

VETERANS HANDBOOK

Tactics for Civilian Life

- Employment



- Planning for Transition



- Education



- Housing



- Financial Security



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VETERANS HANDBOOK

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Making the Right Moves

There's no basic training for new veterans.

You've heard it before: The transition from service member to civilian is one of the most difficult you're ever likely to make. You can plan diligently, make well-reasoned decisions, and think you're ready for what's ahead. But being a member of the military one day and a veteran the next means leaving behind a clearly defined and closely knit unit and becoming just one of the crowd.

How easily you manage this move depends on how carefully you plan and a number of other factors, some of which you're already aware of:

- Whether you made the decision to leave the military or it was made for you
- If you have a good job lined up
- If you're coping with a serious injury
- How stable your personal life is

But you may also have to cope with emotions or reactions that surprise or disturb you, including symptoms of persistent stress.

The best way to prepare for this dramatic change in your life is to anticipate its challenges and be ready to seize its opportunities.

OFF TO A HEAD START

Before you leave the service, it's a good idea to identify the professional, financial, and personal choices that lie ahead and to explore the ways your status as a veteran may give you certain advantages.

Certainly employment is a major concern, and, as you'll discover, various departments of the federal government, including Defense (DoD), Labor (DOL), and Veterans Affairs (VA) have mounted a coordinated effort to help you launch a successful job search. Individual states also have veteran-specific employment programs, as do some private organizations.

The Post 9/11 GI Bill provides tuition and housing assistance for qualifying veterans. And while financial aid from the Department of Education, individual states, and many

educational institutions isn't necessarily veteran-specific, it can help make it possible for you to be a full-time student.

When you're ready to buy a home, you'll want to investigate the VA home loan program and look into real estate tax breaks that may be available. Similarly, your insurance needs—life and healthcare in particular—may be met at least in part by programs you're eligible for as a veteran.

Finally, it's smart to seek out veteran-friendly financial institutions for your savings, checking, and investment needs.

THREE KEY DECISIONS

To prepare for the immediate choices you'll have to make as a new civilian, it helps to group them into three categories:

- **Career decisions**, including whether to postpone your job search to polish your skills, acquire new ones, or finish an undergraduate or graduate degree

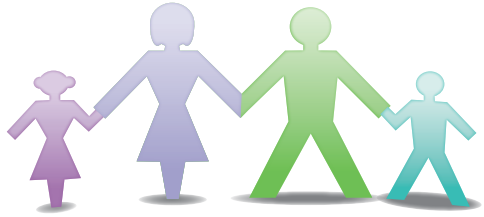


FAMILY MATTERS

If you have a family—spouse, partner, children—the changes in your life are intertwined with the changes in theirs. Talking things through and making collaborative decisions are essential to a successful transition.

For example, choosing one job over another may be a decision you have to make for yourself. But where that job is located, whether you buy a home right away or decide to rent, and if you choose to use the GI Bill's tuition assistance for yourself, your spouse, or your children isn't just about you—they affect your family directly.

If you've been deployed for extended periods, you and your spouse may not have been doing much joint decision making, if only for practical reasons. Establishing—or reestablishing—a partnership approach to setting goals, making choices, and managing money can add positive energy, rather than more stress, to your new life.



- **Financial decisions**, including establishing a relationship with a reputable financial institution, such as a credit union, setting a strategy for saving and investing, and refining your money management skills
- **Personal decisions**, including where to live, the type and amount of life insurance you need, and the best source for health insurance

There's overlap, of course. The flexibility you have in managing your money depends on what you earn and what your living expenses are. Similarly, the decisions you make about health insurance may depend on whether or not your new employer offers this coverage.

READY, AIM, FILE

If you plan to take advantage of the VA benefits to which you're entitled, it's essential to enroll for your VA eBenefits account at www.eBenefits.va.gov.

Check out the "Introduction to eBenefits" link on the Help Page for a description of how to apply. You'll need to be registered in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) and have a DoD Self Service (DS) Logon.

When you leave the military, the one thing you don't leave behind is the paperwork. There's a form for almost everything, from your Release or Discharge papers (DD Form 214) and Verification of Military Experience and Training (DD Form 2586) to the specific documents you need to qualify for a VA loan guaranty, receive tuition assistance through the GI Bill, or convert your SGLI insurance.

It's smart to obtain the original documents and a number of certified photocopies while you're still on active duty. You will need a system for keeping them secure and accessible so you'll have them when you need them—which may be more often than you think.

You'll also want to keep careful track of your personal records, including birth certificates, adoption papers, marriage licenses, and divorce decrees. There are times when you need originals, not copies.

Moving Out, Moving On

There are ways to smooth your transition when you hit bumps in the road.

If your transition to civilian life were simply about a change of address and a new job description, it wouldn't be such an ordeal. But as millions of men and women before you have discovered, there's a lot more to transition than you might think—for both you and your family.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPOUSES

If your spouse isn't a member of the military and eligible for transition assistance and veterans benefits, he or she may find it difficult to make personal and career decisions, especially if you're still sorting out your own future.

MORE RESOURCES

In addition to the extensive resources available through the DoD, DOL, VA, ED, and other federal departments, there's an extensive list of veterans organizations, including some with specialized missions, at www.veteransnetwork.net/directory.php.

Other valuable transition resources are available on the websites of the National Resource Directory (www.nrd.gov), the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (www.iava.org), and Military Exits (www.militaryexits.com).

Spouses are eligible to attend the transition workshops and job fairs that are available to you. However, access to many of the spouse-focused career and education programs, including tuition assistance available through the MyCAA program and the Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), ends when you're no longer on active duty.

If your spouse has a scholarship through the National Military Family Association, or other education or training benefits, it's smart to investigate what effect, if any, your leaving the service will have on continued participation in the program and if any action is required.

Remember, you do have the right to assign the education benefits to which you're entitled under the Post 9/11 GI Bill to your spouse or children, rather than using them yourself. But you must make that decision while you're still on active duty and meet other conditions that apply.

MOVING OUT/MOVING ON

The DoD covers the expense of moving your household from your last duty station.

If you're leaving the service voluntarily, the DoD will pay for the move within 180 days of separation, provided you return to your home of record or move somewhere that's an equal or shorter distance. If your new home is farther away, you're responsible for the additional cost of the move. If you're leaving the service involuntarily, the



distance limits do not apply to your moving costs and the time limit is extended to one year.

FIGHTING OTHER BATTLES

Despite your best planning and the help available to you from a number of sources, not everything may go as smoothly as you'd like. One area of potential frustration is in obtaining benefits to which you believe you're entitled—disability in particular, but also healthcare, education, and others—if the VA turns down your claim.

If you appeal and are again turned down, there is a process for taking your case to the US Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. You can find information on how to file at www.uscourts.cavc.gov.

One caution, however: You should always have legal representation for court filings, and the attorney you use must be accredited by the VA. You can search at www.va.gov/ogc/apps/accreditation/ either by typing in an attorney's name or downloading a complete list.

If you can't afford a lawyer, you can contact the Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program at www.vetsprobono.org. The consortium's partners are The American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, the National Veterans Legal

Services Program (NVLSP), and the Paralyzed Veterans of America.

DEALING WITH STRESS

If transition is more difficult than you expected, don't assume that the issues you're facing will resolve themselves if you just give them enough time. Some may, if the stress is created by concerns about landing a job, choosing a school, or buying a home.

But if your experiences in a combat zone are weighing on you or you're feeling adrift in civilian life, it's much wiser to seek help, both for your own sake and the sake of your family.

Online resources are often the most accessible way to get started, including establishing ties with a community of other veterans. You might begin with the websites www.maketheconnection.net, and the National Resource Directory at www.nrd.gov and search for vet Success.

You'll also want to investigate the VA's VET Center Program (www.vetcenter.va.gov), which provides counseling for combat veterans and those who experienced sexual trauma and harassment while on duty. It's community-based, free of charge, open to families as well as veterans, and staffed by combat veterans and families of combat veterans. There's a directory on the site, under the Locations tab at the top, where you can search for a center by state or zip code, and a Combat Call Center open 24 hours at 877-927-8387.

You can also find a link to individual state Departments of Veterans Affairs at www.va.gov/statedva.htm. These offices may provide the in-person help you are looking for closer to home and more quickly than the VA.



IN AN EMERGENCY

A Military Crisis Line at 800-273-8255 provides trained professionals available to take calls at any time. Dial and then press "1" to connect. There's also a chat feature at www.veteranscrisisline.net or text 83-8255.



Transition Assistance

It's your job to take the initiative in finding the information you need and acting on it.

You may find it hard to concentrate on becoming a civilian whether or not you're still on active duty. The danger is that waiting too long to get started on transition planning may force you into choices that may not be the best for you.

A good first step is deciding where to begin. The most important are likely to include:

- The benefits to which you're entitled as a veteran and how to obtain them
- Employment-related issues, specifically finding a job that's the beginning of a rewarding career
- Education opportunities for building your skills or acquiring academic credentials



FORWARD, MARCH

The Department of Defense (DoD) Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and its website at www.dodtap.mil are designed to smooth the path to the next phase of your life.

The easiest way to set things in motion is to visit the TAP site—as well as your branch's transition website—to explore the services that can help ensure you're ready to move into civilian life with the skills you need to be successful, whatever you choose to do next.

TIP

Check out the valuable transition assistance at Military OneSource (www.militaryonesource.mil) by clicking on the Transition Assistance link under Military Life Topics. You can also download a copy of "Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors" at www1.va.gov/OPA/publications/benefits_book.asp

TAP's core five-day Transition GPS—an acronym for goals, plans, success that you may want to think of as your personal global positioning system—includes a financial planning and budgeting component, a VA benefits briefing, and an employment workshop offered in collaboration with the Department of Labor (DOL). You may also want to participate in one or more of the supplemental training tracks that focus on higher education, technical training, or entrepreneurship.

By the time you finish the program, and before you leave the military, you must be able to demonstrate that you have a workable Individual Transition Plan (ITP) and have met the required career readiness standards (CRS) detailed at www.dodtap.mil/career_readiness_standards.html. You can find an ITP checklist, DD Form 2958, at www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/forms/eforms/dd2958.pdf.

FITTING FORMS

A minimum of 90 days before you're scheduled to leave the military, you're required to complete **DD Form 2648**, the "Pre-Separation Counseling Checklist." This multi-page document lets you check off the topics, if any, you'd like to discuss with a career counselor and the workshops and briefings you'd like to attend.

The form provides website links where you can access information about each item in the long list of choices. It's up to you to determine what you need to know, what you can learn on your own, and when counseling would help. To meet with a counselor, you must also be willing to indicate that you need help—not always the easiest, but often the smartest, thing to do.

