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1 Ex-military personnel's experiences of loneliness and social isolation from discharge,
2 through transition, to the present day

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16

17 Both authors developed this project idea; SGG carried out data collection and data analysis;
18 GWM participated in data analysis discussions and supervised the project; SGG wrote the
19 paper; GWM edited the paper.

20

21 **Abstract**

22 Objectives: This study aimed to examine the unique factors of loneliness and social isolation within
23 the ex-military population from discharge, through transition, to the present day. Design: A
24 qualitative, Phenomenological approach was adopted. Methods: In-depth semi-structured interviews
25 were carried out with 11 participants who had all served in the British Armed Forces and represented
26 all three military services (Royal Navy; Army; Royal Air Force). Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used
27 to analyse the data. Results: Three themes were generated - a sense of loss; difficulty in connecting in
28 civilian life; and seeking out familiarity. The findings of this study were examined through the lenses
29 of the Social Needs Approach and the Cognitive Discrepancy Model. Conclusions: Individuals
30 developed close bonds in the military through meaningful and prolonged contact, reducing feelings of
31 loneliness and social isolation during their time in service. The sense of belonging was key to social
32 connection, but transition out of the military severed existing relationships, and a lack of belonging
33 hindered the development of relationships within the civilian community. This study has implications
34 for service provision relating to ex-military personnel and future service leavers.

35

36 Keywords: Veteran; ex-military; transition; loneliness; social isolation

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40

41 Introduction

42 Loneliness and social isolation have become increasingly acknowledged as a health concern, are
43 widely recognised risk factors for adverse mental and physical health outcomes (1), and are linked to
44 premature death (2, 3). This evidence has grown since the COVID-19 pandemic (4) and has highlighted
45 the universal issue of both loneliness and social isolation across the population (5). Whilst both
46 loneliness and social isolation can be experienced by everyone, the ex-military population present
47 unique experiences of loneliness and social isolation that requires specific attention (6). Both
48 experiences of loneliness and social isolation in the ex-military population have been associated with
49 post-traumatic stress (7), depression (8), suicidal ideation (9, 10), and deteriorating physical health
50 (11).

51 The military is a highly structured environment where healthcare, housing, welfare, and social support
52 are intrinsic to the service (12). In addition to this, the military has distinct social norms that are
53 reinforced during service (12). Transitioning into a fluid civilian society can, therefore, be challenging
54 without the supportive framework and social norms of the military (13). Whilst studies on transition
55 from military to civilian life have identified that being socially connected in the community is
56 associated with positive transition (14), there are a number of factors that may be experienced during
57 transition that can impact loneliness and social isolation. The search for continuity from military to
58 civilian life makes adjustment to civilian life challenging (15) which may result in “reverse culture
59 shock” (16) and identity conflict (17, 18).

60 Comradeship has been found to be a significant factor during military service (19) and a report by the
61 Royal British Legion (20) states that 65% of ex-military personnel exiting the British Armed Forces felt
62 lonely and/or socially isolated. Reduced support networks, as a result of leaving the military, are
63 associated with an increase in loneliness (21) and social isolation increases the propensity to drink to
64 excess at home or alone (22). Studies have also demonstrated feelings of detachment from both

65 military and civilian society (23, 24) and social ties can weaken (25). Research from the USA has also
66 identified that ex-military personnel may struggle to build up new social connections when relocating
67 (26), may have difficulty accessing social support to assist with reintegration (27), and may have
68 challenges in retaining or building social networks that support health and wellbeing (28). One
69 theoretical and methodological perspective around “culturally meaningful networks” examines the
70 social mechanisms which impact social networks through the transition to civilian life (29). This
71 framework proposes that structure, meaning, and time play crucial roles in influencing social networks
72 after military service (29). It can therefore be argued that specialised interventions within this
73 subpopulation should consider these three factors, and are essential during both the transitional
74 period and in the longer term (30).

75 Loneliness has been considered theoretically through both the Social Needs Approach (31) and the
76 Cognitive Discrepancy Model (32). The Social Needs Approach (31) identifies two distinct categories
77 of loneliness: emotional loneliness, i.e. the absence of an intimate attachment in which individuals
78 may be motivated to seek fulfilling relationships to alleviate their sense of loss; and social loneliness,
79 i.e. a lack of social networks in which individuals may strive to identify new social connections. The
80 Cognitive Discrepancy Model (32) considers loneliness as the perceived discrepancy between the
81 desired and actual quality or quantity of relationships. The model distinguishes between subjective
82 loneliness and objective social isolation and states they may be experienced independently or
83 simultaneously (32).

