

We conducted a qualitative evidence synthesis of 25 articles to delve into the complexity of chronic pain experiences among military personnel, recently retired/discharged veterans, and their healthcare providers. The findings in this report are both revealing and profound, with poignant implications for chronic pain care within and beyond the military context.

Military Personnel

Our review illuminated multiple benefits of non-pharmacological interventions in managing chronic pain from the perspectives and experiences of military personnel. Physical benefits span improved mobility and alleviation of pain symptoms, while psychological gains encompass mood elevation and increased self-efficacy. Importantly, these benefits were intimately connected to program design, delivery elements, and individual mindsets. However, the military lifestyle and culture – such as the mission-first mentality and pain avoidance – heavily impacted chronic pain experiences. This mentality fosters a stoic approach where service members prioritize mission completion over personal health. Such an attitude can potentially lead to the neglect of minor pains or discomfort, allowing these symptoms to escalate into chronic pain over time. Deprioritizing self-care and delaying treatment in favor of duty performance can create long-term, detrimental effects on physical well-being. Of note is the double stigma of women: the stigma of chronic pain in the military, compounded by the struggle for acceptance by their male counterparts.

Recently Retired/Discharged Veterans

The narrative of stigma, pain avoidance, and mission-first philosophy extends into the lives of veterans post-service. Their transition into civilian life presents unique challenges, including access to healthcare services, reintegration difficulties, and diminishing social support. Tailoring chronic pain services to address these transition-related needs was highlighted as vital, underscoring the need for programs supporting veterans' reintegration into civilian life.

Healthcare Providers

Providers overwhelmingly acknowledged the beneficial effects of non-pharmacological interventions in managing chronic pain, highlighting reduced opioid dependence and improved patient daily activities. However, realizing these benefits depended heavily on numerous factors, including personalized care, understanding the chronic pain story, strong patient-provider relationships, and effective utilization of screening tools. Significant barriers surfaced, including a lack of standardized assessment tools, complexities in referral systems, and providers' knowledge gaps on chronic pain. Crucially, providers emphasized the need to understand military language and culture and how these elements affect their care approach.

Future Research Opportunities

Beyond the critical findings highlighted, this review includes an extensive list of future research opportunities that could significantly advance our understanding of chronic pain in

the military context. This opportunity matrix was derived from our analysis of the complex interplay of unique experiences and distinct perspectives. The identified gaps illuminated a broad spectrum of research potentials, such as further exploring the effect of military culture on chronic pain management, examining the transition from service to civilian life and its impact on chronic pain experiences, and investigating the dynamics of the provider-patient relationship in the context of chronic pain. These opportunities underscore the pressing need to delve deeper into unexplored facets of chronic pain management in this special population, guided by the insights gained from our review. The accompanying table presents these comprehensive research opportunities, each as a stepping stone to enhancing our understanding and influencing policy and practice to improve chronic pain management among military personnel, veterans, and their healthcare providers. By capitalizing on these opportunities, we can pave a path toward improved care and the well-being of those who have served.