You are also eligible for educational and vocational counseling from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) within 180 days of the date you expect to leave the service or within a year after actually leaving, provided you are eligible for a VA education program. To sign up, you use **VA Form 28-8832, "Application for Counseling."**

DD Form 2648

"Pre-Separation Counseling"

VA Form 28-8832

"Application for Counseling"

DD Form 214

To participate in any programs offered through the VA, as well as many of the federal and state veterans programs, you'll need a copy of your **DD Form 214**. In fact, you should be sure your local Veterans Center has a certified copy of the form on file in case you need to provide it in the future. After you leave the military, this form and your military records are stored in the National Archives. You have access to them, but getting replacement copies can be very slow.

TAP INTO A WORKSHOP

The hands-on DOL employment workshop is a focal point of transition program. It incorporates the use of social media and other networking technology to facilitate job searches and provides access to priority career guidance and job search services.

Part of the three-day workshop focuses on practical matters, including writing resumes and cover letters and honing interview skills. The workshop also deals with more open-ended issues, such as choosing among job offers and adjusting to a civilian workplace. You can also expect the facilitators to provide an evaluation of your strengths and weaknesses as a job candidate.

The workshops are presented on some, but not all, military installations. Ask the

Transition Assistance Office at your Camp, Post, or Station, or your Command Career Counselor to help you schedule a slot. If there's space, your spouse may also be eligible to participate to facilitate his or her own job search.

If you can't be there in person, you can use the link on the Transition GPS homepage to access the virtual curriculum at the Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) website. If you're married, your spouse can participate in the training as well.

There's a comparable but more extensive program, called DTAP, for disabled service members. Additional time is included for assessing individual job readiness and addressing special needs.



Employment Planning

Nothing is more challenging, or has the potential to be more rewarding, than launching a new career.

As you shift from a military to a civilian career, the essential questions to ask are:

- What work do I want to do?
- Are my skills and talents compatible with this goal?
- What additional qualifications do I need?

You may have started down this track already—in fact, you may be leaving the military to act on your career plans. But if you're just beginning to think about the direction you want your life to go, you'll discover it takes time, and often trial-and-error, to find what you're looking for.

Sometimes, there is a direct relationship between the job you've been doing and the one you're looking for in the civilian world. When that connection isn't obvious, being able to explain the relationship between your service experience and the job you're applying for may help demonstrate you're a strong candidate.

TO DO!!

ASSEMBLE YOUR CREDENTIALS

For starters, you should get a copy of DD Form 2586, "Verification of Military Experience and Training" (MVET) before you leave your final assignment. You'll need the information to create a resume and fill out job applications. The form will also help you evaluate the skills you have to offer employers. The timing is important because you need a current DoD Common Access Card or DFAS myPay PIN or DS Logon to access the form.

You should also contact your branch for an official transcript of the education and training credits you've earned both in and outside the military. This record can help you establish your job qualifications.

STATE RULES

Each state sets its own requirements for occupations that require licenses. A license in one state may be accepted in another, but don't assume that it will be. Contact the licensing board in the state where you'll be working to verify its requirements and fees.

One part of the Transition GPS curriculum, called Military Occupational Code (MOC) Crosswalk, is designed to translate the skills, training, and experience you've acquired in the military into credentials relevant to civilian jobs. It also helps you identify education or training that may make you a stronger job prospect.

You can also link to a tool for translating your military experience to civilian credentials on the VA's eBenefits website.

Each branch also has a credentialing website where you can research the licenses or certifications, if any, that you'll need for specific jobs and learn about the qualifications required for certain civilian occupations. You may have already met these standards during your military career. If not, you'll need to supplement your experience to qualify. You can also find additional credentialing information online at www.acinet.org or www.dantes.doded.mil/index.html.

TOSSING DARTS

If you're in the dark about a career that interests you, it may be worth looking at the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook (www.bls.gov/ooh/). It describes the projected number of new jobs in each field, education and training requirements, and the median pay.

You can also find the fastest growing occupations and those with the highest projected growth



rate. It's also smart to investigate labor market trends. You won't be interested in all the fields where employment is growing, but you might think twice about focusing on a field with more qualified applicants than there are jobs.

Remember, too, when you're considering what a particular job pays, to look beyond the current average salary. Some jobs have the potential for increased earnings over time while others don't. You'll also want to be realistic about the income you'll need to live comfortably as a civilian. You'll almost certainly need more than your military pay, which came with a number of benefits, such

as housing or a housing allowance and healthcare, which you'll now have to pay for yourself.

WORKING FOR YOURSELF

As part of employment planning, don't overlook the possibility of establishing your own business—or the potential challenges of that choice. While there are many more pros and cons of starting a small business than are covered here, you may want to explore the following topics more deeply:

- The product or service you would provide, what you would charge, and who your customers would be
- What would differentiate your business from its competitors
- What starting and running your business would cost until it could become at least self-sustaining—and ideally profitable
- Where the start-up money would come from

One valuable resource is The Veterans Corporation (TVC), whose mission is helping veterans become entrepreneurs. You can reach TVC at www.veteranscorp.org.

You might also approach military-focused financial institutions, such as credit unions on installations, for loans to help you start your business, and be sure to explore what's available at the Veterans Business Outreach Centers of the Small Business Administration at www.sba.gov/offices/headquarter/ovbd/resources/362341.



INFORMATION CENTRAL: SBA

The Small Business Administration (SBA) Office of Veterans Business Development offers a variety of programs for veterans and other members of the military community who want to build their own businesses, including:

- **Small Business Learning Center** is a multipart, multiplatform course covering topics such as starting, managing, and financing a business.

- **The Veterans Business Outreach Program**, with 16 participating organizations, provides training, counseling, mentoring, and referrals. Other services VBOP provides are help with preparing a business plan and analysis of your plan's strengths and weaknesses.
- **Operation Boots to Business** is a collaboration with Syracuse University, the DoD, and the VA to help veterans build their businesses and to provide ongoing support through the nationwide Resource Partner network.

The Job Search

Finding a job requires launching an all-out campaign.

Public or private sector? Large company or small? Profit or nonprofit? Desk job or outdoor work? You don't need to resolve all those issues before you start looking for a job. In fact, it's probably better to pursue several opportunities at the same time. Considering just one job at a time can stretch out the process longer than you'd like.

If you're successful in attracting more than one offer, you may be able to negotiate a higher salary or better employee benefits if both employers are eager to hire you, and you're equally enthusiastic about the jobs.

NETWORKING

If you're qualified for the kind of job you'd like to have, securing a position typically involves networking and making connections. This means being in touch with everyone you know—even slightly—who may be hiring or could refer you to an employer who is.

In your case, networking involves leveraging your military experience by identifying veteran-friendly employers and jobs where veterans have preference. For example, qualifying veterans have preference in federal agency appointments and all DOL funded programs. Some states have comparable rules. Three cautions though:

- Be sure to clarify in your cover letter and resume that you're eligible for preference
- Preference is not a guarantee you will be hired, even if you are qualified
- Remember that your credit score is often a factor in qualifying for a job

You can check preference information at www.opm.gov/staffingPortal/Vetguide.asp#2 or the Veterans Employment and Training Service Office in your state. Every state has at least one. State employment offices also give referral and job counseling preference to veterans.

In addition, some private employers actively



recruit veterans, though they are not required to give them preference.

The DOL also has a number of employment initiatives, including an Employment Center and a program that provides guidance and referrals for up to six months. There's more information at www.dol.gov/vets/goldcard.html.

GOING TO THE FAIR

The DoD, states, nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, communities, and other groups sponsor job fairs for veterans looking for work. Most are located in US cities or military installations, though some are overseas. And while there are virtual fairs, the more useful

FEDERAL RULES

The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) requires state, local, and private employers with more than 15 workers to provide equal employment opportunities to people with disabilities, including disabled veterans. Going a step further, the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) requires employers to make reasonable efforts to assist veterans in becoming qualified for a job. There's more information at www.dol.gov/vets.

HIRE JAMIE



ones normally provide face-to-face meetings.

Job fairs are good places to gain experience networking, presenting yourself as a job candidate, and interviewing prospective employers. Be sure to have an adequate supply of resumes with you to hand to the employers you meet.

Always check out the sponsor of any job fair you're considering. You can use the "About Us" button on the organization's home page to learn about its history, approach, and scope. If there's a fee, you'll want to be sure you're not paying for services you could receive from other sources, including the military, for free.

RESUMES AND COVER LETTERS

To apply for jobs, you need a resume and cover letter. They have the same goal—to secure you an interview—and you use them together for the best results.

A resume details the highlights of your experience, skills, education, and training and is presented in a distinctive, immediately recognizable format. There's a good section on resume writing in chapter 3 of the TAP manual (www.dol.gov/vets/programs/tap/tapmanualmar06.pdf), where you can compare different styles and select one that presents your qualifications most effectively. There's also a resume builder on the eBenefits website so employers who want to hire veterans can locate you.

TIP

You may qualify for unemployment compensation if there's a gap between your discharge and the time you start a civilian job. The details vary by state, so check with your local unemployment office or www.careeronestop.org.

You can use the same resume to apply for jobs that require similar experience and skills. But if you're applying for a number of different jobs, you may want to tweak your resume to emphasize specific strengths. For example, you might highlight your leadership experience for one prospective employer and your technology skills for another.

The cover letter creates a critical first impression of who you are. Its purpose is to draw attention to yourself, set you apart from other candidates, and point out the skills you have to offer that make you the right choice for the job. It's essential that each cover letter you send is focused specifically on the job for which you're applying, based either on the job description or your knowledge of the employer.

While you can use some elements in each version of the letter, such as a brief summary of your experience, you can be pretty sure that a generic letter won't get the result you want.

Before sending out your letter and resume, you need to be absolutely certain there are no spelling or grammar errors. Nothing redirects your application to the reject pile faster. It's often best to get someone to proofread your submissions as it's notoriously easy to miss your own mistakes.



JOB SEARCH SITES

Here's a list of veteran-focused sites you may find helpful:

- www.mynextmove.org/vets
- www.usajobs.gov
- www.careeronestop.org
- www.helmetstohardhats.org
- www.proudtoserveagain.com

The Post 9/11 GI Bill

This may be the right time to pursue your education and advance your career.

Enrolling in school may be the perfect next step after leaving the military, whether you're accumulating credentials for a specific occupation or trying to decide on a career path. More education is always smart, and the benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill make this choice especially appealing.

Specifically, the Post 9/11 GI Bill will pay your tuition and fees for up to 36 months for two- or four-year under-

a nine-month academic year if you attend a public college or university in another state. It also covers accredited private or state-approved vocational or training programs. There's also a stipend of up to \$1,000 to cover books and supplies each year. Check out www.NewGIBill.org to calculate your benefits or seek advice.



