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## Who am I?

**Emre Umucu, PhD**

- Received PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Rehabilitation Psychology)
- Assistant professor of Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Special Education
- Psychologist, Certified rehabilitation counselor and Licensed Professional Counselor (WI)
- Director and Founder of the Veteran VWell-Being Lab (V<sup>3</sup>)
- Clinical experience at Federal (e.g., VA), State-Federal (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation Offices), and non-profit (e.g., community mental health agencies) mental health and rehabilitation agencies
- Research on positive psychology, Veteran health, well-being, test construction, and psychosocial adjustment in people with disabilities and chronic illnesses

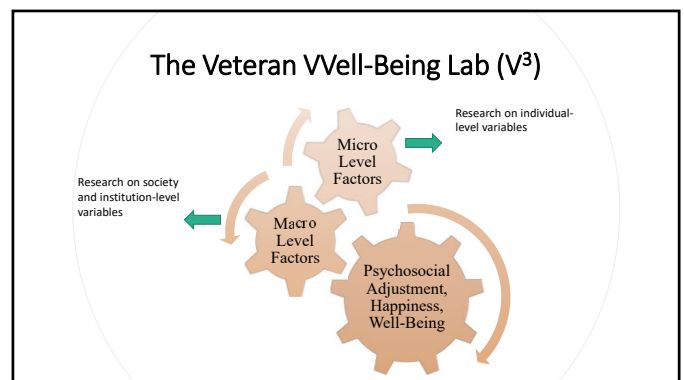
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## The Veteran VWell-Being Lab (V<sup>3</sup>)

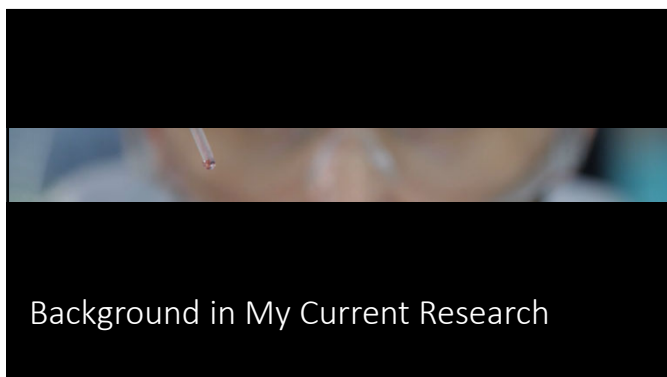
**Mission:** The Veteran VWell-Being Lab is dedicated to conduct high-impact and inspiring research to improve the health and quality of life for all individuals with and without disabilities.

**Vision:** The Veteran VWell-Being Lab aims to be a part of scientific community improving the health and quality of life for all individuals with and without disabilities.

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## Background (1): Veterans in College Settings

**After Post-9/11 GI Bill**, colleges and universities have **experienced a steady increase** in their veteran population.

**Challenging transition; service-connected disabilities (e.g., PTSD); external stressors, and institutional barriers (e.g., GI Bill issues)**

(DiRamo et al., 2008; Elliot et al., 2011; Norman et al., 2015; Umucu et al., 2018, 2019, 2020)

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### Background (2): PTSD

PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) is a **“psychiatric disabling condition”** that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event, like combat, a natural disaster, a car accident, or sexual assault

PTSD is associated with a host of negative health, well-being, rehabilitation, and education outcomes, including difficulties in regulating emotions, lack of engagement in activities, difficulties with family and social relationships, and difficulties in college and career success

Prevalence of PTSD:  
 >>45.6% in student veterans  
 >> Prevalence of PTSD is estimated to be higher

(NIH MedlinePlus, 2009; Owens et al., 2009; Ridd et al., 2011; Tsai et al., 2012; Umucu et al., in preparation; VA, 2018)

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### Background (3): Student Veterans with PTSD and PTSD Symptoms

- Academic Problems** such as academic functioning
- Psychological Health Problems** such as depression
- Physical Health Problem** such as sleep problems
- Substance Use Problems** such as using substances as a coping mechanism
- Relationship Problems** such as sense of isolation and lack of social support

Negatively affecting college life adjustment, well-being, and quality of life

(Aleichner & Yatab, 2016; Barry et al., 2014; Gatz, 2014; Normal et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2011; Umucu, 2017; Umucu et al., 2018, 2019, 2020; Whiteman & Barry, 2011)

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### Background (4): Seeking Help Behaviors

- Research has demonstrated that student veterans experience more help-seeking stigma than students without a military background
- Military-Veteran culture (values strengths and self-reliance instead of weaknesses)
- Seeking professional help to increase well-being might be less stigmatizing than seeking help to reduce psychopathological symptoms such as depression
- Can Positive Psychology be a solution to increase help-seeking behaviors?