84 Developing the narrative around loneliness and social isolation in the British Armed Forces ex-military
85 has been recommended (30) as well as determining the prevalence of both concepts within this
86 subpopulation (6). However, there is a distinct lack of Social Needs Approach theoretical application
87 in the wider literature, including literature focusing on experiences of loneliness and social isolation
88 in the Armed Forces Community. Furthermore, conducting qualitative research has been suggested to
89 establish what works for whom and why during transition to civilian life (33) and to provide a deeper

90 understanding of how problems emerge and what contributes to successful outcomes (34). Given the
91 evidence, this study aimed to examine the unique factors of loneliness and social isolation for ex-
92 military population from discharge, through transition to the present day.

93

94 **Materials and Methods**

95 **Design**

96 A Phenomenological methodology was adopted as this qualitative method focuses on participants'
97 views of their lived experiences. The phenomenological approach seeks to capture experiences,
98 thoughts and feelings whereby the researcher assumes a person-centred role by listening
99 empathically without questioning or judgement (34). Grounded theory was not deemed appropriate
100 as it is concerned with the researcher developing a theory from their own interpretations and
101 discourse analysis was not considered suitable as it examines the use of language (35). Semi-
102 structured interviews were appropriate as they complement the realist phenomenological approach
103 by allowing participants the flexibility to openly describe aspects of loneliness and social isolation that
104 have meaning and relevance to them. Inductive analysis was utilised to analyse the data to ensure
105 findings were data driven rather than seeking out data that upheld a specific theory which is consistent
106 with the phenomenological approach (36). This study received full ethical approval from [Anonymous]
107 University's Ethics approval system.

108

109 **Participants**

110 Using voluntary and snowballing sampling strategies, participants who were over the age of 18 and
111 had served in the British Armed Forces were recruited (Table 1).

112 **Table 1 Summary of participants**

Participant number	Sex	Age	Length of Service (years)	Years since discharge
Participant 01	M	57	38	3
Participant 02	M	55	5	34
Participant 03	M	62	20	23
Participant 04	F	41	7	15
Participant 05	F	66	30	16
Participant 06	M	63	28	18
Participant 07	M	69	16	30
Participant 08	F	72	25	27
Participant 09	F	49	13	15
Participant 10	M	53	23	13
Participant 11	F	49	7	21

113

114 Recruitment was carried out using professional networks known to the researcher (SGG). This network
 115 forwarded this email to their own networks and advertised the study via social media. Eleven
 116 participants volunteered to participate. Participants were between the age of 49 and 72 (mean=58)
 117 were recruited, six male and five female, all of whom had served in the British Armed Forces.
 118 Participants served in the Royal Navy (n=1), Army (n=8), and Royal Air Force (n=2). Length of service
 119 ranged from five years to 38 years (mean=19 years). The number of years elapsed since discharge
 120 ranged from three years to 34 years (mean=20 years) and rank ranged from Private to Lieutenant
 121 Colonel.

122 **Materials**

123 An interview guide was developed consisting of open-ended questions (Fig 1). The interview guide
124 was reviewed by an independent individual, who was ex-military, to establish whether the questions
125 were relevant and appropriate. Following a review by the ethics panel, suggestions were made, and
126 the interview guide was amended accordingly.

127

128 **Fig 1. Semi-structured interview schedule**

129

130 **Procedure**

131 An email was distributed amongst a professional network which contained details of the study and
132 the researcher's contact details. Potential participants contacted the researcher who provided a
133 participant information sheet and a consent form. All participants were given the opportunity to ask
134 any questions. If they were still happy to participate, they provided consent and a semi-structured
135 interview was arranged.

136 Interviews took place between 10th July – 21st September 2020. The interview process was adapted
137 due to COVID-19 and participants were offered interviews by telephone or video call. Of the 11
138 participants, five opted for telephone and six chose video call. Interviews took place in a private and
139 confidential workspace in the researcher's home and lasted an average of one hour. Prior to the
140 interview, the nature of the research was explained to the participant, and they were reminded that
141 the interview would be recorded. They were also advised that the interview could be paused or
142 terminated at any time, and they could withdraw from the study. Demographic details on age, service
143 type, rank, service length and discharge date were taken from each participant during the interview.
144 At the end of the interview the participant was emailed a participant debrief. Interviews were then
145 transcribed verbatim by the researcher and each transcript was given an ID code. Demographic
146 information was entered onto a spreadsheet that linked the ID code to the transcription to enable the

147 researcher to identify each participant should they wish to withdraw from the study. The coded
148 transcripts, coded spreadsheet and consent forms were all stored separately and securely on a
149 password protected computer.

150

151 **Analytical Strategy**

152 The interview transcripts were analysed using the principles of reflexive Thematic Analysis (37, 38) as
153 it is a flexible approach to understanding data, is not fixed to a specific epistemological position and
154 *“...can be conducted within both realist/essentialist and constructionist paradigms...”* (33). Reflexive
155 Thematic Analysis enables the researcher to derive knowledge from the data through an iterative
156 process to identify patterns and meanings within the data that produces codes and ultimately
157 generates final themes (39).