The bill covers your tuition and fees at any public institution to which you're admitted in your home state and a fixed amount that increases annually to pay tuition and fees for

You'll also be eligible for a location-based housing subsidy when you enroll more than half-time. The complication is that the subsidy isn't paid when your school isn't in session, which includes the break between terms and summer vacation, often three full months or more. Since most rentals require a year lease, you'll have to find a way to supplement your housing costs for the periods the subsidy isn't paid.

If you're required to take a national entrance exam as part of the application process, such as the SAT, ACT, GMAT, LSAT, or others, those fees are normally reimbursed. So are expenses for meeting certification requirements.

ELIGIBLE FOR THE GI BILL?

To qualify for the full benefit, you must have served at least 36 months on active duty, including active duty since 9/11/2001, or have a service-related disability.

WHEN YOU'RE READY

To apply for Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits, you'll need to complete **VA Form 22-1990, "Application for VA Education Benefits,"** at www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/apply.asp or by calling 888-442-4551. You have 15 years from the date you leave the military to take advantage of this opportunity.

YELLOW RIBBON PROGRAM

If you think a private college or university will suit your interests better than a public institution, you'll want to look for the list of approved degree-granting institutions that participate in the veteran-friendly Yellow Ribbon program. Being part of the program may make it possible for you to enroll without taking on more debt than you are comfortable with—a major benefit in itself.



Participating schools cover at least part of the tuition and fees that exceed what the GI Bill covers. In addition, the VA matches the amount the institution commits, dollar for dollar.

This means, for example, if a school covers \$8,000, and you add the VA match of \$8,000 on top of the amount covered by the GI Bill, then you'll have nearly twice as much for tuition, fees, and related costs for the academic year. Schools publish the amount they will contribute and the number of students who can participate each year. You apply directly to the school. Schools don't promise to include everyone who's eligible, but if you participate one year, you should be in line for funding for the following years.

You can check the websites of the schools in which you're interested to see if they're part of the Yellow Ribbon program or find a list of participating schools by searching for www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/yellow_ribbon.asp.

You may be able to reduce the cost of your education and speed up your progress toward a degree by transferring credits you've already earned or passing qualifying tests through the College Level Examination Program (CLEP).

VA Form 22-1990

"Application for VA Education Benefits"

OTHER WAYS TO PAY

If you have to borrow to pay for the difference between what the GI Bill covers and the cost of your certificate or degree, you may wonder if you're making the right decision in pursuing your education now. Though that's ultimately your call, borrowing wisely for a goal as valuable as education can pay big dividends in the future. Smart borrowing boils down to two things:

- Taking loans for only as much as you need
- Finding loans with the lowest possible rates and most flexible repayment terms

With few exceptions, it means borrowing through the US Department of Education (ED) Direct Loan program or possibly through your state's education loan program.

Federal Direct loans offer low interest rates, especially on subsidized loans for students who demonstrate financial need. There are several repayment alternatives, including some that give you 25 years to repay. As an adult, you are also eligible for a direct PLUS loan, although the rates are somewhat higher.

You apply for federal loans by completing the FAFSA, or Free Application for Federal Student Aid (www.fafsa.ed.gov). It's long, detailed, and annoying, but essential to qualify for grants, loans, and federal work/study programs that provide on-campus jobs while you're enrolled. Remember that grants, like scholarships, don't have to be repaid, so they're always worth investigating.

BEWARE PRIVATE LOANS

Be very careful of private student loans from commercial lenders, and the institutional loans offered by certain schools. They're typically more costly and less flexible than federal or state loans.



Making Education Choices

Deciding to pursue your education will alter your life.

You may find the most challenging part of taking advantage of the GI Bill is choosing the school or schools where you'll apply. Even the best-intentioned advice can be hard to follow if you've never applied to college before.

The truth is that you can get a good education at most accredited colleges and universities. The same is true for well-established technical or vocational programs. But the risk is that some institutions, particularly those that seem to make enrolling especially easy, may not deliver on their promises. In fact, some schools recruit veterans aggressively because they profit from the VA payments they collect.

As you narrow your search to schools that best meet your needs and expectations, a good place to start is at www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/, clicking on the "Choose a School" link. There's a short guide called "Factors to Consider When Choosing a School" on the School Decision Resources page. There's also a GI Bill Comparison Tool that lets you compare different schools quickly once you've identified the ones you're seriously considering.

Then go to the College Scorecard at www.collegecost.ed.gov/scorecard to find the average net cost at specific schools.

In looking at these costs, however, keep in mind that you're probably in better financial shape than you think since a significant part of the cost of your education will be paid for you.

A WORD TO THE WISE

Keep an eye on the CFPB website (www.cfpb.gov) for regularly updated information on financial issues affecting you as a student and as a veteran. You should also search for "Student Aid Tips for Veterans" at www.nasfaa.org.



IN THE COMPANY OF PEERS

Many veterans find an on-campus veterans organization a valuable—perhaps even essential—part of their college experience. Among other things, participating in such organizations is a good way to tap into resources other vets have already discovered—or helped create. What's more, being able to share experiences can help to buffer the culture shock of student life. Among other resources, check out Student Veterans of America at www.studentveterans.org.

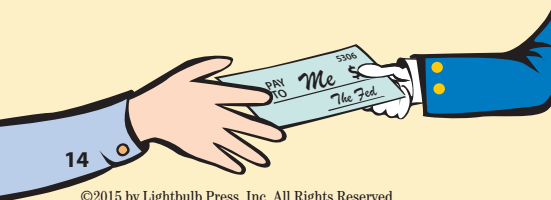
At the same time, other vets, perhaps you included, prefer not to identify themselves as former members of the military. Don't let that decision stop you from claiming all the benefits to which you're entitled. And don't be concerned that identifying yourself as a veteran on your application will hurt your chances for admission. In fact, the opposite is true.

TAKING A TAX BREAK

You should plan to take advantage of the American Opportunity Credit (AOC) when you file your federal tax return for any year in which you have deductible education expenses for yourself, your spouse, or a dependent.

This credit allows you to subtract the amount to which you're entitled from the federal income tax you owe. The credit is refundable, which means if your tax falls below \$0 after taking the credit, the government will send you a check for

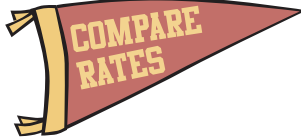
The American Opportunity Credit



MAKING A CHOICE

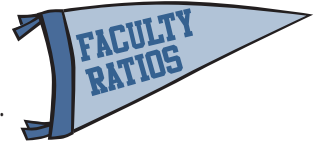
When you enlisted, you probably didn't apply to three or four branches of the service to see where you'd get in. But when you're applying for college or program admission, you almost always submit multiple applications. Admission is rarely guaranteed, though some schools have historically encouraged veterans to apply. One thing you'll want to do is make sure the schools you're considering will help you meet your goals and are well-regarded by potential employers in your field.

- Compare graduation and job placement rates. Schools that promise jobs as a reason to enroll should provide statistics to back up the promise. One clue to over-promising may be higher than average loan default rates.



- Take a look at the ratio of full-time to part-time faculty and the ratio of faculty to students. More full-time than part-time faculty and fewer

students per faculty member are both factors in quality education.



- Geography may also be important. For example, having family nearby may make it easier to handle living arrangements or childcare.
- Think about whether you want an urban or rural campus, a large or small school, a school that has a strong online learning component, or one that emphasizes the on-campus experience.



These aren't the only issues to weigh, but they are good places to start. You might also try to get in touch with a veterans organization at schools you're considering to get feedback from other vets.

OTHER CHOICES

You may also be eligible for the Montgomery GI Bill, an older program with somewhat different benefits. It's smart to compare the provisions of the two programs to decide which better meets your needs. When you use one of them, you're not eligible for the other.

IMPROVED TRANSPARENCY

The Department of Education, with the VA and CFPB, has developed a Financial Aid Shopping Sheet to provide a standardized format for financial aid offers to help you make an informed comparison of what college will cost you. A number of schools have signed up to use the template, and you can download a blank version to enter information from schools that aren't yet participating at www.collegecost.ed.gov/shopping_sheet.pdf.

at least part of the difference. If you're not enrolled in a two- or four-year undergraduate degree-granting program, look into the Lifetime Learning Credit. The amount of the credit is less than the AOC, and it isn't refundable, but if you have eligible expenses you should use the credit.

There are income caps on eligibility for both credits, but the levels are high enough for many veterans to qualify.

KNOW BEFORE YOU OWE

Buying a Home

A VA loan guaranty can provide the key to your new home.

One of the big decisions you make as a new veteran is where to live. If you're starting a new job or enrolling in school, you have a good sense of where you'll be. So the question is whether to rent or buy. Renting has some advantages, especially if you expect to move again within a few years. It's often cheaper, and you don't have to worry about finding a buyer when you're ready to move.

On the other hand, if you plan to settle in a community for the foreseeable future, buying could be a good decision for both financial and personal reasons. And, as a veteran, you can usually take advantage of the VA home loan program to help make buying more affordable.

HOW THE GUARANTY WORKS

The VA guaranty helps veterans and active duty servicemembers find mortgage loans by protecting lenders against the possibility a borrower will default. Specifically, the VA promises repayment of a minimum of 25% of the loan amount, with higher percentages covered for smaller loans.

The VA sets a maximum on the amount it will guarantee on a loan, though technically not the amount of the loan. The amount in each case is determined by the state and county in which the property is located. You can find these caps, which may be reset annually, by searching for "county loan limits" at www.benefits.va.gov.

While the VA home loan program has made it possible for more than 19 million people to buy homes, it doesn't ensure that all eligible veterans will be able to find a mortgage loan or borrow as much as they need to buy the properties they want.

DOING YOUR HOMEWORK

To qualify for a VA loan guaranty under the home loan program, you must have a Certificate of Eligibility (COE), which you

can obtain at www.ebenefits.va.gov, and meet certain other requirements:

- You must have good credit, as well as enough income to afford mortgage payments, maintain the property, and cover your needs and the needs of your family
- The purchase price can't be more than the appraised value of the home as determined by a VA appraiser
- You must certify you'll occupy the home

HOW THE HOME LOAN PROGRAM CAN HELP

- The VA will guarantee a minimum of 25% of the loan
- No cash down payment required
- Limit on closing costs
- No private mortgage insurance (PMI) required
- No prepayment penalty
- Financial counseling is available

ADVANTAGE: LOAN GUARANTY

One of the most appealing features of the VA home loan program is that you aren't required to make a cash down payment, which, with other loans, can be as much as 20% of the purchase price. This means you can borrow 100% of the value of the home plus the customary VA funding fee of 2.15% for first-time borrowers. (The fee is reduced if you make a down payment and may be waived if you are a disabled veteran.)

