

Veterans and Career Counseling

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Introduction

Veterans develop strong skills from their military service, but these strengths do not always transfer easily to the civilian sector. Many face challenges with identity, workplace adjustment, or barriers like disabilities and limited resources. Career counseling can guide veterans through these transitions, and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is especially helpful by focusing on self-efficacy, goals, supports, and barriers. Using SCCT alongside assessments, interventions, community resources, and even spirituality, aids counselors in helping veterans find meaningful civilian careers that match their skills and values.

Career Counseling for Veterans

Veterans can gain valuable strengths while serving in the military, such as discipline, leadership, and teamwork; however, transitioning into the civilian sector can still be challenging. Leaving the structured identity of the military often includes obstacles for veterans in finding direction and reconnecting with their civilian community (Shue et al., 2023). When people join the military, they are instilled with its values, structure, and identity. Career counseling can help veterans bridge the gap between their military identity and civilian employment, redefine their skills, and overcome barriers through structured support, like [Veteran Readiness and Employment](#) (VR&E) programs that provide skills assessment, training, apprenticeships, and job placement (Lent & Brown, 2020; Phoenix College, 2025). It can provide mentoring and guidance to help veterans consider career paths that align with their values and identity in civilian life. SCCT can help veterans build confidence by focusing on self-efficacy, goals, and shaping expectations for future outcomes (Lent & Brown, 2020). It also stresses the need to create opportunities that support new skills and interests. Career counselors can provide guidance on accommodations, support networks, and resources like the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

or veteran employment programs. Many veterans face challenges such as disabilities or mental health concerns, but employment and vocational programs can improve health, quality of life, mobility, confidence, and reduce substance use (Hutcheon et al., 2025; Stevenson et al., 2023).

Veteran Statistics

There are over 3.3 million post-9/11 veterans in the U.S., and about 200,000 more leave the military each year. By 2026, their total is expected to exceed 4 million (Aronson et al., 2019). In 2024, 3.2% of post-9/11 veterans were unemployed, compared to 3% of all veterans (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Nearly half of these report a service-related disability. These veterans often view employment as a top priority but also a major challenge. For example, veterans living with mental health conditions are about three times more likely than civilians to encounter difficulties when reintegrating into the workforce (Prévost et al., 2025). Many programs exist to support veterans, yet little is known about which are most effective. Research shows that male veterans and those in junior enlisted ranks are less likely to use services like job databases, career fairs, or counseling compared to women, senior enlisted, or officers. Veterans dealing with physical health problems were found to rely on online job databases about 46% more often than veterans with mental health challenges. Minority veterans tend to use more programs than their Caucasian peers. To improve access, programs should customize outreach and engagement to veterans' diverse backgrounds and needs.

Social Cognitive Career Theory and Veterans

SCCT emphasizes self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting as central aspects of career development (Lent & Brown, 2020). In the general population, research consistently shows that people with higher self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations are more likely to explore careers, persist through challenges, and achieve satisfying employment outcomes. SCCT

has been applied across diverse groups, demonstrating its flexibility in addressing barriers such as gender, socioeconomic status, and access to resources. This is particularly important for veterans, since they come from diverse backgrounds and hold various beliefs (Wang et al., 2022). SCCT is also especially relevant for veterans because it incorporates the role of supports and barriers in determining career decisions. Veterans often face challenges such as translating military skills into civilian terms, adjusting to identity changes, limited job-seeking skills, cultural differences, and health issues. Studies with post-9/11 veterans with service-connected disabilities highlight these as common barriers to finding meaningful civilian work (Al-Abdulmunem et al., 2023). At the same time, supports like planning ahead, pursuing education, receiving emotional and practical help, and working with employers who value military service made the process easier.

Veterans remain motivated to work but need time, personalized support, and flexible employment programs to adjust successfully and find suitable civilian careers. SCCT provides a framework for building confidence, connecting military-acquired skills to new opportunities, and creating realistic career goals. SCCT's contextual supports, like mentoring and adaptability, make it highly effective for this group (Lent & Brown, 2020). Individual or group supports, such as resilience training and cognitive-behavioral therapies that improve adaptability and flexibility, can better prepare veterans for the transition to civilian employment as well.

Applying Social Cognitive Career Theory

Initially, I would explore the client's career history, military role, and transition experiences and assess supports, barriers, and career self-efficacy. We would discuss current concerns, such as challenges in translating skills, health limitations, or uncertainty about goals, and normalize these as common during reintegration (Al-Abdulmunem et al., 2023). Building

trust would be a priority by highlighting the client's strengths, including discipline, leadership, and teamwork. Our mutual military service will help build rapport. I would use tools like self-efficacy scales to measure confidence in job-seeking and adaptability, such as the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (CDSE). This can measure the client's confidence in occupation information, self-appraisal, selecting goals, planning, and problem-solving (Shirley Ryan, 2022). Interest inventories can connect past experiences with new opportunities. Using interest inventories and narratives to explore the client's likes and dislikes will broaden their career awareness (Lent & Brown, 2020). Additionally, the Barriers to Employment and Coping Efficacy Scales for Veterans (BECES-V) can help identify obstacles and coping strengths (Prévost et al., 2025). A study of U.S. and Canadian veterans found that health, adaptability, and stigma were major barriers, while confidence in handling work-life balance predicted success when returning to work.

Building confidence through practice, mentoring, and feedback would follow. Using these assessment tools and resources like O*Net and The Strong Interest Inventory (SII), the client can explore career interests and outcome expectations, uncover potential careers that capitalize on their strengths and values, set realistic goals and action steps, and build confidence (Lent & Brown, 2020; Shepherd University, n.d.). Persistence can be reinforced with ongoing support and reflection.