158 Analysis was conducted by the researcher with consideration for each of the six phases of Braun and
159 Clarke (38) step-by-step guide. Braun and Clarke (37) state their 2006 paper provides a starting point
160 and is not intended to be a rigid procedure that one must adhere to, but rather a fluid approach. They
161 also suggest that researchers should be explicit when writing about theme generation and both of
162 these points are reflected in the analysis strategy and the analytical trail. Inductive analysis was utilised
163 which ensured the findings were data driven rather than seeking out data that upheld a specific
164 theory. Inductive analysis was utilised to generate data-driven codes, sub-themes, and themes (32).

165 As the researcher undertook and transcribed the interviews this enabled them to become fully
166 immersed in the data from the outset. During this phase of analysis, initial impressions were noted
167 e.g. grief, bonding, identity, language. All analysis was done using pen and paper. The transcripts were
168 then read repeatedly so the researcher became familiar with the full dataset and any potential
169 meanings relevant to the research topic were highlighted in red.

170 Repeatedly reading through the highlighted text generated initial codes which were given separate
171 headings and organised chronologically from discharge, transition and present day to coincide with
172 the research question. Transcripts were also colour co-ordinated according to the participant as it
173 was anticipated this would ensure the codes generated were taken from a broad base of participants.
174 The full transcripts were then re-read to ensure that all relevant data had been captured. Both authors
175 met repeatedly throughout data analysis to discuss the codes, sub-themes, and themes generated in
176 this study.

177 Reflexivity is one approach to acknowledging the researcher's position within the research (40). One
178 author (SGG) was employed by a military charity, and they were acutely aware of how their
179 experiences may influence the research. It was their intention to remain objective throughout the
180 research process, therefore, they kept a reflexive journal to minimise their biases. This was supported
181 by regular meetings with GWM to discuss the research aims, data collection tools, and data
182 analysis/interpretation. It is noteworthy to remark how the interview schedule questions may have
183 been influenced by the researcher's positionality. For example, the language used in the questions
184 such as the "social impact" of geographical relocation and "challenges" in forming new friendships
185 imply difficulties were experienced and would have prompted the participant to discuss these.

186

187 **Results**

188 Given the inconsistencies between the understanding of loneliness and social isolation, participants
189 were asked the meaning of the terms to ensure the analysis was accurately reflected. Participants
190 widely defined loneliness as "*...the absence of meaningful relationships...*" (Participant 04) and
191 suggested it "*...isn't necessarily being on your own.*" (Participant 03) as you can be "*...lonely in a*
192 *crowded room...*" (Participant 04). Social isolation was defined by participants as a lack of physical

193 contacts by “...literally having nobody around you...” (Participant 04) and “...where you are on your
194 own.” (Participant 09).

195 Three themes were generated from this data: a sense of loss; difficulty in connecting in civilian life;
196 and seeking out familiarity (Table 2). Each theme includes sub-themes.

197

198 **Table 2 Themes and sub-themes generated from the dataset**

THEME	SUBTHEME
A Sense of Loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Formation of bonds• Loss of Identity• Detached Social Networks
Difficulty Connecting in Civilian Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Different Social Norms• Experiential Differences
Seeking Out Familiarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reconnecting to Ex-military Community• Connecting through Shared Interests

199

200 **A sense of loss**

201 ***Formation of Bonds***

202 In order to comprehend the sense of loss, it is important to highlight the strength of military
203 comradeship experienced by the participants. Participants described how strong attachments
204 developed due to being together in prolonged close proximity during their military service, where
205 “...you make very fast, very firm friends for that period of time” (Participant 11). This was felt to

206 contribute to the unique formation of bonds that operate at a profound level. Having been through
207 the same experiences was integral to shaping friendships and strengthening bonds:

208 *“You form a bond, you’ve been through the same thing together and whether you’re a sniper*
209 *or a woodworker or a cook or a butcher, you’ve all been through the same military training*
210 *and you’ve all had the same good times and you’ve all been through the bad times and been*
211 *to the same places and I think that does create a bond certainly.” (Participant 02)*

212 Experiencing intense situations where your life depends upon those with whom you serve was felt to
213 increase the intimacy and depth of attachments. Furthermore, loyalty and respect flourish in
214 challenging situations and participants reported their trust in each other, thus breaking down barriers
215 and cementing a strong supportive network through comradeship:

216 *“...you have, no matter what, the loyalty is massive, you know what I mean?” (Participant 01)*

217 *“...you’ve got to have that respect because you’re going to a war zone...” (Participant 09)*