There are good reasons to make a down payment, if you can. Most important is that in reducing the amount you borrow, you reduce your borrowing costs and spend less on housing. Making a down payment may also reduce the loan

REFINANCING A LOAN

If you use the VA home loan program to refinance an existing mortgage to reduce the interest rate you're paying, your credit isn't rechecked and the only certification you're required to make is that you have occupied the property.

you need to less than the amount the VA will guarantee in the area where you're buying.

Another plus with a VA guaranty is that you don't need private mortgage insurance (PMI), which is normally required if you make a down payment of less than 20%. In addition, you can always prepay a loan with a VA guaranty without penalty, and the loan itself may be assumable, which means that it can be transferred to a new owner. One caution, however: Be sure to have the assumption approved by the VA.

While a VA loan guaranty does not protect you against foreclosure if you can't make your payments, the VA does offer financial counseling to help you avoid losing your home if you're having financial problems. If you're having trouble paying, you can also logon to www.cfbp.gov/mortgagehelp or call 855-411-2372.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- **A Certificate of Eligibility (COE)**
- **Good credit**
- **Enough income for mortgage payments and other expenses**
- **Certification of your occupancy**
- **A loan provided by a creditable lender**
- **Money for closing costs**

MONEY MATTERS

Before you begin to search actively for a home, it's important to anticipate some of the added costs of buying.

You should pay for an inspection of the property before you sign a contract with the seller. Armed with information about potential structural and other problems, you may be able to negotiate a lower price. You should also hire an attorney to represent you in the buying process.

In addition, you'll need enough cash on hand when the purchase is finalized to pay the balance of your down payment, if you're making one, and other closing costs. Although a VA guaranty does limit closing costs, you may owe more than the national average of 2% of the loan amount if you're buying in an area with high local real estate taxes.

Shopping for a Loan

There's a reason that buying a home seems complicated. It is.



When you've decided to take advantage of the VA mortgage loan guaranty, the hard work begins. This includes finding:

- A home that meets your family's requirements and also the VA rule that the purchase price isn't higher than the home's appraised value
- A lender that offers you a competitive annual percentage rate (APR) that combines the interest rate, fees, and settlement costs

QUALIFYING TO BORROW

Potential lenders consider your credit report and score, your income and debt-to-income (DTI) ratio, and the collateral—in this case the home you're buying—in evaluating your loan application. DTI is a measure of your outstanding debt, including what you'll be paying for your home, in relation to your income. As a general rule, it is harder to qualify with a DTI above 40%, and 36% is the preferable limit. It's also wise to request a loan that is no more than four times the amount the VA will guaranty in the area where you are planning to buy.

$$\frac{\text{Your outstanding debt}}{\text{Your gross income}} = \text{DTI Ratio}$$

SHOPPING FOR A LOAN

A smart way to start your search for a mortgage loan is by checking online to get a sense of the current lending environment, including the average interest rate that lenders are charging.

You can find ballpark numbers without having to provide any personal information at a number of commercial sites.

Next, contact several lenders, starting with your primary financial institution, such as the credit union or bank where you have checking and savings accounts. You may be eligible for a somewhat lower rate as an existing member or customer, provided you qualify to borrow. You'll want to ask about interest rates and settlement costs separately, and take good notes, so you can make a more accurate comparison of possible offers. This may also allow you to negotiate a deal more effectively.

Within three business days of a mortgage loan application, the lender must provide a good faith Loan Estimate of the total cost of borrowing. The form was redesigned by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (www.cfpb.gov) to make it easier to understand what you'll owe and how competing offers compare. You'll get a similarly designed Closing Disclosure just before the sale is finalized.

What it costs you to borrow depends on three things: the amount of your loan, the annual percentage rate (APR), and the loan term, which is often 15 or 30 years. The less you

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Amount of your loan} \\ &+ \text{APR} \\ &+ \text{Loan term} \\ \hline &= \text{Total cost of a mortgage loan} \end{aligned}$$

CHECK YOUR CREDIT

At least six months before you begin the hunt for a mortgage loan, log on to www.annualcreditreport.com to check your credit report with one of the three major credit reporting agencies—Equifax, Experian, or TransUnion. You're entitled to a free report from each of the agencies once every 12 months.

What you're looking for are red flags that might make a potential lender hesitant to provide a loan. This can happen if the record shows you've been 30 days or more late in

making credit payments, you have large credit debts, you've ever defaulted, or you have judgments against you.

If you've had such problems, you may be turned down unless you can convince the lender you are a good risk despite the record. In fact, it may be wise to postpone trying to buy until you can improve your credit record.

If you find mistakes—and they can and do occur—contact the agency to have them corrected. There are clear instructions on the website explaining what to do.

borrow, the lower your rate, and the shorter the term, the cheaper borrowing is. The reverse, of course, is true as well.

FIXED OR VARIABLE?

One major decision you'll have to make is whether to choose a fixed rate, a variable rate, or a hybrid rate mortgage loan. Most lenders offer all three alternatives.

BUYER BEWARE

Before you take an adjustable rate or hybrid loan, be sure to find out the highest rate you could ever pay.



TYPE OF MORTGAGE	CONDITIONS
Fixed Rate	Your monthly payments of principal and interest remain the same for the term of the loan.
Variable Rate	The payment changes when the rate is adjusted up or down, typically annually, in response to a change in the cost of borrowing as reflected in a public index.
Hybrid	The rate is fixed for the first five, seven, or ten years and is adjusted at least annually after that.

There are caps, or limits, on variable rate changes with a VA loan guaranty: up to 1% annually and 5% over the life of the loan. With a hybrid loan whose fixed period is more than five years, the caps are 2% at the first adjustment and 6% over the loan term. These caps are linked to the actual cost of borrowing at the time you take your loan, which is typically higher than the initial rate you pay.

WHAT A PITI

In addition to principal and interest, your monthly mortgage loan payment will almost certainly include 1/12 of your annual homeowners insurance premium and 1/12 of your local property taxes. Together, Principal, Interest, Taxes, and Insurance are known as PITI.

Life Insurance

If you have dependents, you need to insure your life for their security.

Many people would rather not think about life insurance. That's understandable, but it's also a mistake. Life insurance lets you provide for the people you care about if you're no longer around to provide for them yourself.

At its most basic, life insurance will cover funeral arrangements, outstanding bills, and settling your estate after your death. But, more important, this insurance can replace the income you would have earned had you lived longer, pay off the mortgage if you have one, and provide money for your children's education.

LIFE INSURANCE OVERVIEW

There are two basic types of life insurance—term and permanent. Term insurance covers you for a specific period of time, such as five years, and can normally be renewed when the time period ends. Permanent insurance, on the other hand, covers you for your lifetime, or in some cases, until you turn 100. There are several varieties of permanent insurance, the most common being whole life—also known as straight life or ordinary life. Overall, permanent insurance tends to be more expensive than term for the same level of coverage.

You pay an annual premium for either term or permanent insurance and must stay up-to-date with your payments for the policy to remain in effect. When you die, your beneficiary, whom you name in the insurance contract, receives the

LIFE INSURANCE WHILE IN SERVICE



face value. This is a cash amount, also known as the death benefit, that you select when you purchase the policy. For example, you might name your spouse as the beneficiary of a \$400,000 term policy.

With a permanent policy—though not with a term policy—part of the premium you pay accumulates in a tax-deferred cash value account. You may be able to borrow against this account, but any amount you borrow reduces the death benefit dollar for dollar until the loan is repaid. If you stop paying your premiums or surrender the policy for any reason, you get back the cash surrender value, which is the balance of your cash value account minus loan balances, interest due, and fees.

BUILDING ON WHAT YOU HAVE

When you leave the military, the life insurance coverage you had on active duty through service-members' group life insurance (SGLI) is automatically extended for 120 days without charge. This continuing SGLI coverage is a term policy with a death benefit of up to \$400,000, plus \$100,000 for traumatic injury. The amount is the same as the death benefit of your existing SGLI policy.



LIFE INSURANCE AS A VETERAN

TERM LIFE INSURANCE vs. PERMANENT LIFE INSURANCE

Term insurance covers you for a specific period of time, and can normally be renewed when the time period ends.

Permanent insurance covers you for your lifetime, or in some cases, until you turn 100.

Part of the premium you pay accumulates in a tax-deferred cash value account.

Convert to
VGLI

Convert to a permanent
policy offered by an
affiliated commercial
insurance company

Compare and
choose your own
term policy

CHOOSING A POLICY

The key to buying life insurance is finding the right coverage at the best price. In some situations, VGLI may be your best choice, despite the fact that it is more costly than SGLI. A policy from a VA-affiliated insurer may better suit your needs, provided you want permanent insurance rather than term. Or, if your health is good, you may want to look into a different term policy. What you don't want to do is put off making a decision.

One approach is to consult a fee-only life insurance adviser who doesn't sell policies and will provide unbiased advice. Another is to read widely to understand your alternatives. In addition to the VA, resources like *Consumer Reports* can be a good place to begin.

Among the things to consider are the reputation of the insurer based on the assessments of independent ratings agencies, the comparative cost of term and permanent policies, how your life insurance needs are likely to change as you age, and whether there is an accelerated benefits option should you become terminally ill.

Before the extension period ends, it's up to you to arrange for new insurance. You can convert your SGLI policy to a veterans' group life policy (VGLI), administered by the same company. If you do so within 240 days, you automatically qualify for the insurance without a health examination, and your death benefit remains the same as it was with SGLI. You have an additional year to apply for coverage after the extension ends, but during that period you'll need to take a physical exam, and you could be turned down.

VGLI is structured as a five-year renewable term policy. Your premium is determined by your age at the time you renew and the amount of the death benefit. If your current coverage is less than \$400,000, you can increase it in increments of \$25,000 at each renewal, up to that cap.

Alternately, you can convert your SGLI to a permanent policy offered by one of the commercial insurance companies affiliated with the VA program. Again, if you act before your SGLI ends, no health examination is required.

You can find the details of both types of coverage, including the cost, and compare the two by exploring the *VA Life Insurance Handbook* at www.insurance.va.gov.

HOW MUCH INSURANCE?

One rule of thumb says you need life insurance equal to eight to ten times your annual income, especially if you have young children. It's probably wise to use a life insurance calculator like the one you can find at www.benefits.va.gov/INSURANCE/introCalc.asp.

