Brief Report

Talking to Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans About Tobacco Use

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Abstract

Introduction: Our goal in this study was to examine beliefs and attitudes about tobacco use in the newest generation of combat veterans, those who served in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom [OEF]) and Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom [OIF]).

Methods: We held 5 focus groups (n = 17) with Minnesota Army National Guard soldiers who had recently returned from combat deployment in support of OEF/OIF. Sessions were audiorecorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

Results: We found that it is common to use tobacco in the combat zone for stress and anger management and boredom relief. Tobacco was also a tool for staying alert, a way to socialize, and provided a chance to take breaks. Participants recognized the culture of tobacco use in the military. Stress, nicotine dependence, the tobacco environment at drill activities, and perceived inaccessibility of cessation tools perpetuated use at home and served as a barrier to cessation. Repeatedly, participants cited tobacco policies (such as increased taxes and smoke-free workspaces) as motivators for quitting.

Conclusions: There are specific circumstances common to combat zones that promote tobacco use. Results suggest that environmental changes that address the prominence of tobacco in military culture, the acceptance of nonsmoking breaks, and cessation programs that address stress issues and make cessation aids available may be effective in reducing tobacco use.

Introduction

Serving in the military is associated with smoking initiation, progression to heavier smoking patterns, and recidivism among former smokers (Bondurant & Wedge, 2009; Bray et al., 2006; Feigelman, 1994;Forgas, Meyer, & Cohen, 1996;Klevens et al., 1995; McKinney, McIntire, Carmody, & Joseph, 1997; Smith et al., 2008). In 2008, just under one third of active duty military personnel were smokers (Bray et al., 2010). Smoking rates are particularly high among veterans returning from combat deployment to Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom; OEF) and Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom; OIF). It is estimated that veterans who served in OEF/OIF may be 50% more likely to use tobacco than their peers who did not deploy (Bondurant & Wedge, 2009). In 2005, 15% of personnel reported using smokeless tobacco (Bray et al., 2006). This is dramatically higher than U.S. general population prevalences of smokeless tobacco use, which ranged from 1.3% in California to 9.1% in Wyoming in 2009 (“State-specific prevalence of cigarette smoking and smokeless tobacco use among adults—United States, 2009,” 2010). Military personnel report that they start smoking during service to ease stress, relieve of boredom, and to help relax (Bray et al., 2006). They also report using tobacco to cope with sleep deprivation and that using tobacco is one of the few indulgences that they are allowed during to deployment to OEF/OIF where there are many restrictions and limited entertainment options (Poston et al., 2008).

Despite evidence that tobacco use impedes military readiness (Conway, Woodruff, & Hervig, 2007; Haddock, Pyle, Poston, Bray, & Stein, 2007; Klesges, Haddock, Chang, Talcott, & Lando, 2001) and has substantial monetary costs to the Department of Defense (Helyer, Brehm, & Perino, 1998; Klesges et al., 2001; Robinson, Chao, Coil, & Fonseca, 2000), tobacco is still a part of military culture. The fact that cigarettes are readily accessible and perceived to be low cost on military bases (whether or not this is actually the case) helps make tobacco seem acceptable (Haddock et al., 2009; Poston et al., 2008). The ability to take smoking breaks and socialize both with peers and with superiors at “smoking pits” have been identified as factors that encourage smoking (Haddock et al., 2009; Poston et al., 2008).

We aimed to gather in-depth information on veteran’s reasons for using tobacco both in OEF/OIF and during reintegration in order to understand the barriers these veterans face in attempting to quit tobacco use.

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Methods

In the winter of 2008–2009, participants (n = 17) were recruited from the Minnesota Army National Guard (MN ANG) Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Program’s 30-, 60-, and 90-day postdeployment reintegration trainings. Eligibility criteria were having served in the MN ANG in OEF/OIF and having used tobacco while during deployment. We conducted five focus groups ranging in size from two to five participants. Three focus groups were conducted in-person; two were over the phone. All study procedures were approved by the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Health Care System (VA) Institutional Review Board.

