

Cultural Vital Signs

Military Culture:
Core Competencies for Healthcare Professionals



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Cultural Vital Signs Checklist

Cultural Vital Signs are suggested ways to obtain data to better inform your care. They might be considered “good to ask” questions as you work with a military population. The intention of the questions is to help you gather information, in a skilled and sensitive way, about:

- Patient experiences
- Perceptions of the problems they are facing
- Key past and present stressors
- Present and future concerns
- Strengths and resources
- Goals for treatment

While it is not recommended that you ask all of the cultural vital signs of each patient, listening for or being aware of the themes that are characterized by the following questions can help you determine the impact that military culture has had on many aspects of your patient’s life.

Ask open-ended questions, pay attention to non-verbal cues and language use, and above all, show respectful curiosity and empathy.



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Military Ethos

Military ethos speaks to the core values of Service members – the foundations of who they are and what they believe in. Each branch of service has subtle differences in defined ethos – often referred to as Military Ethos or Warrior Ethos – as well as undefined ethos. Taking into consideration the foundational drivers behind who your patient is can help promote provider-patient alliance and treatment compliance.

Service Branch / Identifying Information

- ☐ Why did you choose to join ____ (their branch of service) instead of another branch of service?
- ☐ What is / was compelling about being a(n) ____ (soldier, marine, airman, sailor, coastguardsman)?
- ☐ How would you like to be addressed?
- ☐ Were / are you an Officer, Warrant Officer, or enlisted?
- ☐ What is / was your rank?
- ☐ What is / was your MOS (Army or Marine), AFSC (AF), NEC (Navy enlisted) or Officer Designator (Navy Officer)?
- ☐ What training have you received?

Operational Experiences

- ☐ What is / was your primary job? What do / did you do?
- ☐ When you were deployed, did you perform your assigned MOS?
- ☐ What other duties have you fulfilled / do you fulfill?
- ☐ Where have you been stationed?
- ☐ What kinds of missions have you participated in?
- ☐ How have you adjusted / did you adjust / to military life?
- ☐ What is your work environment like?
- ☐ Who do you work with, and what is your role?
- ☐ What kind of leadership roles have you been in?

- ☐ Have you felt like you've received good mentoring in your career?
- ☐ Do you ever have a difficulty conversing at length with those in authority positions?
- ☐ "What impact has your injury/illness had on your fellow team members?"
- ☐ How trusting do you think you are with your fellow service members, on a scale of one to ten?
- ☐ How trusting do you think you are with civilians, on a scale of one to ten?
- ☐ Have your own standards ever caused you to be frustrated with yourself or others who do not live up to those standards (i.e., service, punctuality, integrity in relationships)?
- ☐ What have been some of the most important aspects of being in the military?
- ☐ What are some of the biggest challenges about being in the military?
- ☐ What are some of the greatest rewards about being in the military?



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Military Organization and Roles

It is not necessary for you to ask all of the following cultural vital signs of each patient. You can choose the questions that best fit the life chapter or context that most matches your patient's current status. Listening for or just being aware of the themes that are characterized by the following questions can help you determine the impact that military culture has had on the particular phase of your patient's military life.

Life Chapters

Boot Camp / Training

- ☐ What was boot camp / officer training like for you?
- ☐ What specialty training have you participated in?
 - How long has it lasted?
- ☐ Do you feel prepared for the work you do?
- ☐ How has your training affected your view of yourself / life?

First Assignment, Tour of Duty, or Deployment

- ☐ How are you adjusting to military life?
- ☐ Is it what you expected?
- ☐ How is your first job compared to training?
- ☐ Do you feel fulfilled by your work?
- ☐ Do you miss anything or anyone from your civilian life?
- ☐ What are the pluses and minuses of your role in the military?
- ☐ Have you been deployed?
- ☐ What was your role while deployed?

Military Career Continuation Decisions

- ☐ What made you decide to stay in (or leave) the military?
- ☐ What challenges have you had to face by choosing to continue your career in the military?
- ☐ What rewards and resources has it brought you?
 - Are challenges balanced with rewards at this time, or is one winning out over the other?
- ☐ Have you been deployed?
- ☐ What was your role while deployed?

