

The Truth About Transition

Adrian Campbell, PhD

1. You are not alone in missing “it”

We ALL miss it. We miss the shitty food, sleeping in dog piles, laughing about things that no one else would ever dare to think of as funny. We miss knowing our brothers and sisters are so close, even as we complain about how bad they stink.

We miss nothing and everything making sense at the same time.

We miss the adrenaline rush that comes with work others would run from. The way the body shifts in anticipation of what is to come... yea, it's weird, but man do we miss that feeling.

We miss the simplicity of a culture where there are firm boundaries, where you know what to expect from the people around you in both serious and relaxed situations.

We miss KNOWING the people we are around every day, like really KNOWING them, and the fact that they KNOW us.

We miss someone having our back no matter what, no matter where.

We miss each other. It isn't the work, well sometimes it's the work, I mean, a lot of us did really cool shit, but more than the work, we miss each other, and the life that we had together.

Whatever your “it” is, know you aren't alone in missing it. As weird as it might feel when you are surrounded by civilians who don't understand.

2. The loss is complex – Mind, Body, and Spirit

When we enter the military we go through an intense training and indoctrination period, aka basic training or bootcamp. During this time we learn the basics of military bearing, behavior, skills, etc., but more than that, we are stripped down to the very essence of our being and re-made into part of the collective WE of the military.

When we leave basic training we are no longer an individual, but rather a member; a member of a group, a collective. We are taught both consciously and unconsciously to love and protect our group above all others. We are taught that membership in this group is now the most important thing IN YOUR ENTIRE LIFE. That the other members of this group and the mission of this group are THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS and you should be willing to GIVE YOUR LIFE for them when necessary.

We are taught this not only through words, but through action. We are taught all of this on a level that goes beyond thought, digs deep into emotion, and resides in the tissues of our bodies. We know these ideas and concepts to be true, not because we can recite the words, but because we can feel it in the very depths of our beings, in our bones. We just KNOW these things to be true. It is embedded in our very being.

And then, one day, your military service ends. You might go through a class designed to help you get a new job and manage your finances once you are out, but is it enough? From the conversations I have had with MANY of my brother and sisters from every branch of the military, I know it isn't. It is far from enough.

Sure, they are trying to prepare you for your next chapter, the future, but what about everything you are leaving behind, everything you are about to lose? The trouble with this is that we can't really articulate what those things are. Even once we get out and feel this gaping hole in our lives, we can't really put into words what used to be there. We just KNOW something is missing.

And this is where it gets even more complicated, especially if you spend most of your time around civilians once you get out, because they absolutely do not get it. They can't. It isn't their fault. So now you might feel as if you are walking around in the world, with this gaping hole in your chest that no one else can see or understand but you.

Your loss is complex. It involves your mind, body, and spirit, and is not something that can be understood by people who never experienced it. However you might be struggling, whatever emotions or thoughts you are wrestling with, please know you aren't alone, your feelings and experiences are most likely NORMAL for someone who has lived through this kind of loss, and most importantly, you CAN feel better again.

3. The experience of loss can happen years, and sometimes decades after – This is NORMAL

Sometimes things are tough the days before we get out and immediately thereafter. Sometimes we feel the loss intensely, right off the bat. But other times it takes months, years, decades before the loss we buried starts to rise to the surface.

You may have been JUST FINE for 15 years, got out, got a job, a new place to live, began integrating in your community, and then all of a sudden you start remembering things from your service...

You might have dreams, flashback, memories surface... or maybe you just all of a sudden start missing IT, when you haven't for the entire time you've been out. Like what the hell?! Right?

It's normal. YOU are NORMAL. You got shit to deal with, but it's cool, we all do.

The most important thing is to reach out, get support, and work through your shit.

Again, YOU ARE NOT ALONE. The majority of veterans I work with have been out for over 10 years. If they can do it, you can do it. Just reach out.

4. The experience of loss can turn into unacknowledged grief and display symptoms similar to depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

This is the thing that honestly BLEW MY MIND during my research. The symptoms of complicated grief, unacknowledged loss, and PTSD are SO similar! All of them involve nightmares, flashbacks, avoidance, anger, depression, anxiety, chronic pain and illness... the only way to pick the right box, aka diagnosis, so we get the help we need, is to REALLY get to know them and their experiences.

Unfortunately, most cognitive-behavioral therapists either don't have the training to do this, or, most often, they aren't given the time. The number of veteran diagnoses for Adjustment Disorder has continued to rise, because honestly, they don't know what is going on with so many of us, because it is COMPLEX, you know, like most human beings are.

Now, I am not saying you don't have PTSD, but what I am saying is that it isn't always that simple. Often the grief we carry LOOKS like PTSD and because our civilian culture doesn't understand the sheer gravity of our loss, because enough research has not been done, those who really want to help us are often at a loss for why we don't get better. To top it off, grief often makes PTSD symptoms worse. Great, right?

So again, not saying you don't have PTSD, BUT if you have been in treatment and it isn't working, or if you have a diagnosis like Adjustment Disorder and just aren't sure what is going on, maybe explore loss and grief with your therapist, and see where that takes you.

5. So here's the deal...

Unfortunately, what we miss can't be solved by a phone call, or even a weekend visit, because things are different once you're out. It's like some magic bubble has been popped, and you are different and they are different, and well, we have to move on, to the next stage in life.

But that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. That doesn't mean it is easy. That doesn't mean you have to be happy about it. You can be happy about the next stage and still sad about all you are leaving behind. You can feel both emotions, and so much more, you actually NEED to allow yourself to do this. It's important.

There will most likely be moments in your life as you move forward that bring back memories, that make you smile, cry, get angry...and that is ok, that is normal, that is grief. Hold it close, like the memory of a lost loved one, allow yourself to feel the way you need to feel, dammit. Know that you aren't alone and there are thousands, if not millions of others around the world that know what you are going through, even if the civilian in the next cubicle doesn't "get it", they won't, and that is ok.

You experienced a life that millions of Americans will never know, will never understand. And once you are out and surrounded by them it may feel as if you are all alone in this grief. But you are not. I promise you with everything I have, YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

We may now be separated by career, economic status, geography, lifestyle choices, etc., but know this, we are all still connected, and always will be. BUT, you have to move on.

Too many of us keep a hidden flame for the military burning within us, like a EX that we just can't get over. Asking ourselves, what ifs and maybes until we go crazy. You gotta let it go. You gotta recognize it for the amazing (and sometimes shitty) experience that it was, be grateful for that, and say goodbye. There will never be anything exactly like that in your life again, and the search for it will drive you mad.

Now, that doesn't mean there aren't TONS of awesome experiences and new friends out there waiting for you! Because there are, I can promise you that too, but you have to put the effort in and try. Moving into civilian life is a transition into a new culture, one that is kind of familiar, but still strange and foreign in so many ways. To make it work, to do better, be better, feel better, you have to put in the work just

like you did when you joined the military. It may not always seem like it, especially not on the hard days, but these people are worth it. You are worth it. The life you dream of living is waiting for you, and you fucking deserve it. So do the work. You got this, I believe in you, and even on days it may not seem like it, we ARE in this together.