Sixteen of the 17 participants were male; ages ranged from 25 to 41 years for the 14 participants who provided us with pre interview questionnaires. Ten participants reported having “some college or technical school,” two reported being “high-school graduates,” and one reported being a “college graduate.” Of the 14 who provided us with preinterview questionnaires, 4 reported using smokeless exclusively, all the smokers reported currently smoking a ≤20 cigarettes/day, and 10 participants report using tobacco within an hour of waking.

The semi-structured moderator’s guide focused on reasons for using tobacco, barriers to cessation, and aspects cessation programs that are appealing. The focus groups were audiorecorded and transcribed.

Transcripts of focus group sessions were analyzed using the grounded theory approach (Bernard, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Themes were identified, and two members of the research team (RW and BC) coded the transcripts independently using the qualitative analysis package NVivo 8 (QSR International). Discrepancies were reviewed (by RW) for resolution.

Results

Tobacco Use Increases in the Military

Participants commonly reported personnel initiated tobacco use during their military service. One participant said, “…their buddies are smoking so they say, ‘you know I’ll smoke one’ and then before you know it it’s a pack a day.” Others reported joining the military as a tobacco user but increasing their use while serving.

Using Tobacco to Cope With Stress, Anger, and Boredom

Participants told us that using tobacco in OEF/OIF served as coping strategy. One participant stated, “…boredom and downtime—sometimes all you can do is smoke or exercise. It is usually too hot to exercise, though.” After a stressful situation, tobacco was used to calm nerves as one veteran reported, “Yeah, an explosion would happen that would trigger it and the first thing that you do it just light up especially after everything was fine.” Beyond combat situations, participants talked about difficulties in finding outlets to express frustrations that are inherent in deployment. One participant explained, “There is only so far that you can go with being angry. Especially in the military; you can’t just go off on somebody, so that is the first thing I do, grab for the cigarettes and walk away.”

Tobacco as a Performance Tool

Tobacco was also viewed as a performance tool for staying alert during long shifts and through times of sleep deprivation. A veteran said, “There are helicopters over head, explosions, alarms, etc. You have different shifts and rotations and it is just really hard to get any sleep. Cigarettes help you cope and stay awake.”

Tobacco Use as Recreation and Expression of Freedom

“That is the only thing you have control that nobody else really can tell you what you can’t do,” one participant explained. This also relates to boredom as tobacco was seen as one of the few recreational options in OEF/OIF, especially since alcohol was banned. A participant told us, “I have noticed for me personally that the regular smokers smoke a lot more on deployment because there is no booze to drink it with and I think that is another way to compensate for not having any booze around.”

Tobacco Use Regarded as Part of Military Culture

A participant said, “It is such a camaraderie thing.” Related to camaraderie is the ability to take smoking or chewing breaks, which nonusers could not do. A participant reported, “You can either be out smoking you know no one will question or if you’re just standing around somewhere they’re going to say ‘what are you doing’, but if you’re out there smoking it’s pretty much a free ticket to slack off.” There was a strong impression that using tobacco was still a part of military culture; however, several participants mentioned that this has lessened.

Participants noticed that the social norm environment in the military was very different than in general U.S. society. One participant stated, “It [tobacco] is so acceptable in the military. There are no restrictions where you can or can’t smoke. There is no judgment from peers. On the other hand, I probably wouldn’t smoke around my family.”

Drill Weekends

When asked what makes it difficult to quit tobacco, several respondents immediately said, “drill weekend.” Another participant said, “Now that I am home, and not around smokers, I have successfully quit. Although, I still smoke 3 packs on drill weekend. There is a lot of tobacco use on drill weekends. Even the nonsmokers smoke on drill weekend.”

Smoke-Free Environments

We did not plan to discuss smoke-free indoor air policy; however, it came up repeatedly. Participants felt that these policies were helpful for quitting tobacco use, often much to their surprise. One participant said, “Now that I can’t smoke in the bars, that is a HUGE help. I smoke a lot less now. I thought that I would have a huge problem with smoke-free bars but I like it a lot; it really needed to be done. It does help a lot.”

