

Factors that influence the success or failure of online self-help interventions (OSHIs) for UK military veterans and their families; a Realist Review

Introduction

- More than 15,000 people left the UK Armed Forces in 2017/18 to transition to civilian life⁽¹⁾ and although most veterans transition successfully, a minority experience significant difficulty.
- Those veterans lacking sufficient financial resources, family and/or social supports and civilian workplace experience are considered most at risk for poorer outcomes⁽²⁾.
- For those experiencing difficulties with the transition, research has indicated that there are many practical and psychosocial factors that can act as barriers to help-seeking.
- In practical terms, despite the special consideration sometimes afforded veterans under the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC)⁽³⁾, veterans will join the same queues, for the same services, as their civilian counterparts⁽⁴⁾.
- Within an ongoing political climate of austerity, commonly cited barriers to accessing services in the UK currently include long waiting lists, patchy service provision, application processing delays and travel/cost difficulties⁽⁵⁻⁷⁾.
- In psychosocial terms, perceived negative stigma is a known deterrent to help-seeking, particularly for mental health difficulties⁽⁸⁾.
- Evidence indicates that online self-help interventions (OSHIs) may offer one way of overcoming both psychosocial and logistical barriers to veteran care.

Objectives

Little is currently known about the contextual determinants of OSHIs’ efficacy and the implications of such understanding for all stakeholders within the veteran community.

The primary aim of this realist review was therefore to provide an evidence-base for veteran specific OSHIs. Specifically, we aimed to identify and explain what influences the success or failure of OSHIs for UK military veterans and their families.

The review therefore aimed to answer the following questions:

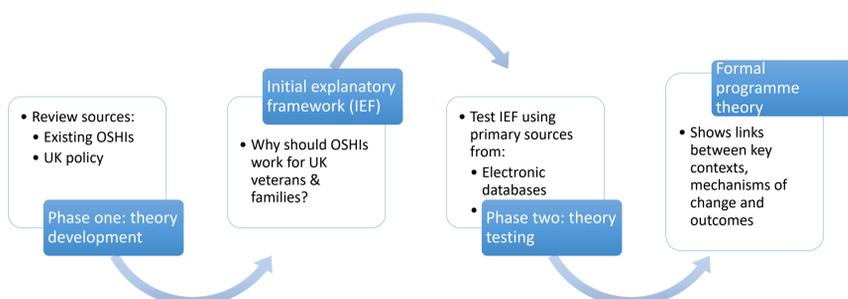
- What are the main mechanisms thought to explain the success or failure of OSHIs?
- In what circumstances are OSHIs likely to be effective for UK military veterans and their families?

Methods

This review was conducted in accordance with the Realist and Meta-narrative Evidence Syntheses: Evolving Standards (RAMESES) guidance. A narrative, interpretive approach was used throughout.

Seeking to go beyond establishing whether an intervention works or not, realist reviews develop formal explanations called programme theories, for how it is supposed to work. Specifically, programme theories explain what works, for whom and in what circumstances. This is achieved through a repetitive process of literature searching, extraction and synthesis.

The current review occurred in two phases: i) theory development; and ii) theory testing. Phase one reviewed existing OSHIs and UK government policy on military transition supports, to develop an initial explanatory framework for how OSHIs should work for the UK veteran community. Phase two used empirical sources to test and refine this framework into formal programme theories that would inform the wider evaluation:



Results

Phase one: theory development

- We reviewed 151 OSHIs across seven support domains: housing, employment, finances, living independently, family and communities, physical health and mental wellbeing.
- Informed by our OSHI and background policy searches, we developed an initial explanatory framework comprising key components of success and failure. These were formulated as Context (C), Mechanism (M) and Outcome (O) components, where C+M=O.
- Whilst individual elements of the framework could be combined in many ways, overall, the strongest CMO configuration to emerge from phase one was the frequent stakeholder call (C) for a single point-of-contact centre (M) to provide a long-overdue solution (O) to the problem of helping veterans in need navigate a confusing and poorly co-ordinated military charity field (C).

Phase two: theory testing

- Sixty-nine articles were included in the final sample, which comprised:
- 38 peer-reviewed, empirical studies published in academic journals;
- 21 non-peer reviewed, non-academic publications containing empirical data;
- 10 other types of publications containing key contextual evidence, such as policy documents.

Based on the primary evidence in our sample, the initial explanatory framework was refined as three formal programme theories:

Empowerment and accessibility

- When clear information and useful self-help tools are made accessible online (M) to veterans with a wide range of needs and preferences (C), they can use their new knowledge and skills (M) to meet their own needs (O) without drawing on external supports (O). This holds additional benefit as a cost-effective way of increasing reach and maximising resources within pressured community services (O)

Trust and security

- When veterans who are deterred from seeking help by stigma or security concerns (C) can access a confidential, secure, online service (M), they will be sufficiently reassured to seek help for their difficulties, no matter how complex (M), and will trust us enough to provide it in whatever form they need (O)

Recognition and partnership

- When we use our expertise, relationships and knowledge of the military charity sector to signpost (M) veterans in need (C) to the right supports, we simplify the help-seeking process (O) whilst recognising and validating veterans’ service (M). This also honours the national obligation to our veteran community (O)

Conclusions

Given the paucity of UK outcomes research on veteran-focused OSHIs, it remains unclear exactly how an OSHI can overcome the significant psychosocial and practical barriers to seeking help identified in this review. However, the programme theories presented in this report emphasise the importance of maintaining good accessibility, security and third sector partnerships for optimum user engagement.

References

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