Addressing Barriers

Veterans may face many barriers, such as service-related disabilities, mental health or substance use histories, identifying job goals, transportation difficulties, limited digital access, job application challenges, homelessness, lack of a driver's license, criminal records, age stigma, and employment gaps, while also struggling with interviews, networking, and self-advocacy due

to limited social support (Stevenson et al., 2023). At the same time, some display overconfidence or unrealistic salary expectations. These factors can limit opportunities, lower confidence, and reduce career adaptability (Lent & Brown, 2020). For example, a physical disability may limit certain job tasks, while a history of substance use or incarceration can create stigma in hiring. Additionally, a lack of transportation or access to computers can hinder job applications, interviews, and training.

Counselors using SCCT can help clients build confidence, set clear goals, and increase support. For veterans, this might mean helping them access disability accommodations, vocational rehab, and workplace supports, offering relapse-prevention or treatment programs for mental health or substance use, working with legal or second-chance hiring programs if they have felony records, and helping with transportation or tech access like remote work, public library computers, or transit vouchers. Additionally, intensive career coaching and assistance with translating military skills have been shown to improve employment and health outcomes for veterans (Bond et al., 2022; Hutcheon et al., 2025). These components, especially mentor-led support and skill-focused content, are the parts of employment programs most strongly linked to job attainment and promotion in recent studies.

Resources for Vocation

[ARIZONA@WORK – Veterans Services](#) provides services like priority in job referrals, training, and other employment services for veterans with disabilities (ARIZONA@WORK, 2025). [Pima County Veterans Employment Services](#) offers peer support, benefits counseling, networking, career counseling, help with job searches, claims assistance for education, medical care, disability, behavioral health services, recovery occupational skills training, help with housing, adult tutoring and education, and other basic needs (Pima County, 2025). [Arizona](#)

[Coalition for Military Families](#) connects veterans & family members with statewide employment and training opportunities and helps with barriers like housing and transportation (Arizona Coalition, n.d.). [Phoenix College](#) provides links and information for VR&E and the VA, which helps veterans prepare for and find suitable jobs, and offers training, apprenticeships, and counseling (Phoenix College, 2025). The VA also offers vocational assessments and guidance, job-readiness skills development, work incentives counseling, job placement and development, job retention support, reasonable accommodations and assistive technology, and resource referrals (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], 2025). For those with a service-related disability that limits their ability to work or prevents them from working, VR&E can help. In some cases, family members may also qualify for certain benefits. Veterans can apply online with the [VA Form 28-1900](#).

Effectiveness of Treatment Plan

This plan is tenable and feasible because it is grounded in SCCT, which is highly applicable to veterans since it emphasizes self-efficacy, supports, barriers, and outcome expectations (Lent & Brown, 2020). The integration of evidence-based assessments such as the CDSE, interest inventories, and the BECES-V strengthens the plan by offering measurable ways to track needs and progress. In addition, the plan provides barrier-specific interventions that address real challenges veterans face, including disability, substance use, homelessness, and stigma, and offers practical solutions like accommodations, digital access, and relapse-prevention supports. Incorporating existing local resources that can be accessed immediately and aligned with counseling interventions, like VR&E and ARIZONA@WORK, strengthens the plan. Combining theory, assessments, supports, and available resources makes this plan a realistic and effective framework for helping veterans transition into fulfilling civilian careers.

Further research is needed to understand how social cognitive factors interact with culture, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability (Lent & Brown, 2020). More evidence is also needed on the effectiveness of SCCT-based interventions. Veterans may respond differently because social and cultural contexts affect self-efficacy, expectations, and goals. A study of veterans on the U.S.-Mexico border found barriers like limited mental health care, military mindset, strained family ties, discrimination, and scarce jobs, which can lower confidence and slow progress. Those with stronger supports advance more quickly, showing the need to customize SCCT to the individual (Paat et al., 2025). Additionally, unemployed veterans with mental health or substance use conditions need integrated support that combines career development, mental health care, and sobriety (Stevenson et al., 2025).

Incorporating Spirituality

Spirituality can be important in career counseling with veterans, as many connect their service to a sense of calling and purpose. Career paths should align with their spiritual identity, and counselors can guide veterans toward civilian work that reflects values like service and integrity, such as public safety or social services (Lemke, 2020). Spiritual communities also provide support, mentorship, and identity resources, which align with SCCT and benefit veterans' career development.

Spirituality has benefits but also challenges for veterans. Morally injurious experiences (MIEs) can damage identity, self-worth, and meaning, causing anguish and guilt. The more severe the MIE, the harder it is to make sense of, with the loss of meaning being a key sign of moral injury (Brémault-Phillips et al., 2019). Finding meaning can reduce stress, restore moral frameworks, and lower this risk. It is vital to address how veterans interpret MIEs. Pastoral care can offer support. Spiritual bypassing can also occur when clients use spiritual practices to avoid

emotional or psychological issues (Dua & Sharma, 2025). For veterans, counselors should apply spirituality in a client-led, trauma-informed way, helping them face painful experiences and connecting them with safe supports like VA or base chaplains or faith communities they trust (Grimell & Atuel, 2023; Kelley et al., 2024). Clear boundaries and collaboration with trained spiritual leaders are essential to ensure spirituality promotes healing rather than avoidance (ACA, 2014).

Conclusion

Veterans can benefit from career counseling that recognizes both their strengths and the unique challenges they face. By applying SCCT, addressing barriers, and connecting them with resources and supports, counselors can help veterans build confidence and pursue meaningful work. Judiciously integrating spirituality and values further supports their search for purpose and fulfillment in civilian careers.

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