Participants also suggested more restrictive tobacco policies in the military, several saying it would help them quit if drill weekends were smoke-free. One suggested: “What about if you could get your commanding officer to order you not to smoke on drill weekend? Support from commander is important. If I knew that I had the support of my commanding officer that
would make a huge difference.” However, these comments were always followed by concern as one veteran told us, “A smoke-free armory would send morale into the grave.” A participant suggested that the PX (post exchange, the stores, operated by the military, located at army posts) discontinue selling tobacco and implementing prohibitions on mailing tobacco to deployed military members. Again, there were many worries about these restrictions being so unpopular; at least initially, the spirit of the troops would be seriously harmed.

Tobacco at Home
Veterans offered that stress from situations created during the process of reintegrating into civilian life perpetuated tobacco use. We were told, “The stress of being back home makes it hard to quit. Families, finding a job, re-acclimating, etc. all make life back at home really stressful.” Finally, the veterans talked about addiction being a major reason why the habit is maintained.

The rising price of tobacco was a frequently mentioned as a reason to quit tobacco use after deployment. One participant told us, “Last week I paid 38 dollars a carton and I went today, and I paid 46 dollars, so it went up eight dollars. So I just can’t do it anymore. I just told my wife this morning that I am not buying anymore.”

Discussion
We found frequently cited reasons for using tobacco during service in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: stress and anger management, boredom relief, staying alert, the culture of tobacco that is still prominent in the military, social opportunities, and the ability for tobacco users to take breaks. Veterans described that tobacco use was, if not condoned, accepted in military settings. Policies such as smoke-free indoor environments and tax increases were endorsed as motivators for cessation, while drill weekend was seen as a barrier.

Our work confirmed findings from previous research on veterans of OEF/OIF. As in previous studies, our participants cited the privilege of taking tobacco breaks where they could socialize with peers as being an explanation for initiating and escalating tobacco use (Haddock et al., 2009; Nelson, Pederson, & Lewis, 2009; Poston et al., 2008). Additionally, tobacco was perceived as readily available and accepted in the military culture (Haddock et al., 2009; Poston et al., 2008). Other themes that were consistent with prior work were that tobacco relieved stress, anger, boredom, and helped with alertness (Haddock et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2009; Poston et al., 2008).

Participants frequently volunteered comments on policy issues even though we did not intend to touch on these topics. Participants commonly reported initial opposition to smoke-free bar and restaurant policies but later came to feel that these policies had been or would be an important spur for cessation. Several focus group participants expressed positive opinions of a tobacco-free policy in the military either on a larger scale or more locally in the form of a unit commander commanding his or her unit not to use tobacco. While this opinion was always very quickly accompanied with doubts about its feasibility, it is interesting that the concept was under consideration. Military culture change and policy would be mutually reinforcing and could be the key to substantially reducing tobacco use among veterans.

A limitation of this study is our small sample size. Recruiting was more difficult than we anticipated as returning veterans have many competing commitments and participating in research is not a priority. Despite the small sample, we do feel that we reached saturation as the main themes were repeated.

National Guard members are in a unique position relative to active duty military when not deployed as they have one foot in military culture and the other in general U.S. civilian culture. Our participants noted that the attitudes toward tobacco differ between these two cultures that their tobacco use behaviors varied based upon where they are. The phenomenon of the “field smoker” or one who does not smoke at home but does smoke once they are deployed to a combat environment has been noted (Poston et al., 2008). Similarly, we heard participants tell us of drill weekend tobacco users who did not use tobacco during the civilian part of their month but would use when they were at drill. Often when we would start the topic on barriers to quitting, participants would readily volunteer that drill weekend was a major barrier.

Military and veteran populations represent a tobacco use disparity population that needs to be understood and prioritized. There is a unique window of opportunity for the VA, the military, and health providers to encourage cessation as service members return home.

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Declaration of Interests
None declared.

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