Health Insurance

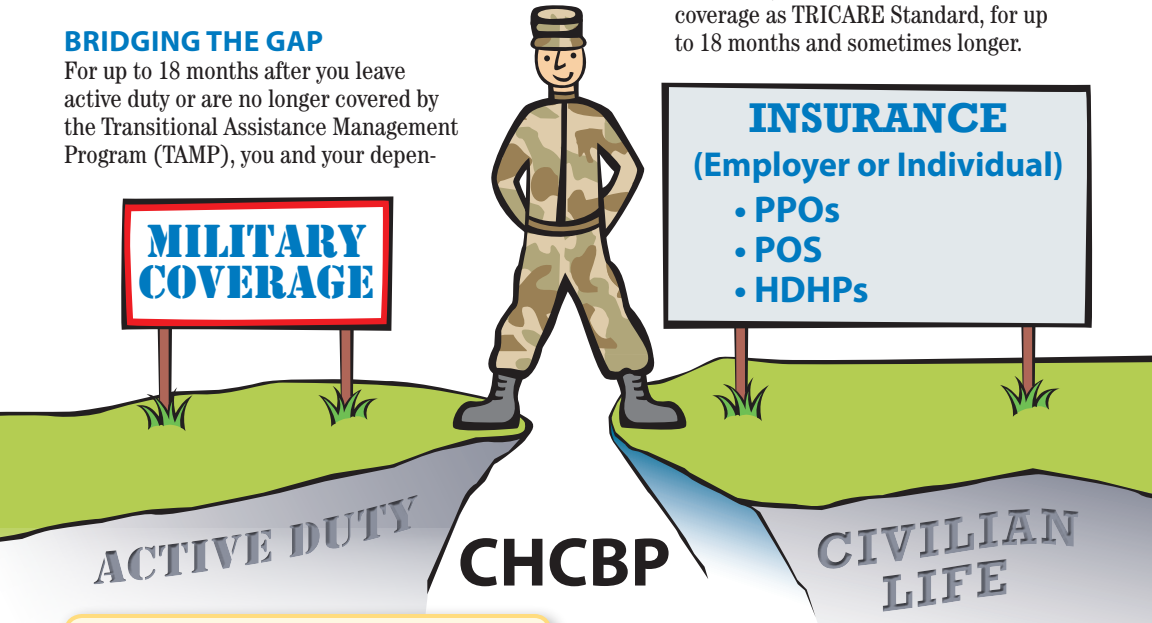
There are no two ways about it: You don't ever want to be without health insurance.

The risks of being uninsured are too great to consider. But finding health insurance—and paying for it—if you aren't moving directly into a job that offers coverage as an employee benefit, can be one of the major challenges of transitioning from active duty to civilian life.

BRIDGING THE GAP


For up to 18 months after you leave active duty or are no longer covered by the Transitional Assistance Management Program (TAMP), you and your depen-

dents are eligible for health insurance through the Continued Health Care Benefit Program (CHCBP). You must apply within 60 days after your military coverage ends and pay the premiums quarterly. You can extend this insurance, which provides the same coverage as TRICARE Standard, for up to 18 months and sometimes longer.



BUYER BEWARE

If you're buying interim health insurance, opt for a major medical policy. It will cover the big bills and be cheaper than a comprehensive policy, though it won't cover routine care. But avoid hospitalization-only policies, especially those that exclude the first 10 days. Chances are you won't be in that long, and your bill can be tens of thousands of dollars for even a few days.



You apply for CHCBP insurance using **DD Form 2837** and provide the documentation it requires. The form itself describes some details of the coverage, including how to file a claim. You can learn more, including the amount of the current premiums, at a TRICARE Service Center and on the website of Humana Military Healthcare Services, which provides the CHCBP coverage, at www.humanamilitary.com.

While this insurance may seem expensive, and the benefits may not be as generous as you're accustomed to, it accomplishes several important

things. First, the insurance insulates you against large medical bills or the possibility that you may have difficulty finding treatment because you're not insured. Equally important, by providing you with continuing healthcare coverage, it ensures that any pre-existing conditions you may have will be covered when you eventually enroll in an employer-provided plan or buy an individual policy. Remember, if there's a coverage gap of 63 days or more, an insurance company can refuse to cover pre-existing conditions for as long as 18 months.

HAVING A BABY?

If you are pregnant when you leave active duty, you may qualify for continuing care through a military treatment facility (MTF).

Alternately, you may qualify for coverage through CHCBP or TAMP. In any case, you will receive a certificate of creditable coverage, which means your new insurer will cover the pregnancy rather than treating it as an uncovered pre-existing condition.



HEALTH INSURANCE BASICS

In finding the right healthcare coverage, it pays to know the key differences among plan types. If you have multiple job offers, for example, the health insurance benefit each employer offers may be a factor in choosing among them.

Participating provider organizations (PPOs) are networks of doctors and other healthcare professionals who agree to accept the fees that the plan sponsor will pay for specific services. You generally have a primary care physician, and you may need a referral from him or her to see a specialist. In addition to the monthly premium, there may also be a copayment—often in the \$20 range for primary care and more for a specialist—for each visit except for preventive services, which are covered in full. If you go outside the network, your care may not be covered or, if it is, you are likely to pay a substantial percentage of the cost.

DD Form 2837

CHCBP Insurance Application

With a point of service plan (POS), you go to any provider you choose and submit the bills to your insurance company. After you've met an annual out-of-pocket deductible, the insurer will pay a percentage of the amount it has determined is reasonable for each service—perhaps 80%—and you pay the balance as coinsurance. But, if the doctor or other healthcare providers charge more than the amount the insurer considers reasonable, you are responsible for the difference.

High deductible health plans (HDHPs), which use a network of providers, have significantly higher annual deductibles than traditional, or first dollar, plans for covered services. But HDHPs cap your out-of-pocket costs each year, though the cap is several thousand dollars. If you reach that threshold, the plan pays nearly the entire cost of any additional covered treatment. With an HDHP, you can also open a tax-free health savings account (HSA) to help you accumulate money to cover your healthcare costs.

ADD YOUR NAME

In addition to buying health insurance, all veterans should enroll for VA health benefits online at www.va.gov/health benefits. In the eBenefits box on the right, click Register Now. Unlike Medicare, which provides the same benefits for all participants, VA benefits are based on who you are, what you need, and sometimes what your income is. After you enroll, you should receive a personalized copy of the *Veterans Health Benefits Handbook* that details the services to which you are entitled.

Remember, too, that while you may be treated at a VA facility, your spouse (unless he or she is also a veteran) and children don't qualify for VA healthcare unless you have a total and permanent disability.

Managing Money

To make smart financial decisions, you need to plan ahead.

If you and your family have a spending plan that's helped you to keep the bills paid and add money to your savings account on a regular basis, that plan should serve you well in civilian life. But you've probably discovered you're paying significantly more for some essential expenses, such as housing and healthcare, than you've been used to paying.

Since these added costs may put a strain on your finances, now may be a good time to review some basic principles of managing money. And if you're someone who hasn't gotten around to making a spending plan, or if the plans you've tried haven't worked out so well, this is the ideal time to make a fresh start.

CASH IN/CASH OUT

Monitoring your monthly cash flow is the first step in being an effective money manager. You need to know:

- How much income is coming in
- How much of that income you're spending
- How much, if anything, is left at the end of each pay period

If you regularly have money left in your checking account when your next paycheck arrives, you have a positive cash flow. This generally means things are moving in the right direction. But if you regularly run out of money even before paying all of your bills, you have a negative cash flow and could be headed for serious financial trouble.

TIP

Don't treat your spending plan as if it's written in stone and become so discouraged that you stop trying to make it work. It's smarter to think of the plan as a work in progress.

Either way, you can improve your cash flow by increasing your income—which may not be as easy as you'd like it to be—or by reducing your spending, or both. But first you have to know where your money is going.

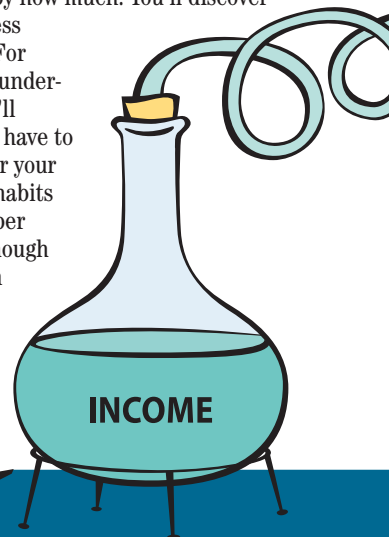
KEEPING GOOD RECORDS

When you pay by check or debit card or use a credit card, figuring out your spending is relatively easy. All you need to track your expenses are the monthly statements from your credit union or bank and your credit card issuer.

It's harder, however, to keep track of the cash you take out of an ATM. One approach is to keep a daily spending record for a week or two, either by using an app on your phone or by recording expenses in a small notebook. What you discover may surprise—or shock—you.

When you have the numbers to work with, you can list your expenses by category. Online budget worksheets can be very helpful, including the one you can find at www.lightbulbpress.com/veterans/budgetworksheet.

Now comes the hard part: deciding where you can cut back and by how much. You'll discover that this is a process of trial and error. For example, you may underestimate what you'll spend on food and have to modify your plan or your grocery-shopping habits to make that number more realistic—though modifying the plan probably means cutting back on something else you'd really like to do or have.



GOODBYE TO SCRA

When you finish your active duty, some of the protections of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA), such as interest rate caps, eviction protection, and the ability to end car leases early may terminate, though others are extended for a time.

If you've taken advantage of any SCRA provisions, you'll want to find out when the protection ends and what your remaining obligations are to creditors, the courts, or other parties. You can begin by contacting an Armed Forces Legal Assistance Program office. You can find one that's convenient for you at legalassistance.law.af.mil/content/locator.php.

CHECK IT OUT

Checking and savings accounts are essential tools in successful money management.

By linking your savings to your checking account you can authorize automatic transfers of a percentage of your pay to build your savings balance. In addition, direct deposit of your paycheck or other benefits and electronic bill payment can save you time and money.

You have a wide choice of federally insured credit unions and banks in civilian life, and you'll want to compare those you're considering on three criteria: cost, convenience, and service. The bottom line is that you want the most economical provider that offers the services you need. In an online environment, remember that physical proximity isn't always essential.