218 *“...having lived through adversity with the people you can trust, you have a high opinion of*
219 *them...” (Participant 10)*

220 *“I think one of the things that stick with me is comradeship and all the rest of it is when you’ve been*
221 *thrown into an intense situation and it’s how...how barriers break down.” (Participant 03).* Having a
222 common goal was felt to bind people together and form a collective unit that operates as a supportive
223 network. Participants reported how bonding is achieved through that supportive network and
224 “fighting” for one another:

225 *“They say people don’t fight for their country they fight for their pals and I think that’s right*
226 *really. People, you know, they support each other often in very difficult situations.”*
227 *(Participant 07)*

228 The degree to which bonds were developed was evident through the use of phrases such as *“band of*
229 *brothers” (Participant 01)*, illustrating a tremendous sense of kinship experienced within military

230 service. The strength of relationships created within the military was evidenced by the nature in which
231 participants associated it to family. Forming a strong familial attachment is a significant aspect of
232 military life which provides deep and fulfilling relationships:

233 *“So from my perspective, you know, it was everything, it was family, you know, it was a whole*
234 *life...yeah, they were family, mates I served with, they were brothers.” (Participant 10)*

235 Although female participants did not use the phrase “band of sisters” they still described their
236 relationships in the military as “family”:

237 *“When I was serving it was excellent, it’s like you almost built up another family.... everybody*
238 *was very supportive and it was like having your own family out there which was really, really*
239 *good.” (Participant 09).*

240

241 **Loss of Identity**

242 Participants described leaving the military as a loss of identity and was described as being similar to
243 feelings of bereavement:

244 *“When I first left, I was totally and utterly bereft. The day I handed my ID card in I sat and*
245 *wept because that was my whole identity...” (Participant 05)*

246 *“I suppose there’s almost a bereavement there, having left the forces. Yeah...it’s that sense of*
247 *loss.” (Participant 07)*

248 Following discharge, the dichotomy of military and civilian life felt like living two lives, but comfort
249 was achieved through their ongoing military identity:

250 *“I often think when I’m out and about I live two lives...I live my life and I live the life that*
251 *people see. In my head I still lead a military life.” (Participant 08)*

252 *“...the military side I’m more myself than my civilian side.” (Participant 05).*

253 For some, this sense of grief and loss of identity was felt later in life:

254 *“...it hit me years and years later whereas I know it hits some people instantly and they don’t*
255 *adjust...they find it a real struggle and for me it wasn’t, but certain aspects of it will come back*
256 *as time has gone on.” (Participant 02)*

257 This highlights the importance of military identity and the distinction between transient and chronic
258 loneliness. The impact can be felt immediately upon discharge or many years later, which can inform
259 the positioning of interventions to combat loneliness and social isolation.

260 ***Detached Social Networks***

261 No longer having a network of close, like-minded friends felt both lonely and isolated once discharged.
262 The strong attachments that had formed whilst serving were felt to be broken which may result in
263 feelings of social isolation without a supportive network:

264 *“...coming out the military right, you expect everybody...you expect to keep that connection*
265 *and it doesn’t happen and it’s quite a big, big thing because you’ve been where everybody was*
266 *around you, you kept in touch and everybody says they’ll keep in touch and when you get out*
267 *it’s as if you’re just forgotten about.” (Participant 09)*

268 Losing contact with the ‘military family’ also contributed to feeling lonely and abandoned without
269 anyone to depend upon:

270 *“I think people struggling with mental health anyway...I think for them to feel so abandoned,*
271 *that is what worsens everything for them.” (Participant 09)*

272 *“...it’s an enormous wrench leaving that family that is the army that is the regiment, the*
273 *company, the squadron whatever it might be. They’re dumped in the big wide world and it’s*
274 *a pretty soulless place really.” (Participant 07)*

275 Missing the social life that the military provided was evidenced and for some the sudden lack of
276 support network on discharge had not been considered:

277 *"I still really, really miss the social life from the Sergeant's mess, I really, really miss that...you*
278 *know." (Participant 08)*

279 *"I hadn't planned that I would have missed it, but I clearly did and I had lost that support*
280 *network and having all those people around." (Participant 10)*

281 Those trying to reconnect to childhood friendships found *"...they're just not interested so I felt very*
282 *isolated when I first came back here" (Participant 05)* and could result in *"...feeling like a stranger in*
283 *your own town..." (Participant 01)*. There was some regret leaving the area where they had served as
284 it was a struggle reconnecting: *"If I'd have known then what I know now, I wouldn't have left [area]*
285 *because that is where I was stationed when my service came to an end." (Participant 08)*. However,
286 not all participants felt this way as one participant had moved back to their childhood home and
287 *"...reconnected with those friends from school and college" (Participant 04)*. Another who had settled
288 close to where they had last been stationed had already forged civilian relationships in the area *"I*
289 *suppose I had some contacts up here already and I just built on those..." (Participant 03)*.

