

8 Battlefield Skills that Make Life in the Civilian World Challenging

Adapted from James Munroe, Ed.D, Boston VA Healthcare System. james.munroe@med.va.gov

1. **Safety.** Military personnel in the war zone must be on constant alert for danger. Everyday events at home, like a traffic jam, can trigger a sense of danger and vulnerability. The soldier may seek constant control and vigilance. People accustomed to safety may not understand.
2. **Trust and Identifying the Enemy.** To survive, military personnel must learn quickly not to trust in the war zone. It's better to assume that everyone is the enemy until proven otherwise. At home, mistrust and suspiciousness severely damage most important relationships, including marriage.
3. **Mission Orientation.** The primary task in the military is to complete the mission ordered from above. All attention and resources are directed to its completion. In the civilian world, individuals are expected to take initiative, seek out tasks, balance competing priorities, and decide for themselves how to proceed.
4. **Decision Making.** In the war zone, following orders is critical to personal safety, the well-being of comrades, and the success of the mission. Military personnel whose rank requires decision making must give life-and-death orders, even when all the information is not available. At home, especially in families, decision making tends to be cooperative. People take time to consider questions and options and to seek out additional information.
5. **Response Tactics.** In the war zone, survival depends on automatic response to danger. It is critical to act first—with maximum firepower—and think later. Keeping all supplies and equipment, including weapons, clean, well-maintained, and in their proper place is critical to response. At home, messy rooms and dirty dishes feel dangerous, and the soldier's response to these realities may intimidate or frighten family members.
6. **Predictability and Intelligence Control.** In the war zone, troops are in serious danger if the enemy can predict their movements, routine, location or intentions. Military personnel learn to vary their routine and withhold information. But at home, employers expect routines and children need them.
7. **Emotional Control.** Combat exposes military personnel to overwhelming events that elicit fear, loss and grief. Yet the job requires that they move on quickly, staying alert and vigilant. The range of acceptable emotions may narrow to anger and irritability. Drugs and alcohol help sustain emotional numbing, even after the soldier comes home. Emotions that are dangerous in combat are critical for relationships at home.
8. **Talking about the War.** It's hard to talk about how the war changed the individual. War may challenge the soldier's core beliefs about humanity and justice in the world. There are few opportunities to reflect on this in the combat situation. At home, it is difficult to explain to civilians—to people who live in safety—what happened in combat, what decisions were made, why those decisions were necessary. Talking about the war may overwhelm the soldier with horror or grief. And the soldier may be afraid that their stories will upset people they care about or lead to rejection.