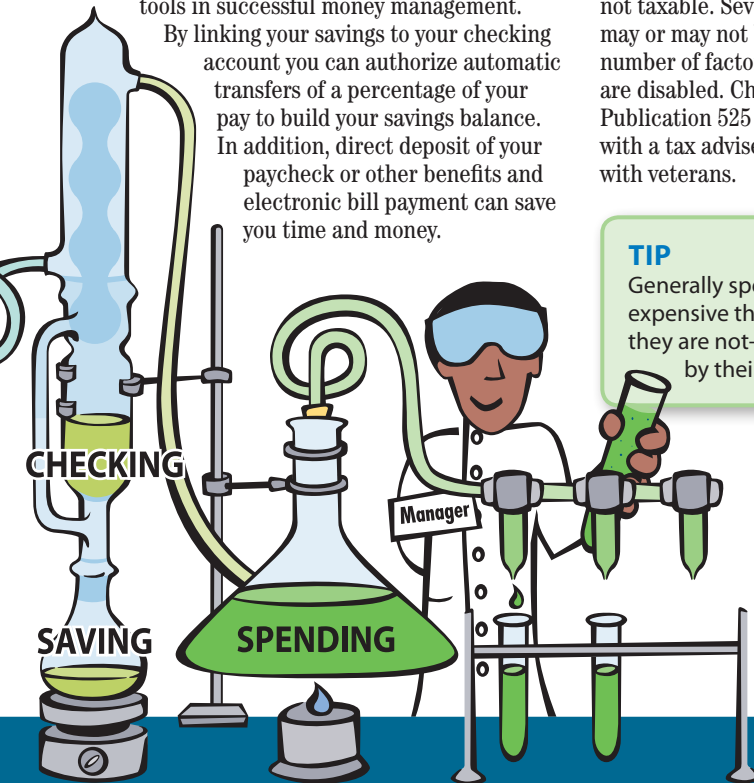
TAXING ISSUES

Preparing your income tax returns may also be more complicated than you might expect. Among other things, if you were posted to a combat zone during the year before you left the military, you may have tax-exempt as well as taxable income that must be reported differently. You may also qualify for education tax credits, childcare credits, the earned income tax credit, and other tax breaks.

If you're receiving VA benefits, most of them, including education and training allowances, are not taxable. Severance pay and pension income may or may not be taxable, depending on a number of factors, including whether or not you are disabled. Check out IRS Publication 3 and Publication 525 and initially, at least, consult with a tax adviser who has experience working with veterans.

TIP

Generally speaking, credit unions are less expensive than banks, in large part because they are not-for-profit institutions owned by their depositors.



Using Credit

Credit makes life easier, but it can be a trap.

There's a lot credit can do for you. In fact, access to credit can be a lifesaver. But credit makes spending easy, sometimes too easy. So you can find yourself in credit trouble if you're spending more than you can afford to repay.

MAKING CREDIT HISTORY

If you've ever had a loan or used a credit card, you have a credit report and a credit score. Here's how it works: Credit reporting agencies collect information from lenders and public records, summarize it into a report, and distill it into a score using a formula—often one developed by FICO®. A FICO score ranges from 300 to 850, with the average score around 730.

Your FICO score not only indicates how you've used credit in the past, but it helps to determine your access to future credit and what that credit will cost you. For example, repeatedly late or skipped credit payments could limit your ability to get a car or mortgage loan or increase the interest rate you'll have to pay if you are offered one.



If you are turned down for credit, or you're offered an APR that's higher than the best one the lender is advertising, you must be told which credit reporting agency's credit score the lender used and what your score was. The agency must also provide a free credit report if you request it.

AnnualCreditReport.com

The only source for your free credit reports. Authorized by federal law.

Everyone is entitled to one free credit report from each of the three major credit reporting agencies once every 12 months. To access your report, all you have to do is go to www.annualcreditreport.com and follow the directions. If you spread your requests over the year, asking for one report every four months, you'll always have a sense of where you stand.

Some banks and credit card companies will provide your credit score for free, but often there's a charge. If you're about to apply for a major loan, it might be worth paying to see your score. But first find out which score the lender uses and request that one. Scores vary among agencies, and may be calculated differently for different end users, such as lenders or employers.

There's more information on scores and other aspects of credit at www.myfico.com.

BUILDING GOOD CREDIT

If you're building—or rebuilding—your credit history, there are some basic steps to follow:

- Find a good credit card and use it regularly, paying for your purchases on time—and in full, if possible—every billing period
- Use only a portion of your card's line of credit, ideally 30% or less
- Apply for a loan, perhaps to buy a car or pay for education not covered by your GI Bill, and repay the loan on time
- Restrict your applications for new credit, particularly new credit cards

There aren't any quick fixes if you have credit problems, but over time you can repair your history and make a good case to lenders that you're creditworthy.





TIP

If you're offered a free credit report and score anywhere but at www.annualcreditreport.com, don't believe it, even if it's from one of the same three agencies. There's a fee somewhere, often for a service you don't need, such as credit monitoring.

purchases that you'll pay off over time and another for purchases that you pay off in full.

CHOOSING A CREDIT CARD

Credit unions and banks issue credit cards that differ in a number of important ways:

- The annual percentage rate (APR), which determines the monthly finance charge on any unpaid balance
- Whether there is a grace period, which is the time between the date the card issuer sends you your new balance and the date your payment is due
- Whether there's an annual fee, which can vary significantly from one issuer to the next



As you weigh your options, you need to be realistic about your borrowing habits. If you're confident you'll always pay your outstanding balance in full and on time, a card with a grace period allows you to use credit while avoiding finance charges. However, if you generally carry a balance, you'll want a card with a low APR so that you'll be paying as little interest as possible.

It can be smart to use two credit cards, one with a low APR that you use only for major

KEEPING CREDIT IN CHECK

While large outstanding loans can create credit problems, people are more likely to borrow too much using credit cards and repay too slowly, cutting into the money they have for other expenses.

To provide a wake-up call, credit card statements estimate the cost and the time it will take to pay off your outstanding balance over various time periods, assuming your payments arrive on time and you stop using the card.

If you're feeling the pinch of credit card debt, check out the repayment calculator at www.federalreserve.gov/creditcardcalculator to explore how you can reduce your costs by paying even a little more each month.

HELP WANTED

If you run into trouble with loans or credit cards, help is available. The VA's Debt Management Center can help you with debts you accrue using benefits the VA offers, like a mortgage loan guaranty. If you're struggling with federal student loan debt, you can probably switch your repayment plan and reduce your payments by contacting your loan servicer.

You can also find credit counseling through the National Foundation for Consumer Credit (www.nfcc.org) or the Association of Independent Consumer Credit Counseling Agencies (www.aiccca.org).

But anyone who tries to tell you there's a quick fix for credit problems isn't being honest. In fact, working with such people or companies is a waste of your time and money.

Saving and Investing

Putting money aside can help meet emergencies and long-term goals.

If you're feeling financially stressed—which can happen when you're juggling work, education, and family responsibilities—saving and investing may be the last things on your mind. Yet both are essential to your financial security and the security of the people who depend on you. And getting started doesn't require a big commitment of money or time.

EMERGENCY FUNDS

Financial emergencies have a nasty way of cropping up at inconvenient times: Your car needs a major repair, the refrigerator dies, or, worse yet, you or your spouse is out of work for several months and you need money to cover the mortgage or other regular expenses.

Other unexpected events—even pleasant ones, such as your parents' anniversary party or a chance for your children to go to a sports or music camp—can foul up your spending plan.

Of course, you could put some of these expenses on a credit card. But you risk increasing these costs significantly if you pay off the bills over an extended period. And, in the worst cases, the expense may put you over your line of credit.

The better solution is to build an emergency fund—sometimes called a rainy-day fund—by saving a regular amount from each paycheck until you hit your target. As a rule, your emergency fund should provide a minimum of three to six months of living expenses in easily accessible accounts, such as certificates of deposit (CDs), 13-week US Treasury bills, and money market accounts.

Easily accessible accounts are liquid, which means you can sell or redeem them quickly for

THREE PARTS TO FINANCIAL SECURITY



3-6 months of living expenses

- CDs or money market accounts
- US Treasury Bills



SAVINGS ACCOUNT

cash with little or no loss of value. In addition to being liquid, these accounts are either federally insured or, in the case of Treasury bills, backed by the government's promise to repay.

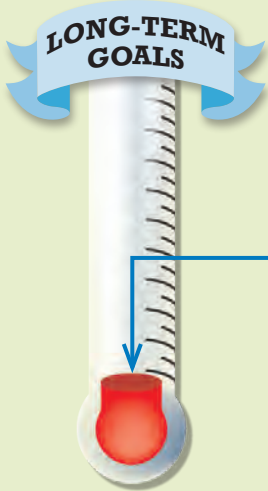
With CDs, you can use a technique called laddering. Instead of putting your entire emergency fund in one CD, you can split the money among three or four one-year CDs that mature at regular intervals during the year. The staggered maturity dates reduce the risk of having to take an early withdrawal. If there's no emergency, you can roll the CD over for another term.

OTHER REASONS TO SAVE

Once you have an emergency fund, saving can also help you meet short-term goals, such as the down payment on a new car or the money to pay for a family vacation. Saving is all about putting away a regular amount on a regular basis. Sure, you may earn some interest, but what really builds your account value is regular cash infusions.

TIP

In most cases, the younger you are, the more you want to focus on long-term growth by investing in stock and stock funds.



TYPES OF INVESTMENTS

STOCKS	\$	
BONDS	\$	
MUTUAL FUNDS & EXCHANGE TRADED FUNDS		

Investing also requires learning enough about various types of investments—basically stocks, bonds, and the mutual funds and exchange traded funds (ETFs) that invest in stocks and bonds—to make informed choices.

Stocks and stock funds are equity investments, which means you buy an ownership share when you invest. You may earn dividend income on stock investments and, if the price increases, you may decide to sell at a profit. But stock prices aren't fixed and can go down as well as up.

Bonds have a fixed price if you buy at issue and hold until maturity, and they pay interest income, usually at a fixed rate. But the prices change during the term, so if you sell before maturity, you may sell for more or less than you paid to buy.

With any investment, if you sell when the price is less than you paid, you'll lock in a loss.

To support a savings habit, it often helps to arrange for a direct transfer periodically from your checking to your savings account. That way, you won't be so tempted to spend the cash.

STEP UP TO INVESTING

Like saving, investing helps protect your financial security. But it differs from saving in two significant ways:

1. Most investments are not federally insured and can lose value, which means you take a certain amount of risk in investing that you don't take when you save.
2. Over time investments as a whole, though not every individual investment, have provided a stronger return than savings. While there's no guarantee that history will repeat itself, it's reasonable to assume that investing, if done judiciously, can make the difference between just getting by and meeting your goals.

LEARNING THE INVESTING ROPES

The best approach to investing is to learn as you go. A number of websites, including www.investor.gov and some state regulators' websites, offer clear, unbiased information about investing and provide links to other resources. Also, find out if your credit union or bank provides investor seminars, and check to see if local schools or libraries offer introductory courses on investing. Be cautious, though, of seminars that are really fronts for selling specific investments.

TIP

If you have to tap your emergency fund, it's best to start rebuilding it as soon as the emergency ends so you can draw on the fund again if the need arises.