290

291 **Difficulty connecting in civilian life**

292 ***Different Social Norms***

293 Entering into a new civilian environment can be difficult and the disparity between the military and
294 civilian social norms was defined as *"...a big culture shock" (Participant 07)*. In particular, language,
295 humour, and speaking frankly felt very different in civilian life which resulted in feeling like *"...a fish*
296 *out of water" (Participant 08)*.

297 Participants described the differences in military and non-military language and felt that they were
298 sometimes misunderstood. Differences in what is acceptable language could result in being guarded
299 about what is said:

300 *“...I almost felt that when I first got out, I couldn’t speak freely I had to watch everything that*
301 *I said. So that kind of silences you a little bit.” (Participant 09)*

302 Humour was a factor that could create a barrier to friendships between ex-military personnel and
303 civilians which resulted in having to adapt interactions:

304 *“...you can tell the story that you know a military audience will find that funny but it might be*
305 *too risky to tell that in front of a different audience in a different social situation.” (Participant*
306 *06)*

307 Speaking open and honestly could result in fewer social interactions causing isolation:

308 *“I wasn’t prepared to be spoken down to and I would challenge and that would put people’s*
309 *backs up and that would distance them from me...” (Participant 08)*

310 One participant who had worked with civilians whilst serving did not experience the profound
311 disconnect and felt equipped to deal with civilian social norms:

312 *“I had a foot in both camps so I could work with military people and I could work with civilians,*
313 *so I was fortunate there.” (Participant 07)*

314

315 ***Experiential Differences***

316 Participants felt some difficulty connecting with civilians as they did not share the same experiences:

317 *“...they don’t see what’s inside me, they don’t see what I’ve experienced, so they don’t see,*
318 *they don’t give me credit to be able to do things.” (Participant 08)*

319 What did provide solace was speaking with ex-military personnel as there is a mutual understanding
320 that requires no clarification:

321 *“...the comfort for me is the fact that you don’t have to explain yourself. You don’t have to*
322 *necessarily explain your reaction to certain things.” (Participant 11)*

323 Not being understood or able to share personal experiences made it difficult to open up to civilians:

324 *“...having to park it even though you didn’t want to, you know, having had a sort of*
325 *overwhelming experience and then not being able to share it as it were, or to have other people*
326 *understand it and even now talking about it makes me feel slightly emotional and actually*
327 *difficult.” (Participant 06)*

328 This made individuals feel lonely as they were unable to express their feelings to civilians as they did
329 not have that shared sense of understanding:

330 *“I was never alone, I was never isolated without anyone, but I could feel lonely in a crowded*
331 *room. I could have felt absolutely lonely because at the time there was no one that got me,*
332 *nobody who understood me and therefore nobody I could talk to about what, you know, things*
333 *that were playing on my mind...” (Participant 11)*

334 Ex-military personnel may not have confidence in civilians to understand their reality and expect them
335 to react negatively if they hear them speak in a way that was acceptable in the military. Due to a lack
336 of trust in civilians, they may remain silent around them:

337 *“...I suppose I have issues with...I don’t know...trust. It’s almost like I have lots of friends that I*
338 *go out with but not who I would say that I would 100% trust” (Participant 09)*

339

340 **Seeking out familiarity**

341 ***Reconnecting to Ex-military Community***

342 Feeling disconnected in civilian life led to seeking out familiarity via regimental unions where
343 connections were already established:

344 *"I tend to go to reunions...you know...regimental unions and I always come away from that*
345 *feeling so much better, you know, a foot taller because I've seen me mates who've just had a*
346 *crack on, a laugh."* (Participant 01)

347 Meeting up with comrades felt like *"...fitting into a comfy pair of slippers..."* (Participant 11) and seeing
348 those who were well known brought about a certain level of ease as it presented harmonious
349 interpersonal transactions:

350 *"It may have been 40 years ago for a lot of these guys, but when they get together in a room*
351 *within five minutes everyone's playing exactly the same roles they played 40 years ago. It's like*
352 *they've never been apart and then they'll go back to their own lives."* (Participant 02)

353 There was an affinity connecting to ex-military in a civilian setting as there was a mutual understanding
354 of past experiences, and identifying other ex-military in civilian life provided an element of solace:

355 *"...the senior partner there was I suppose the oldest partner in the firm, he'd done national*
356 *service as a second lieutenant...so he had an empathy from where I'd come from."* (Participant
357 07)

358 *"On a night out I can spot, men more than women, but I can spot service personnel I can almost*
359 *spot from a distance, ones that are still serving and ex ones"* (Participant 11)

