



Essential Veteran Services

EVALUATIONS & NEXUS LETTERS

EVS DIGITAL PRODUCT SERIES • ACTIVE DUTY TRANSITIONING OUT

The Exit Strategy

1 Year+ from Military Separation

This is not a passive read. If you skim this and move on, nothing changes. This guide is designed to be revisited monthly, written in, and actively used as a planning tool.

01 Insight

02 Action

03 Prompts

04 Notes

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Seven sections, each focused on one area of transition planning. Every entry below is a link; the prompt, tracking, and notes pages are designed to be written in and revisited monthly.

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SECTION ONE

Shift Your Mindset

Your Starting Point

You're more than a year out from separation, and that might feel like plenty of time or something you don't need to think about yet; but here's the reality most people don't realize until it's too late:

The decisions you make in this phase directly impact how much compensation you receive from the VA, how smooth (or chaotic) your transition feels, how quickly you stabilize financially after separation, and how much control you actually have over your next chapter.

Most service members don't intentionally plan their exit.

They react to it, they wait for TAP, they wait until they have orders – and they wait until the pressure is unavoidable. By then, they're rushing decisions that have long-term consequences.

This guide exists to combat that experience.

This is where you start thinking strategically about your benefits, documenting what the military has actually cost your body and mind, and building a transition plan that gives you control and options.

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How to Use This Guide

This is not a passive read. If you skim this and move on, nothing changes.

This guide is designed to be revisited monthly, written in, and actively used as a planning tool. You'll see four types of pages throughout:

01

Insight Pages

These explain what's actually happening behind the scenes, especially with VA claims and transition planning.

02

Action Checklists

Clear, practical steps you can take immediately.

03

Prompt Pages

Questions designed to get you out of autopilot and thinking intentionally.

04

Notes Pages

Because your situation is unique and you need a place to track it.

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Revisit this guide monthly. Write in it. Use it as a planning tool.

The Truth About Separation

No one is managing your transition for you; and not because they don't care, but because the system isn't built that way. Your command is focused on mission readiness; TAP is built to check boxes, not build individualized plans; and the VA evaluates claims, but doesn't help you build them.

That leaves you with a gap

And how you handle that gap determines your outcome. Some people assume things will work out, avoiding thinking about it, and rely on incomplete information.

Others, however:

Document early

Ask better questions

Make decisions with intention

And those are the people who leave with stronger claims, better financial positioning, and less stress.

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Reframe: You're Building a Case

Your VA claim is not just paperwork, it is a legal and medical argument that says: "My current condition is connected to my military service."

That argument needs evidence, and that evidence comes from:

Medical documentation

Consistent reporting of symptoms

A clear timeline

Here's the part that most people miss: You don't build that case at 90 days out. You build it now.

TAKE YOUR TIME WITH THESE QUESTIONS:

01

Why am I getting out?

(Be honest – this shapes everything that follows.)

02

What am I hoping improves in my life after separation?

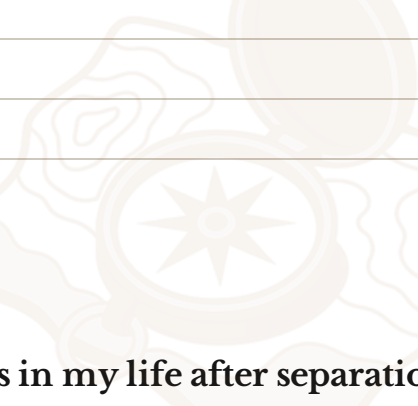
03

What am I afraid might get worse?

04

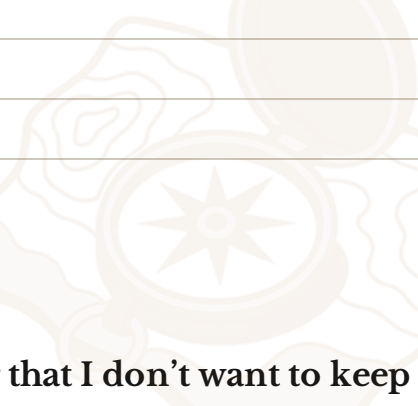
What have I been tolerating that I don't want to keep tolerating?

The next two pages give you room to answer each one.



oves in my life after separation?

What am I hoping improves in my life after separation?



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What have I been tolerating that I don't want to keep tolerating?

SECTION TWO

Your VA Claim Starts Now

The Biggest Mistake (and the Most Common!)