(Hoge et al., 2004; Umucu, 2020; Umucu et al., 2020)

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### Background (5): Theoretical Framework – Positive Psychology

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### Purpose

Little is known about the interrelationships among PTSD symptoms, character strengths, well-being, and college life adjustment in student Veterans

PTSD as a disability has not been examined in the context of Veteran health in college and society settings through the lens of positive psychology

The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether pillars of well-being (i.e., positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment) mediate the relationship between PTSD symptoms and college life adjustment in student veterans with and without disabilities

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### Findings

- Student Veterans with higher levels of PTSD symptoms have lower levels of college life adjustment.
- Student Veterans with higher levels of PTSD symptoms have lower levels of positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning in life, and sense of accomplishment.
- Only positive emotion and sense of accomplishment partially explain the relationship between PTSD symptoms and college life adjustment in student Veterans.

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## Research Implications → My Efforts to Follow-Up

- Experimental design research is warranted to validate results. Positive psychology interventions could be tested in this population by researchers and clinicians.
  - "Serving the Heroes in Postsecondary Education: Evaluating a Positive Psychology Group Intervention to Increase Well-Being and College Life Adjustment in Student Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder" - \$50,000 (PI: 2019-2021) – Spencer Foundation
- More collaborative and funded research is needed to understand mental health, rehabilitation, transition, and education needs of Veterans with disabilities and chronic conditions.
  - "From Military Boots to Books: Examining the Facilitators and Barriers in College Life Adjustment and Well-Being for Student Veterans in EPCC and UTEP" - \$7,500 (PI: 2020-2021) – UTEP
- Research could also focus on all Veterans with disabilities instead of only student Veterans to have higher impact on their employment, quality of life, psychosocial adjustment through Macro Level Research.
  - "Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment" - \$750,000 (PI at UTEP; CO-PI for ~\$16.7 Million Center Grant; 2020-2025) – DOE
    - My lab is mainly responsible for *Veterans with Disabilities*

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## Recommendations for Counseling Clinicians

Our study supports the **implementation of interventions** that increase positive emotion and sense of accomplishment.

In addition to **evidence-based traditional psychotherapy**, clinicians may use **positive psychology interventions** to increase positive emotions and sense of accomplishment in student Veterans with PTSD symptoms.

Clinicians can **integrate contemporary evidence-based approaches into treatment** to encourage student veterans with PTSD symptoms **to imagine their future selves and focus their minds on good events and positive feelings**

Rehabilitation counselors working at university disability and counseling services could pay further attention to student veterans with PTSD to provide them most appropriate accommodation services

University counseling and disability services could provide information on additional resources and services provided by the VA and community mental health and rehabilitation agencies for veterans with PTSD.

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## Potential COVID-19 Implications

The sudden changes on campus, like wearing masks, social distancing, frequent tests for COVID-19, and locked buildings may trigger anxiety and stress in student veterans with PTSD.

Mental health professionals who work on campuses may pay further attention to adjustment problems in students with disabilities, including student veterans with PTSD by telehealth.

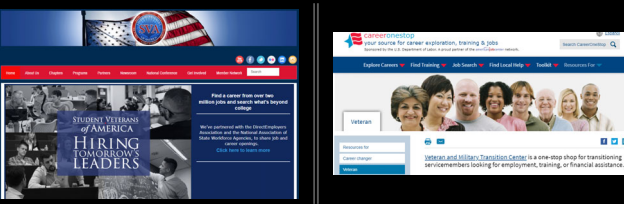
University counseling and accommodation services providers could follow-up with student veterans with PTSD (as well as all students with disabilities) to examine whether they need resources for their coursework.

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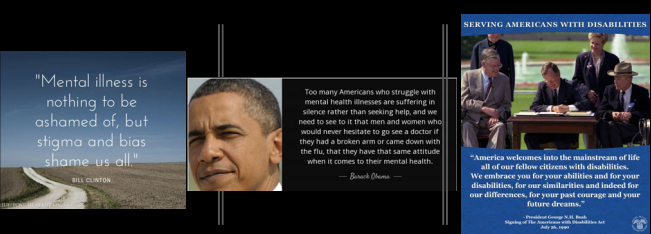
## Services

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## More Services

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## Take an action stop to STIGMA...

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**Well-Being, PTSD, College Adjustment in Student Veterans With and Without Disabilities**

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