360 Being identified as being ex-military offered common ground:

361 *"...I'll be asked "you're ex-military, aren't you?" and I go "how do you know that?" and they*
362 *say they can just tell and I think they maybe say things and I say I get it and they say they know*
363 *you'll get it."* (Participant 09)

364 Moving to an area where there was a large ex-military community provided familiarity where
365 connections could easily be established which highlights the importance of geographical location
366 when seeking out others who have shared experiences:

367 *"I would say here where I live, a village [name] as you can imagine, it has a very big ex-forces*
368 *community." (Participant 06)*

369 Although there was strong evidence of wanting to connect to ex-military personnel, some participants
370 wished to move on from their military career, completely immerse themselves into civilian life and
371 were keen to find alternative ways of connecting with others:

372 *"...you can't replicate that life and really I don't think it's particularly healthy trying to as well."*
373 *(Participant 10)*

374

375 ***Connecting through shared interests***

376 Searching for others who had similar interests were found through hobbies which provided the
377 opportunity to create civilian networks:

378 *"Everything from bowling, line dancing, craft, indoor bowling and all sorts of things and*
379 *through that I then made lots of local pals of which I'm very grateful for cos I had no old*
380 *friends." (Participant 05)*

381 Hobbies were also comparable to military service in that it provided a positive community:

382 *"...in some ways the outdoor community is not dissimilar to the military in many ways. It's*
383 *quite a positive community, does that make sense? I say that from going back to how many*
384 *years since I was in the [service type] that it was a positive community." (Participant 03)*

385 Support groups provided close connections, but there remained a gravitational force towards ex-
386 military personnel:

387 “...it was through a [name] support group...within that were other ex-military, believe it or
388 not, and they are my closest friends, not people I met in the military, but people after it...a lot
389 of those friendships are my civvy friends, but also happen to be ex-military.” (Participant 11)

390

391 **Discussion**

392 This study aimed to examine the unique factors of loneliness and social isolation for ex-military
393 population from discharge, through transition, to the present day. Findings provide a rich
394 understanding of the risk factors for loneliness and social isolation in this subpopulation of military
395 veterans, specifically the sense of comradeship during their military career and the subsequent sense
396 of loss when leaving the military, difficulty connecting to civilians, and seeking out familiarity with
397 other military veterans. This data can be viewed through the lenses of both the Social Needs Approach
398 and Cognitive Discrepancy Model theories (31, 32).

399 Comradeship and the intensity of forming bonds are significant factors in service (19) and this study
400 revealed how social networks and intimate attachments are formed through shared social norms,
401 experiences including active service, and consistency of connection for a prolonged period (29).
402 Edelmann (2018) coins the term “Culturally Meaningful Networks”, a theoretical and methodological
403 perspective focusing on transition from military to civilian life in the United Kingdom (29). Part of this
404 perspective considers the importance of “*concrete relationships with specific others*” and “*the*
405 *meaning the actors invest in these relationships by which they enact and understand related*
406 *interactions*” (Edelmann, 2018, pg. 333). Within the current study there was evidence of this through
407 the strong feeling of ‘family’ bonds whilst serving, with participants considering their connections as
408 a supportive family where trust, respect and integrity are rapidly formed through their active duty.
409 Furthermore, the Social Needs Approach identifies the absence of an intimate attachment as
410 emotional loneliness and a lack of social network as social loneliness, whereas the Cognitive

411 Discrepancy Model suggests that loneliness occurs when there is a perceived discrepancy between
412 the actual and desired level of social involvement. The emotional and social constructs of the Social
413 Needs Approach and the desired level of social contact of the Cognitive Discrepancy Model are
414 satisfied through the vast network of social contacts and meaningful friendships that are created in-
415 service, and comradeship and the military family act as protective factors against the adverse effects
416 of loneliness and social isolation. However, on discharge, these factors are absent as the supportive
417 network is severed and the quality of friendships suffers. This is supportive of other literature within
418 this subpopulation where ex-military personnel experience loneliness due to reduced support
419 networks (21), have weaker social ties (25) and feel detached from military and civilian society (23).
420 Given the strength of comradeship and military identity it is important to note that loneliness and/or
421 social isolation may be experienced later in life. A sense of belonging features as a distinct need
422 throughout the study and it is noteworthy that ‘thwarted belongingness’ is an element of the
423 Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide (41). Given the concerns around suicide two years
424 following discharge in young male early service leavers (42), it is vital that a sense of belonging is
425 fulfilled.