Separation from Military Service

- ☐ What was the cause of your leaving the military?
- ☐ What was the hardest part about leaving?
- ☐ What have been some of your concerns and hopes about civilian life?
- ☐ What was the best part?

Veteran Status

- ☐ What caused you to leave the military?
- ☐ How long have you been a Veteran?
- ☐ What aspects of being in the military affect the way you function now?
- ☐ What challenges have you faced as a Veteran?
- ☐ Are there any resources or rewards that come with being a Veteran for you?
- ☐ If you could imagine a scale, are the challenges of being a Veteran balanced with rewards at this time, or is one side stronger than the other?
- ☐ Did you seek compensation through the Compensation and Pension process?
 - If so, for what? If not, why not?



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Impact of Injury or Illness

- ☐ How long have you been injured / ill?
- ☐ How has this injury / condition affected your work life? Personal life?
- ☐ How has this impacted your family?

Impact of Injury or Illness (cont.)

- ☐ How has your injury/illness impacted your fellow [Soldiers/Marines/Sailors/Airmen/Coastguardsmen, co-workers]?
- ☐ How has this impacted your sense of yourself?
- ☐ How has this impacted your goals?
- ☐ What support / resources do you have to help you with this situation?
- ☐ What support / resources do you feel you need to help you with this situation?
- ☐ What goals do you have for your recovery and return to life?
- ☐ What contingencies have you made in case you can't return to your prior duties / functioning?
- ☐ What concerns do you have about the impact this injury / condition will have on your life?
- ☐ I'm wondering if you had any reservations about being seen today?
- ☐ Have you ever sought treatment before?
 - What was that experience like?
- ☐ Is there anything that might be a barrier to coming back to see me?
- ☐ What are the benefits and detriments to seeking help?
- ☐ What are the benefits and detriments to not seeking help?
- ☐ In what ways is taking care of your health (yourself) consistent with being a good ____ (Soldier, Airman, Marine, Sailor, Coastguardsman)?
- ☐ How do you think I can be most helpful to you in this situation?



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Stressors and Resources

Finding a skilled, sensitive way to gather information about key stressors involves developing strong rapport, asking open-ended questions, and paying attention to nonverbal cues and language use.

While it's not necessary to ask all of the following questions of each patient, listening for or being sensitive to the themes that are characterized by the following questions can help you determine the impact of general and operational stressors on your patient's life.

Stressors

General Stressors

- ☐ How long have you been on station?
- ☐ Have you changed duty locations recently?
- ☐ How is your family doing with moving and adjusting?
- ☐ How has the promotion process gone for you?

Pre-deployment

- ☐ How are you feeling about your upcoming deployment?
- ☐ Do you feel prepared for your deployment?
- ☐ How are the roles at home changing as you prepare for deployment?
- ☐ Are you deploying with your unit?
 - ☐ How are your relationships with unit members/leaders?
- ☐ How are balancing the demands of your unit with the demands at home?
- ☐ What supports are you / your family putting in place to manage this deployment?
- ☐ It can be common to feel both anxious and excited about an upcoming deployment. Have you experienced this?

Deployment

- ☐ How many deployments have you had?
- ☐ How much time have you had between deployments?
- ☐ What have your experiences been like on deployment(s)?
- ☐ What aspects of the deployment have suited you? Which have not?
- ☐ What were some of your biggest challenges during your deployment(s)?
- ☐ What have been the rewards or satisfactions you've had with deployments?
- ☐ What have your stressors been like between deployments?
- ☐ Have your deployment experiences contributed to your being here today? How?

