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Can Those with Mental Illness Serve in the U.S. Military?

Marcia Purse

The short and skinny answer is no—people with current mood disorders, or a history of serious mental illness, cannot serve in the U.S. Military.

How do you know whether you or a loved one may qualify? The U.S. Department of Defense has a directive called the Criteria and Procedure Requirements for [Physical Standards for Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction in the Armed Forces](#) which provides a detailed list of what mental health conditions prevent a person from being in the armed services.

Let's take a closer peek into the disqualifying conditions, and how people sometimes skirt around or bend the rules, so to speak.

Examples of Disqualifying Mental Health Conditions

There are a number of mental health conditions that prevent a person from enlisting in the armed forces. Here is a rundown of many (but not all), so use this as a simple guide, but not a hard and fast rule.

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, you're disqualified from serving in the U.S. military if you have a current diagnosis or a history of a mental disorder with psychotic features, such as [schizophrenia](#) or a delusional disorder

You're also disqualified if you have [bipolar disorder](#) or affective psychoses.

For depressive disorders (for example, major depressive disorder), disqualification from the service will occur if a person had outpatient care that lasted for more than 24 months or any inpatient care. Finally, a person with a depressive disorder must be "stable" without treatment for a continuous 36 months to be eligible.

For anxiety disorders (for example, [panic disorder](#)), a person cannot enter the armed services if he or she needed any inpatient care or outpatient care for more than 12 months cumulatively. Lastly, a person must not have needed any treatment for their anxiety disorder.

Other disqualifying mental health conditions include:

- A history of [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#) or [post-traumatic stress disorder](#)
- A history of or current dissociative, conversion, or factitious disorder, depersonalization, hypochondriasis, somatoform disorders, or pain disorder related to psychological factors or a somatoform disorder
- A history of an [adjustment disorder](#) within the last three months or recurrent episodes of adjustment disorder
- A history of or current psychosexual condition like voyeurism or exhibitionism
- A history of or current alcohol or drug abuse or dependence

- A history of attempted suicide or suicidal behavior

Disturbances of conduct, [impulse control disorder](#), [oppositional defiant disorder](#), or other personality or behavior disorders characterized by frequent encounters with law enforcement agencies, and antisocial attitudes or behavior are other mental health problems that warrant disqualification from the service.

Likewise, a person may be disqualified from enlisting if his or her personality, conduct, or behavior disorder is believed to serve as a serious interference to adjusting to the military.

Other causes for disqualification include (but not limited to) a history of anorexia or bulimia, a history of encopresis after the age of 13, or a history of an expressive or receptive language delay.

Lastly, attention deficit disorder or [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#) (ADD/ADHD) may be a reason for being disqualified. That being said, if a person meets certain criteria, like if he or she had a history of ADD/ADHD only as a child (under the age of 15), he or she may be able to still enter the service, assuming other criteria are met.

Effects of Mental Health Conditions on Service Members

While currently having certain mental health conditions or having a history of a serious mental disorder technically prohibits a person from being in the military, research data suggests that many are skirting the rules.

For example, a major study published in 2014 in *JAMA Psychiatry* found that some 25 percent of non-deployed U.S. military members had some sort of mental disorder, including [panic disorder](#), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and depression, and two-thirds of these had their conditions prior to enlisting.

The study also found that more than 11 percent of U.S. military enlistees had more than one disorder. Interestingly, [intermittent explosive disorder](#) was the most common condition found, affecting approximately 8 percent of the enlistees.

How are people getting around the rules? It's not entirely clear, but people find ways to circumvent the regulations, most in the vein of, "Don't ask, don't tell."

All in all, though, the problem lies not in the technical disregard for the rules, but in the risk to himself or herself if that person enlists. For instance, according to the study in *JAMA Psychiatry*, enlistees who had mental disorders prior to enlisting were more likely to have difficulty performing their job.

In addition, having a mental disorder may make it less likely that someone will re-enlist in the armed services, and may limit promotional opportunities. It's worthy to note that the rules for military pilots are even stricter than those for enlistment.

A Word From Verywell

Rules exist for a reason, and in this case, the rules against enlisting with a history of or current mental disorder are meant to protect those with the condition. In other words, the rules are really in the best interest of the person, as there are clearly serious implications if not followed.

That said, some advocates say the U.S. military should make more efforts to identify mental illness both in recruits and in established service members, not to kick them out, but to provide earlier treatment.

Such an effort could help foster needed assistance in an organization currently wracked with [suicides](#), attempted suicides and diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder, regardless of whether the military member joined with the mental condition, or developed it while serving.

Sources:

Department of Defense (DOD) Directive 6130.3, Physical Standards for Appointment, Enlistment, and Induction, and DOD Instruction 6130.4, Criteria and Procedure Requirements for Physical Standards for Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction in the Armed Forces

Kessler RC et al. Thirty-day prevalence of DSM-IV mental disorders among nondeployed soldiers in the US Army: results from the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS). *JAMA Psychiatry*. 2014 May;71(5):504-13.