426 Through this sense of comradeship during an individual’s military career, ‘a sense of loss’ was
427 experienced after transition out of the military by no longer being surrounded by a large social
428 network, and a sudden lack of rewarding relationships left an emptiness in some participants’ lives. In
429 this study, feelings of loss were mitigated by being occupied with family life or employment, although
430 participants who said they had never felt lonely or socially isolated acknowledged, to some degree,
431 that they missed the close-knit camaraderie of the military later in life. This highlights the complexities
432 of loneliness and social isolation, the mediating pathways as well as the significance of transient
433 loneliness that can be experienced intermittently throughout the lifespan. Both the emotional and
434 social loneliness constructs of the Social Needs Approach go some way to explaining this. Emotional
435 loneliness is the absence of an intimate attachment (9) which is reflected in the data where exiting
436 the military was described as a grieving process with no sense identity or belonging. Transition has

437 been shown to cause identity conflict (17) and searching for continuity between military and civilian
438 life can make it difficult to adjust (15) as this study demonstrates. On the other hand, social loneliness
439 is characterised by a lack of social network (31), and this was identified through 'Detached Social
440 Networks' as social connections were severed on discharge. Social ties are weaker during transition
441 (25) and reduced social networks increases loneliness (21) which was identified in this study as well
442 as a sense of abandonment without the supportive network to rely upon. Reconnecting to childhood
443 friendships rarely worked out, resulting in a detachment from the hometown, however, those who
444 had settled close to where they had been last stationed were able to bridge this gap as they had
445 already formed connections prior to discharge. The findings can also be related to the Cognitive
446 Discrepancy Model as there was a deficiency in the quality and quantity of relationships: participants
447 lost meaningful friendships and no longer had access to their vast social network. Conversely, those
448 who had already established quality relationships and built up a social network prior to discharge were
449 less likely to feel lonely and/or socially isolated.

450 During transition, "reverse culture shock" may be experienced (16) and this study highlights this as
451 participants described their transitional experiences as a culture shock and having lived two different
452 lives. This change in culture led to feelings of detachment from both military and civilian society (23)
453 and being unable to relate to civilians (24) due to military social norms (12). Involvement with the
454 Royal British Legion has helped reduce the impact of these feelings by offering social support akin to
455 comradeship and where ex-military have been able to construct a "modified military self" during the
456 transitional period of identity challenge (43). The subtheme 'Different Social Norms' revealed the
457 differences between military and civilian cultures and the difficulties they present during transition
458 (29). The disparity between military and civilian social norms could make life very lonely as, despite
459 being surrounded by others, it was difficult to communicate or be understood which resulted in trust
460 issues, feeling silenced or having to adapt language, akin to experiences of emotional loneliness (Social
461 Needs Approach), and is reflective of the Cognitive Discrepancy Model where loneliness and social
462 isolation are caused by a dearth in the quality of meaningful relationships. Interestingly, this divide

463 was bridged for those who worked alongside civilians whilst serving as they were already aware of
464 and prepared for the cultural differences.

465 Losing the 'military family' and no longer having a reliable social network provided the motivation to
466 seek out fulfilling relationships where relationships could develop both socially and emotionally. Peer
467 support networks provide a shared sense of social identity and emotional support (44). For some,
468 there is a desire to reconnect to the military community through reunions where established
469 relationships provide harmonious interpersonal transactions and promote well-being as there is
470 mutual understanding. Crucially, these sought interactions are not quantifiable but are meaningful.
471 Others may seek out social connections via hobbies or groups where interests are shared, and
472 meaningful relationships develop. A positive transition is associated with being connected (12) and
473 this study highlights that loneliness and social isolation are central to transition. Whether it is
474 reunions, hobbies, or both that are harnessed to prevent loneliness and social isolation, what is clear
475 is that they promote positive social interactions where common beliefs and goals are shared and a
476 sense of belonging, similar to the experiences of camaraderie, is achieved. These pathways satisfy the
477 three factors of Edelman's "Culturally Meaningful Networks" structure, meaning and time (20) in
478 preventing loneliness and social isolation following military service. It can take time to connect during
479 transition, but there was evidence to suggest that those who worked alongside civilians whilst serving
480 or remained close to their geographical station on discharge enabled them to bridge the gap between
481 military and civilian life, hence a smoother transition and less likely to be lonely or socially isolated.
482 Interestingly, male and female participants both described military connections similarly and no
483 gender-based differences were apparent from this data, although this was not a focus of the current
484 paper.

485

486 **Consideration of Interventions**

487 This study has shown that there is unlikely to be a suitable universal approach where a 'one-size-fits-
488 all' intervention will diminish the effects of loneliness and social isolation in the ex-military population.
489 Successful interventions have yielded a reduction experienced loneliness by connecting ex-military
490 personnel via telephone (45), reduced social isolation through volunteering (46), socially reconnected
491 through various outdoor horticultural activities (47) and maintained well-being through a community-
492 based peer support programme (44). Charitable organisations aim to tackle loneliness and social
493 isolation through telephone-based interventions such as the Royal British Legion (20) Branch
494 Community Support and SSAFA's Forces line (48). The history and heritage projects via Soldier On!
495 (49) and residential courses that encompass outdoor activities such as Future4Heroes (50) and The
496 Warrior Programme, (51) all assist with enhancing social interaction between veterans.

