important to keep it in this report and emphasize the need to consider dying veterans when developing support programs. Dealing with the experience of dying and death is an opportunity to better understand causes and develop systems to prevent premature death and an important component of service support for military veterans.

In Ukraine, dying and death remain deep taboo topics. There is little talk about them, and there are superstitious beliefs. Death is frightening. As a result, unfortunately, dying people are often left alone in the final stages of life, deprived of their agency and the right to decide their own fate. We emphasize the importance of continuing to provide sensitive support to veterans who are in the process of dying. It is crucial to ensure they are provided with decency and respect for their needs and wishes. It is necessary that both the government and society create conditions for a death with dignity, a burial and commemorating soldiers who chose to sacrifice their time, health, dreams and, sometimes, their lives – to protect us and our independence.

We honor the memory of deceased veterans, through the care of their families who are in the process of administering veterans' deaths and commemorating their lives. When a person dies, our attention should be focused on those who that person loved and who he or she can no longer care for. It is our responsibility as a society to care for our soldiers' families after their deaths to show our gratitude.

## **Conclusions: Dying and Death**

These stages are not presented in our study, but we emphasize them separately in the conclusions. After all, a soldier's death can occur at any point along the way. It is important that veterans, who pay the highest price for our freedom and independence, have decent conditions for life, dying and death. And burial and commemoration with dignity and gratitude should honor each soldier and his or her rank. These stages should be studied separately.

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