The transition from soldier to civilian and from soldier to student is huge. For some of you this transition happened quite smoothly, for others it may be a struggle. It is important to remember that homecoming is a process and not a one-time event. So please give yourself time to make this transition and exercise patience in the meantime.

All veterans, like all students, are highly individual and adjust to college in their own way. However, we have found some commonalities among returning veterans. Veteran students most often find it strange, and possibly alienating, being in an environment where most everyone else is going through the everyday motions of life, while you have had a life-changing experience to which most cannot relate. While you were gone relationships may have changed, or previous friends may have moved away from Winona. While in the military you learned battlefield skills that were essential to life in combat, but which can cause misunderstanding and frustration here. You may find you need to relearn who and how to trust, how to feel safe, how to relax, how to express emotions, and how to focus on and find meaning in things that are not life and death decisions.

You almost certainly will find that the day-to-day life at college does not match the high levels of the adrenaline of war. Some veterans find this very mundane until they are further along in the transition home, and others welcome it. Also, some veterans find the total number of daily decisions overwhelming. Granted, the consequences of decisions made while a soldier are vast, the total number of decisions can be quite small compared to civilian life. And, of course, it may take some time to develop an identity beyond “soldier.”

While all returning veterans experience a transition, some also experience combat stress in various forms. Studies by the US Army Mental Health Advisory Team suggest that somewhere between 11 and 17% of returning soldiers will experience acute stress in the form of depression, anxiety or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These emotional and cognitive difficulties can interfere with one’s ability to concentrate and succeed academically. Often these students feel alienated from their community and question the value of school. While some form of combat stress is likely immediately upon return, if, after three months, you find symptoms are intensifying instead of diminishing, effects of the war are interfering with your relationships or academic success, you are self-medicating with drugs or alcohol to numb negative emotions, you are experiencing thoughts of suicide, or you continue to re-experience events from the war, a consultation with a professional is highly recommended.

Experiencing combat stress or PTSD is not a sign of weakness, but rather is a normal set of reactions to the experience of war. However, when these feelings or reactions are not dealt with, they can lead to difficulties in readjusting to community life or the life of a student. Some signs of combat stress include:

- Irritability or anger
- Low tolerance to stress or lasting heightened anxiety
- Difficulty sleeping
- Nightmares or night sweats
- Hyperarousal and startle reactions
- Withdrawal from social settings
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
• Apathy or emotional numbing
• Sadness and depression
• Substance abuse
• Re-experiencing events from the war
• Difficulty concentrating or motivating self academically

We offer the following self-care checklist with hopes that it may help ease the transition.

• Pace your course load upon return. Don’t overwhelm yourself. This may mean taking a lighter load your first semester or two back.
• Take advantage of the resources on campus, e.g., Veterans’ Affairs Office, tutoring services, Counseling Services, Veterans Club, Disabilities Resources, etc.
• Follow a daily schedule to stay organized.
• Pay attention to your physical needs. Get enough sleep, eat healthy, and get exercise. Exercise and adequate sleep are perhaps the best anti-stress strategies available. And we know that what we eat has an impact on our mood.
• Avoid self-medication through drugs and alcohol. It leads to greater issues down the road.
• Limit your exposure to the news media or traumatic information. It can trigger your own trauma.
• Find someone you trust you can talk to about your experiences and current feelings. Find a family member, clergy, another veteran, or friend with whom you can be honest. Consider making contact with a professional. Seeking support is a sign of strength, not weakness. This may be a different message than you received while in the military, but it really is true, and it can lead to academic success.
• Try to make connections with the larger WSU community by exploring groups, clubs or volunteer opportunities. You may need to cultivate many connections before you find the one that fits. It will help break down the barriers you may feel between yourself and other students.
• Focus on others. Find a volunteer opportunity or way to give back to the community. Nothing takes our attention away from ourselves more than finding a way to help others.

Please know that if you are struggling at any level, Counseling Services is here to support you. Our role will be to provide resources, offer support, and attempt to help in easing this transition. If more acute stress is experienced, we will help you locate medical or psychological services within the community or state. Often times veterans prefer to speak with a counselor with military experience or a counselor outside of their immediate community. We can help facilitate this referral.