Long-Term Planning

Achieving your most important goals takes time—and a strategy to get there.

Investing is essential to long-term planning, whether your goals are owning a home, paying for education, enjoying a secure retirement, or fulfilling a dream worth working for. What makes investing effective is having a workable plan for adding new money regularly, monitoring and evaluating your progress, and modifying your approach as your goals evolve.

One of the biggest challenges is the number of choices you have to make: which accounts to open, what investments to make in those accounts, and when to buy and sell.

CHOOSING ACCOUNTS

After you identify your goals, the time frame for achieving them, and the amounts you want to accumulate, the next step is opening the investment accounts that will best help you meet these objectives. Your choice includes tax-deferred, tax-free, and taxable accounts—and many investors use all three.

MANY ACCOUNTS, ONE VALUE

If you're investing for different goals using different accounts, keep in mind that certain investments may be better suited to one type of account than another. For example, municipal bonds may not be the best choice for a tax-deferred account. That's because the interest they pay is usually tax free in a taxable account, but all withdrawals from tax-deferred accounts are taxable, whatever their source.

For example, when you're investing for retirement or higher education, you can take advantage of tax-deferred or tax-free accounts. Tax deferred accounts let you postpone taxes on your investment earnings—and sometimes on amounts you invest—until you withdraw the money. With tax-free accounts you typically avoid

TYPES OF TAX-DEFERRED AND TAX-FREE ACCOUNTS

RETIREMENT



Employer Plans

- TSP and Roth 401(k)
- 401(k) and Roth 401(k)
- 403(b) and Roth 403(b)
- 457 and Roth 457

Individual Plans

- Roth IRA
- IRA

EDUCATION



529 Plans

Coverdell (ESAs)

Baccalaureate Bonds and US Savings Bonds

TAXABLE ACCOUNTS

taxes on your earnings entirely, provided you follow the rules for taking your money out.

The accounts best suited for retirement include employer-sponsored plans, such as TSP, 401(k)s, 403(b)s, and 457s, and individual retirement accounts (IRAs). You can open an IRA with a financial services institution, such as a credit union, bank, mutual fund company, or brokerage firm. With IRAs and some employer plans, you have the choice of tax-deferred or tax-free Roth accounts.

The accounts designed to help you save for education include state-sponsored 529 college savings plans, Coverdell education savings accounts (ESAs), and, in some states, what are known as baccalaureate bonds. You invest after-tax income in these accounts, but earnings are free of federal income tax if you use the money to pay qualified education expenses. Interest on US savings bonds may also be tax free.

You can always use taxable accounts to invest for any goal, including retirement and education. You may do so, for example, if you reach the contribution cap on tax-deferred or tax-free accounts or you want greater flexibility. With taxable accounts, there are no limits on the amount you can invest or on how or when you can use the money. But you will owe income tax on your earnings and any capital gains in the year you realize them.

TAX-DEFERRED OR TAX-FREE?

When you are ready to open an IRA or start participating in an employer's retirement plan, which should you choose—the tax-deferred account or the tax-free Roth?

If you think you'll be earning more in the future than you're earning now, there are good arguments for choosing a Roth. While you'll be paying income tax now on your contributions at your regular tax rate, in the future your withdrawals will be tax free if you're at least 59½ and your account has been open at least five years.

THRIFT SAVINGS PLAN



If your after-service job is with the federal government, you can continue contributing to your Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) account as you did on active duty. If you're working in the private sector or for a state government, you have a number of options for handling your TSP account balance. You may:



Leave it in the TSP until you turn 70½, when you must begin to take required minimum distributions. But if you retire earlier, you may begin withdrawing without penalty any time after you turn 59½



Roll it over to an IRA that you open with a custodian of your choice



Roll it over to a 401(k), 403(b), 457, or similar employer plan, provided the plan accepts rollovers

Sticking with the TSP is often a smart move. The fees are low, the investment choices are diversified, and you can continue to adjust the way your money is invested in the available funds.

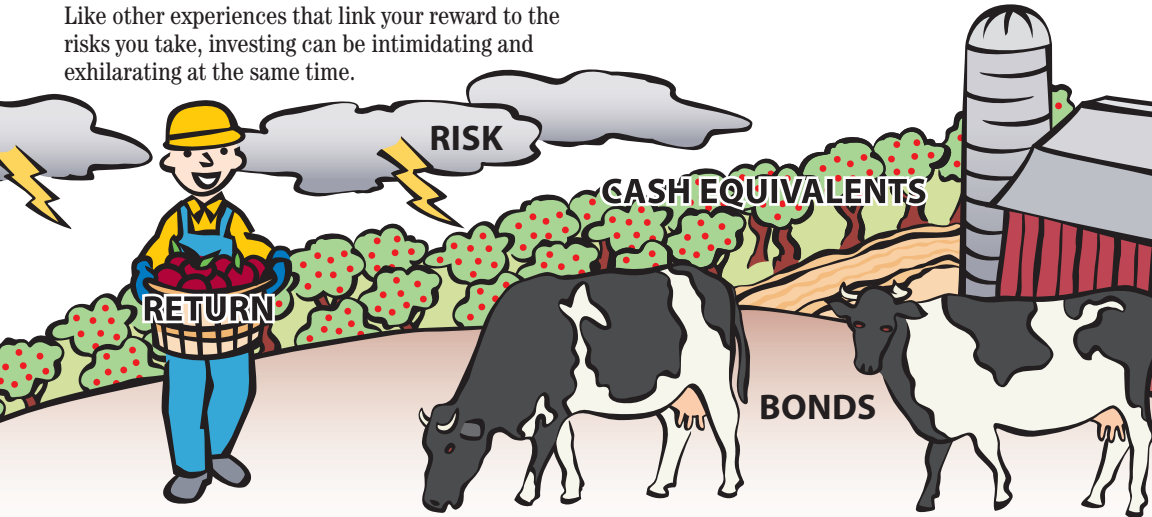
While you can't make additional contributions to your TSP account unless you go back to work for the government, you can take advantage of one special alternative that's not typical of other employer-sponsored retirement plans: You can roll over IRA assets or account balances from former employers' plans to consolidate your savings in the TSP.

Another thing you can do, but should try to avoid if you possibly can, is to use the money in your TSP account to meet current needs. If you withdraw money before retirement, you'll owe income tax on the full amount you take plus a 10% tax penalty if you are younger than 59½. And worst of all, you'll have to start saving for retirement all over again.

Investment Strategy

The best investment decisions are made carefully, for logical reasons.

Like other experiences that link your reward to the risks you take, investing can be intimidating and exhilarating at the same time.



RISK AND RETURN

Once you've selected the accounts you'll use to reach your goals, your next challenge is achieving positive returns on your investments in those accounts. That way, over time you'll have the assets you need by the time you need them.

Return is a measure of what you accumulate in relation to the amount you invest, called your principal. Your account value can increase in two ways—the prices you paid for investments can go up, and you may have interest or dividend earnings. You add the change in value to the earnings to calculate the return.

There is always the risk, however, that prices could fall, producing a negative return. If you sell when an investment's value is down, you could lose some or all of your money, and miss out on any potential gains.

While investing always poses the risk of loss, or of getting a smaller return than you anticipated, there are two strategies you can use to help protect your portfolio against market gyrations or losses from specific investments. One is asset allocation. The other is diversification.

ALLOCATING ASSETS

Using asset allocation means that you invest your principal, on a percentage basis, in different types of investments, called asset classes, which put your money to work in different ways. The three major asset classes are stocks, bonds, and cash equivalents, including insured certificates of deposit (CDs) and US Treasury bills. Other classes include real estate and commodities.

Mutual funds and ETFs belong to an asset class based on their investments: stock funds own stocks and bond funds own bonds. Some funds, however, are grouped into a category called asset allocation funds because they invest in more than one asset class. Balanced funds, for example, own a blend of stocks and bonds. Target date funds change their allocation from a concentration in stocks to a concentration in income-producing investments, such as bonds, as the target date in their name—such as 2025 or 2035—gets closer.

Different asset classes tend to react in different ways to a shift in the economy or investment markets, such as a change in interest rates. Stock prices often increase when bond prices fall, and the reverse. If you own some

stocks and some bonds (or a balanced mutual fund), you increase the probability that some investments will be gaining value even if others are flat or losing value. That's the reason for including several asset classes in your investment portfolio.

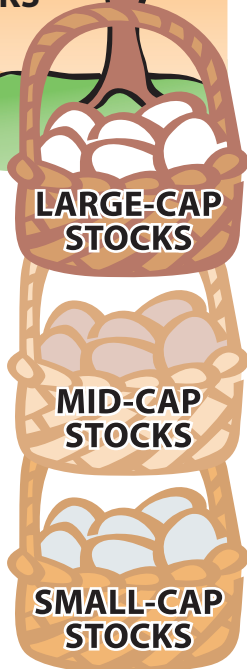
Just remember, though, that allocating doesn't ensure a profit or provide total protection against losses.



DIVERSIFYING YOUR PORTFOLIO

Diversification involves investing in a number of investments within each asset class. It's the same logic as not putting all your eggs in one basket. For example, you might divide the money you allocate to stocks among those issued by companies of different sizes and in different industries, both domestic and international.

Often the easiest way to diversify, especially as you start to invest, is by focusing on broad-based mutual funds and ETFs that own a substantial number of investments within an asset class. In fact, many people choose index mutual funds, like the ones offered in TSP accounts, or ETFs linked to broad market indexes because they are not only diversified but also among the lowest cost



LOOK FOR HELP

If you're having trouble making a plan or selecting investments, finding a reputable financial planner, registered investment adviser (RIA), or stockbroker may help. You can check out an RIA with the Securities and Exchange Commission (www.adviserinfo.sec.gov). You can investigate brokers at FINRA BrokerCheck (www.finra.org/brokercheck) and both RIAs and brokers with your state regulator, which you can locate at www.nasaa.org.

investments you can own. Remember, the less you pay in fees, the more of your return you get to keep.

The reason to diversify is to protect your portfolio value against losses in a single company or companies affected in a similar way by a change in market conditions. Like asset allocation, diversification is a useful strategy for managing risk but not a guarantee of success.

BUYING AND SELLING

Investing usually works best as a long-term proposition.

If you follow a buy-and-hold approach, you build a diversified portfolio by purchasing investments that meet your criteria for being good choices in their own right and good additions to what you already own. Then you hold on, through market ups and downs, unless there is good reason to think an investment is no longer as valuable as you originally thought and seems unlikely to recover its value. For example, a company whose business was renting DVDs could be expected to falter in the era of streaming video unless it changed its business model.

Alternatively, you might set goals for investment performance and sell certain stocks or funds that have gained 15% or 20% in value, using the proceeds to make a new investment.

