



EUROMIL Wednesday Q&A series

“How to prevent and destigmatise mental health issues in the Military?”



Dr. Rebecca Bogaers
Expert on Mental Health, Dutch Ministry of Defence

What are the primary factors contributing to a higher prevalence of mental health issues among military personnel?

Findings of the prevalence of mental health issues among military personnel compared to civilians are very mixed, and they do not always show a higher prevalence among military personnel (Trautmann et al., 2017). However, research does show that military personnel that had been deployed and had experienced high combat exposure, had elevated rates of mental health issues. Military personnel operate in potentially hazardous, dangerous, and emotional demanding situations (Campbell & Nobel, 2009). These circumstances can lead to an increased risk of developing mental health issues (Reijnen et al., 2015; Stevelink et al., 2015).

Does the stigma still exist in the barracks or in workplaces? If so, what actions are key in tackling this phenomenon?

Mental health stigma still exists in the military. For example, recent research in the Netherlands Armed Forces shows that no less than one-third of military personnel with mental health issues feared that seeking treatment or disclosure to a supervisor would lead to social rejection, others treatment them differently and negative career consequences. This mental health stigma forms a barrier to treatment seeking and disclosure and can thus also can have adverse consequences for sustainable employability and wellbeing at work (Bogaers et al., 2023).

To tackle this phenomenon, several actions should be taken:

- To address mental health stigma in the military, it is important to evaluate destigmatizing interventions for their effectiveness within the Netherlands Armed Forces. Previous research on destigmatising interventions showed that interventions targeting mental health stigma that include both education about mental health and that promote contact between people with and without mental health issues (in the right context, e.g. no power differences, in the context of collaboration and legitimized by the supervisor) have positive effects on reducing stigma (Na et al., 2022).



EUROMIL Wednesday Q&A series

“How to prevent and destigmatise mental health issues in the Military?”

- Research also shows that there is self-stigma in the military. Self-stigma occurs when individuals with mental health issues internalize the negative stereotypes and prejudices held by the general population. Previous research shows that support with the decision of whether to disclose mental health issues to a supervisor or not, can help people in dealing with different types of stigma, including self-stigma. Therefore it would be important to assess and implement disclosure decision aids within the military context (Henderson et al., 2012; Rusch & Kusters, 2021).
- Mental health stigma should also be looked at from a policy perspective. It is important to implement and enforce policies to avoid stigma and discrimination against those with mental health issues.

What are the main actions that military authorities should take for mental health awareness?

Military authorities should prioritize mental health awareness during military training more. During training, military personnel should be educated on mental health in general, communication skills and skills to support colleagues with mental health issues. If these skills are generated in an early stage, this could decrease stigma and increase mental health awareness. Additionally, research shows that people with mental health issues do not recognize these issues themselves at first. Therefore, peers could be important in signalling symptoms and facilitating treatment-seeking. Research shows that unit training to increase support for military personnel with mental health issues increases treatment-seeking and supportive behaviour towards those with mental health issues (Britt et al., 2018).

Additionally, supervisors in the military should be trained more on the topic of mental health. Supervisors have a key role in the mental health of their employees and in whether employees seek treatment and disclose mental health issues (Bogaers et al., 2023). The focus of such training should be on the importance of mental health for sustainable employability and wellbeing at work. Furthermore, the training should include ways in which to support military personnel with mental health issues. When supervisors become more aware of the importance of mental health and give priority to this topic within their team, this can create more mental health awareness throughout the military. Such a training has recently been developed in the Netherlands Armed Forces.