497 Recent guidance developed by the Campaign to End Loneliness suggests that interventions reduce
498 loneliness either by supporting existing relationships, helping people to make new connections, or
499 allowing individuals to change their thinking about their social connections (5). It is suggested that
500 mixed (veteran and civilian) social groups may support veterans to change the way they consider their
501 social connections, and to consider non-military friendships. An advantage of this would also enable
502 civilians to learn about military culture and perhaps the onus should not merely lie with the ex-military
503 community but also the broader population to alleviate the disconnect and promote inclusivity. The
504 benefits of ex-military integrating with wider community services has been evidenced in a recently
505 undertaken Delphi study (30).

506 Differences between participants suggest the positioning of interventions needs to be considered.
507 Some felt lonely and socially isolated in-service, whereas others located near to their last station or
508 had worked with civilians whilst serving which assisted with a smoother transition as they were able
509 to connect with ease in civilian life. This indicates that interventions prior to discharge should be
510 considered. Participants could experience loneliness and/or social isolation immediately on exiting
511 the military, whereas others experienced this years later signifying interventions should be tailored to

512 meet individual needs and available from discharge, during transition and throughout the lifespan.
513 What is of paramount importance is having a sense of belonging where individuals can socially
514 connect, share experiences, and allow meaningful relationships to flourish.

515 Finally, it is important to consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on interventions in this field.
516 Many of these projects, however, have had to adapt due to the COVID-19 pandemic and offer
517 alternative online support at present. Loneliness interventions have had to rapidly shift their focus
518 away from face-to-face programmes to meet COVID-19 guidance, often resulting adaptation and
519 remote delivery (5).

520

521 **Strengths and Limitations**

522 The theoretical underpinnings of this study of loneliness and social isolation in the British Armed
523 Forces ex-military population is a key strength. A further strength is the broad range of perspectives
524 from males and females from the Royal Navy, Army, and RAF, as well as ranking from Private to
525 Lieutenant Colonel. However, a limitation of this study may be the under-reporting feelings of
526 loneliness and social isolation as military cultural norms may prevent emotional disclosure (52). For
527 example, a notable difference in this study was that females were more likely than males to
528 acknowledge feeling lonely or social isolated which may be due to the propensity of males under
529 reporting feelings of loneliness and social isolation (53). Time elapsed since discharge ranged from
530 three to 38 years (mean = 20 years) and results may be subject to recall bias (54). The length of time
531 since active service, or current employment status, was not considered as part of this study and should
532 also be addressed as a limitation. These factors may have had an impact on the individuals'
533 experiences of loneliness and social isolation and should be addressed in future work. None were
534 early service leavers, and this cohort are particularly at risk (55). Although preconceptions were

535 minimised by reflexivity, the language used in some of the interview questions implied difficulties with
536 socially connecting which may have prompted participants to discuss their challenges.

537

538 **Future Directions**

539 It would be prudent to obtain further accounts from a wider range of ex-military personnel on
540 loneliness and social isolation to capture a broader understanding of experiences. There was little
541 evidence of differences between rank and service type and no evidence of differences in duration of
542 service and further research should consider looking into this further. It would be worthwhile
543 conducting longitudinal research and include early service leavers and those who have been medically
544 discharged who are plunged unexpectedly into civilian life. Finally, research should also include an
545 examination of current interventions that tackle loneliness and social isolation, their effectiveness and
546 how they benefit the ex-military population.

547

548 **Conclusion**

549 This study highlights the complexities of loneliness and social isolation and their unique impact on
550 discharge and transition, and throughout the lifespan. The Social Needs Approach (31) and Cognitive
551 Discrepancy Model (32) support insight into veterans' experiences of loneliness. The military enabled
552 individuals to develop quality bonds through shared meaning and experience that not only reduced
553 feelings of loneliness but also social isolation through close and prolonged contact. The sense of
554 belonging was key to social connection but was severed upon discharge through lack of consistent
555 connection. Feelings of dissimilarity with the civilian population, through dissimilar social norms and
556 a lack of connection, hindered new social connections and led individuals to seek connections with
557 like-minded military veterans. It is essential that further qualitative research is conducted to establish

558 a broader range of British Armed Forces ex-military personnel perspectives. This will help inform best
559 policy and practice and appropriate intervention strategies to minimise the effects of loneliness and
560 social isolation for ex-military personnel and future service leavers.

561

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565

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