Either way, you want to be sure all your investment earnings are reinvested to buy more shares or additional bonds. That way, you can take advantage of the power of compounding to build your investment account.

On Your Guard

A good defense can prevent unwanted surprises that separate you from your money.

Chances are you've made some mistakes with your money. Most people do. But you should also be prepared for a different set of financial mistakes: The ones that other people want you to make so they can profit from your loss.

While veterans aren't the only ones who are targeted in financial scams, you need to be on your guard against people who praise your service to your country as a gambit to sell you a product or service that's not in your best interest.

HERE'S A DEAL FOR YOU

Con artists who want to get their hands on your money may offer "available only to veterans" deals that turn out to be pitches for phony vacation trips, over-priced electronic equipment, bargain tires, or a discounted rate for providing copies of your military records that you can get for free by requesting them yourself online.

The scams vary: What you think you're buying may never materialize, or, if it does, may be defective. Too often the fine print may reveal that you are paying far more than you realize, and far more than you should.

Be particularly suspicious of appeals to your generosity, especially requests for contributions to military-sounding charities. If you want to express your solidarity with older veterans, wounded warriors, or others who need your help, look for

a legitimate organization that deserves your support. You can find ratings of various military charities at www.military-money-matters.com, www.charitynavigator.org, and www.charitywatch.org. You can log in to the Federal Trade Commission at www.ftc.gov and search for "charity scams" for articles, current alerts, and updates.

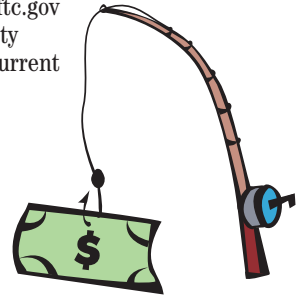
SPOOFING IS NO JOKE

Potentially more dangerous scams are those known as spoofing or phishing.

In both cases, crooks try to get hold of your personal information. Once they have it, they can log in to your accounts or use your identity to obtain credit cards, open lines of credit, or get your tax refund, among other things. If you receive an email saying the VA needs to update your records or certify your eligibility, hit delete. Official requests are never made this way.

In one scam claiming to be from the Defense Finance and Accounting Service, disabled veterans were asked to send their VA award letter, tax returns, 1099-Rs, retiree account statement (RAS), and Form DD 214 to get a larger tax refund. You can just imagine how delighted con artists would be to get their hands on this type of information.

Similarly, be on your guard if you are encouraged by a "veterans benefits specialist" to transfer your veterans benefits to another person, such as an older relative or a child. It may be legal, but the benefits often end up invested in high-cost annuities with long surrender periods and large penalties if you want to change your mind. The person who benefits most from these scams is the salesperson.



CALL BEFORE YOU ACT

The bottom line is this: Before you act on any pitch, especially one linked to pension benefits, call the VA hotline at 877-294-6380. The more you're pressured to act quickly and not consult with anyone else, the more quickly you should call the hotline.



LOANS TO CONSIDER

If you need money to start a business, loans may be available through the Small Business Administration (SBA) Office of Veterans Business Development (www.sba.gov/vets), from your state's office of veterans affairs, and from some private-sector lenders, such as credit unions. As a veteran you have preference on loans or guarantees available from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) for buying, improving, or renovating farm property.



AVOIDING BAD LOANS

There's nothing wrong with borrowing. In fact, timely loans make it possible to achieve some important goals, including buying a home or car or paying for college—things you couldn't ordinarily afford to pay out of your personal savings. Borrowing may also be helpful in other circumstances, such as when you're starting a new business, transitioning between jobs, or coping with unexpected expenses.

What you want to avoid are problem loans that cost much more than they're worth. For example, advance-fee loans, vehicle-title loans, and payday loans are promoted as providing immediate cash if you find yourself short, no credit check required. In reality, they're traps for extracting fees and finance charges that easily could drive you deeper into debt. Remember, as a veteran, you no longer enjoy the protection of the Federal Military Lending Act, which restricts some of the worst abuses of these predatory lenders.

Be wary of loan collectors who try to collect on debts you never incurred or those you have already paid off. Their tactics may be aggressive in the extreme. The Federal Trade Commission has a wealth of helpful information at www.consumer.ftc.gov. Almost

as dangerous as outright scams are loan doctors who offer to fix your credit standing for a fee. You're throwing your money away.

INVESTOR BEWARE

One way to avoid investment fraud is to ignore any online or telephone pitches for can't-fail investments that promise big returns. But you also need to guard against legitimate but inappropriate investments, such as over-the-counter stocks and callable certificates of deposit, which are often served up at free-lunch investment seminars. One safe bet: Never buy any investment, especially one offering a high return, without fully understanding how it works and what its risks are.



NUMBERS TO CALL FOR ASSISTANCE

You can access information or assistance by calling the following telephone numbers, which are listed alphabetically. All numbers beginning with 800, 855, 866, 877, and 888 are toll-free calls.

AnnualCreditReport.com	877-322-8228
AICCCA	866-703-8787 or 703-934-6118
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB)	855-411-2372
Continued Health Care Benefit Program (Humana Military Tricare)	800-444-5445

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

Benefits <i>Disability Compensation, Disability Pension, Home Loan Guaranty, Medical Care, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment</i>	800-827-1000
Civilian Health and Medical Program (CHAMPVA) CHAMPVA Meds by Mail	800-733-8387 888-385-0235 or 866-229-7389
Debt Management Center	800-827-0648
Education (GI Bill)	888-442-4551
Health Benefits	877-222-8387
Life Insurance <i>SGLI or VGLI All other</i>	800-419-1473 800-669-8477
Mammography Helpline	888-492-7844
Mortgage Payment Help (CFPB)	855-411-2372

Pension Scam Hotline	877-294-6380
Special Issues	800-749-8387
Vet Center Combat Call Center	877-927-8387
Veterans Crisis Line	800-273-8255

Department of Labor

Employment Issues <i>National Contact Center</i>	866-487-2365
Phone numbers by topic at www.dol.gov/dol/contact/ contact-phone-topics.htm	

Federal Trade Commission <i>ID Theft</i>	877-438-4338
<i>Making a complaint</i>	877-382-4357

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)	212-982-9699 or 202-544-7692
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Military Crisis Line	800-273-8255, Press 1
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Military OneSource <i>Spanish</i> <i>TTY/TDD</i>	800-342-9647 877-888-0727 866-607-6794
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NFCC <i>Spanish</i>	800-388-2227 800-682-9832
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Small Business Administration Veterans Business Outreach Centers	800-827-5722
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Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program	888-838-7727 or 202-628-8164
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THE VETERANS HANDBOOK

helps the newest generation of veterans make a smooth transition to civilian life. The handbook explains the benefits that make higher education and home ownership accessible and discusses the practical aspects of finding a job, managing money, and investing for the future. Written in clear language with colorful illustrations, the Handbook also lists the resources veterans can trust for reliable information.



VETERANS HANDBOOK

Making the Right Moves

There's no basic training for new veterans.

You've heard it before: The transition from service member to civilian is one of the most difficult you've ever likely to make. You can make it difficult, or you can make it smooth. You can make it a struggle, or you can make it a breeze. The key is to be ready for what's ahead. This book is a guide to help you make the transition from service member to civilian life. It's not just a book about leaving behind a hard-fought and proud life, but also about becoming part of a new one.

- What if you made the decision to leave the military or you were discharged?
- If you have a good job lined up?
- If you're coming with a serious injury?
- How stable your personal life is?

You may also have to cope with questions or positions that are new or different to you, including systems of pension or retirement.

The best way to prepare for this dramatic change is to read this book and explore the challenges and be ready to seize the opportunities.

OFF TO A HEAD START

Before you leave the service, it's a good idea to identify the professional, financial, and personal choices that lie ahead and to explore the ways you can make them a reality. As a veteran you may have certain advantages that can help you get started.

For example, employment in a major contract, and as well as various veteran departments of the federal government, including Defense (DDP), Labor (DL), and Veterans Affairs (VA) (DVA). Other federal agencies, such as the Small Business Administration, also have veteran-specific employment programs.

Professional positions that can be made to fit your needs. It can help make it possible for you to be a full-time student.

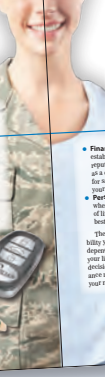
When you're ready to buy a house, you'll want to investigate the VA home loan program and look into the real estate tax breaks that may be available. Finally, your insurance needs—life and health—are in particular—may be set at least in part by programs you're eligible for in the service.

Finally, it's smart to seek out veteran-friendly financial institutions for your savings, checking, and investment needs.

THREE KEY DECISIONS

To prepare for the immediate choices you'll face in making a new civilian life, it helps to group them into three categories:

- **Career decisions:** Including whether to postpone your job search to finish your skills, receive new orders, or finish an undergraduate or graduate degree.
- **Financial decisions:** Including establishing a relationship with a reputable financial institution, such as a credit union, setting a strategy for saving and investing, and learning your money management skills.
- **Personal decisions:** Including where to live, the type and amount of life insurance you need, and the best source for health insurance.



FAMILY MATTERS

If you have a family—spouse, partner, children—the changes to your life are impacted with the choices to make. Taking things through and making collaborative decisions are essential to a successful transition.

For example, choosing an job where another may be a decision you have to make for yourself. But when that job is located, whether you have a better right away or decide to wait, and if you choose to use the GI Bill's education benefits for yourself, your spouse, or your children (GI Bill).

Just ahead of you—think about your family closely. If you've been employed for extended periods, you and your spouse may not have been able to make joint decisions making it easy for personal decisions. Establishing—or reestablishing—a partnership approach to getting goals, making choices, and managing money can add positive energy, rather than more stress, to your new life.



READY, A.M. FILE

If you plan to take advantage of the VA benefits to which you're entitled, it's essential to enroll for your VA benefits account at www.va.gov/efile.

Check out the "Introduction to eBenefits" link on the Help Page for a description of how to apply. You'll need to be registered in the National Employment Disability Reporting System (NEDRS) and have a Direct Service System (DSS) login.

When you leave the military, the one thing you don't have behind is the paperwork. There's a form for almost everything, from your Release or Discharge papers (DD Form 214 and Notification of Military Experience) to your VA Form 10-10 (Certificate of Release or Discharge).

It's smart to obtain the original documents. It's a number of certified photocopies with you are still on active duty. You will need a copy of your discharge papers and accessible forms for keeping them safe and accessible to you. You'll have them when you need them, which may be more often than you think.

You'll also want to keep careful track of your personal records, including birth certificates, adoption papers, marriage certificates, and divorce decrees. There are times when you need originals, not copies.



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