Potentially Traumatic Events

- ☐ Did you have any particularly intense or difficult experiences that stick with you?
- ☐ Were there any assignments or events that your fellow Service members found really challenging, or that stick with you now?
- ☐ Have you received any uninvited and unwanted sexual attention, such as touching, cornering, pressure for sexual favors, or verbal remarks?
- ☐ Did someone ever use force or the threat of force to have sexual contact with you against your will?
- ☐ Did you have any experiences when the chain of command 'did the wrong thing'?
- ☐ (Examples might include covering up a sexual assault, ordering missions to show higher command that the unit is gung-ho [and helping the officers' promotion prospects], or placing personal gain before the mission or the overall unit)



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Resources

While it's always a good idea to assess for strengths and resources in a person's life, it's very important to be careful not to convey that the person should be resilient, or that they are not resilient. Instead, convey that it is understandable and expectable that they are experiencing whatever brought them in, given what their life circumstances are. Use clinical judgment when weaving questions about resources and strengths into the assessment. For instance, don't assume that just because a resilience building or stress mitigation program was offered, that the person was able to access it, or that it was considered a valuable resource to that individual or family.

The military operates survival training, formally called SERE school (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape). One objective of SERE school is to show all SERE candidates – even the most elite special operations warriors – that everyone has a breaking point. It's important to remember that resilience training may increase an individual's ability to complete a mission. However, no resilience training will leave a person immune to stressors. Everyone has a breaking point.

- ☐ What got you through _____?
- ☐ What have been the most and least helpful resources to you?
- ☐ What training have you received related to resilience or stress management?
 - How was that for you?
- ☐ Can you tell me what you learned in _____ program that made the most difference to you? What have you taken away from it?
 - What have you used the most?

- ☐ What parts of your life do you feel are the strongest now? (family, friends, work, other social, physical, spiritual, financial, mental)
- ☐ Do you know of any behavioral health, spiritual or social support resources available to you and your family in the community or at your duty station?
- ☐ Are you using any of them?
 - If so, which? If not, why not?
- ☐ How do you usually address your life challenges? What coping strategies have been most helpful for you up to now?
- ☐ Were there any successes or triumphs during (time frame)?
- ☐ What areas of your life are you interested in strengthening (i.e. marital, individual, family, etc.)?

Find information, training, checklists, apps and more at:

<http://www.deploymentpsych.org/military-culture>



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Overall Cultural Assessment for Diagnosis and Treatment Planning

One of the primary goals of cultural vital signs is to inform your cultural assessment towards diagnosis and treatment planning. The cultural vital signs listed in this section are included to help you determine the patient's perspective regarding treatment, followed by an outline for a full cultural assessment to guide treatment planning.

Patient Perspectives on Problems, Strengths, and Treatment Planning

- ☐ "What problems or concerns bring you to the clinic?"
- ☐ "People often understand their problems in their own way, which may be similar or different from how doctors explain the problem. How would you describe your problem to someone else?"
- ☐ "Is there anything about your background, for example your culture, race, ethnicity, religion or geographical origin that is causing problems for you in your current life situation?"
- ☐ What got you through _____?
- ☐ What have been the most and least helpful resources to you?
- ☐ What have been your previous experiences with treatment?
- ☐ How motivated are you to participate in treatment?
 - If not, what are some of the reasons?
- ☐ Do you know of any behavioral health, spiritual or social support resources available to you and your family in the community or at your duty station?
- ☐ Are you using any of them? If so, which? If not, why not?
- ☐ What areas of your life are you interested in strengthening (i.e., relationships, financial, physical, mental, spiritual, etc.)?

Outline for Military Cultural Assessment

A military cultural assessment can include Identification of the following factors, and their contribution to patient presentation:

- I. Service Branch / Identifying Information
- II. Military Ethos: Operational Experiences
- III. Military Organizations, Roles, Functions
- IV. Life Chapters (as applicable):
 - a. Boot Camp / Training
 - b. First Assignment, Tour of Duty, or Deployment
 - c. Military Career Continuation Decisions
 - d. Separation From Military Service
 - e. Veteran Status
 - f. Impact of Injury or Illness on functioning in work and personal life
- V. Stressors
 - a. Non-Deployment-related
 - b. Pre-Deployment
 - c. During Deployment
 - d. Post-Deployment
 - e. Resources
- VI. Impact of Military Culture on:
 - a. Patient experiences
 - b. Perceptions of the problems they are facing
 - c. Key past and present stressors
 - d. Present and future concerns
 - e. Strengths and resources
 - f. Goals for treatment



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