“I’ll deal with VA stuff later” is a common attitude and mindset but it leads to:

Missing documentation

Weak claims

Delayed benefits

Outright denials

The VA operates on evidence, not intention

They do not assume that your symptoms are service-connected, that your experience was difficult, nor that your condition developed during your time serving.

You have to be able to show it, and the burden of proof is firmly on you.

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What the VA Actually Needs

To approve a claim, the VA generally looks for three main things:

01

A Current Diagnosis

You need a documented condition.

02

An In-Service Event or Exposure

Something during your service that could have caused or contributed to it.

03

A Nexus (Connection)

A link between the two.

This is where most claims fall apart because without documentation over time, that connection becomes harder to prove.

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“Invisible” Conditions

Not all conditions are obvious. Some develop gradually, some are normalized in military culture, and some are actively minimized – but they still count.

Common examples include:

Chronic sleep disruption

Anxiety and hypervigilance

Irritability or emotional detachment

Recurring headaches

Gastrointestinal issues

Chronic joint or back pain

If it affects your daily life, it matters; even if you’ve learned to function through it.

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Action Checklist

Start now:

- ☐ Schedule routine medical appointments
- ☐ Mention symptoms—even if they feel minor
- ☐ Be specific (“3x a week headaches,” not “sometimes headaches”)
- ☐ Follow up on ongoing issues
- ☐ Request copies of visit summaries
- ☐ Track your own symptoms outside of appointments

Consistency builds credibility and being organized will help you feel more confident about your VA claim.

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Start Thinking Ahead

As you're taking tangible steps to prepare for separation, you should also begin preparing your mind and the lens through which you will view your time serving once you are out.

Think beyond what's obvious, and ask yourself deeper questions like:

01

What have I gotten used to that isn't actually normal?

02

What do I avoid doing because of how I feel physically or mentally?

03

What has changed about me since I joined?

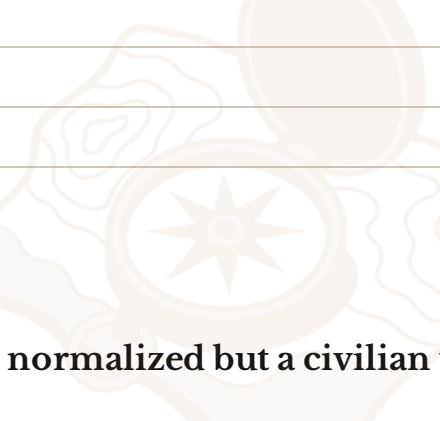
04

What is something that I've normalized but a civilian would consider to be a problem?

The next two pages give you room to answer each one.

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FIRST THOUGHTS:



've normalized but a civilian wo

SECTION THREE

Records

The Records Reality

Many service members assume: “The military has all my records.” And that may be true, but access is not guaranteed, and timelines can work against you.

You should aim to leave service with:

Copies of your medical records

Documentation of key events

Personal records of your symptoms

Once you’re out, retrieving missing information becomes significantly harder.

What to Gather — start building your own file:

- ☐ Medical records (full history)
- ☐ Behavioral health notes (if applicable)
- ☐ Deployment records
- ☐ Injury documentation
- ☐ Profiles / limitations
- ☐ Any off-base medical care records

Organize them in one place; digital and backed up.

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SECTION FOUR

Income Strategy

Think Beyond a Job

Most people think: “I just need to get hired,” but your financial stability may come from a combination of employment income, VA disability compensation, and education benefits (GI Bill housing allowance). Planning these together gives you flexibility.

Reality Check

Most service members:

- Underestimate how long it takes to secure a job
- Overestimate how quickly income stabilizes
- Don’t realize how many resources exist until it’s too late to use them fully

Starting early gives you options, and waiting limits them.

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Job & Financial Resources to Start Exploring Now

CAREER & EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES

SkillBridge

Allows you to intern with civilian companies during your last 180 days of service.

TIP *Many service members wait too long to apply so start researching programs early so you're not scrambling for approval.*

Hiring Our Heroes

Offers fellowships, hiring events, and corporate connections specifically for transitioning service members.

TIP *Their Corporate Fellowship Program can be a direct bridge to full-time employment.*

USAJOBS

Federal employment portal.

TIP *The hiring process is slow so start early and expect delays.*

EDUCATION & TRAINING

GI Bill

Covers tuition + provides a housing allowance.

STRATEGY *This can act as a temporary income stream while you reposition your career.*

Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E)

Helps with career training, education, and job placement, especially if you have service-connected conditions.

TIP *Many veterans overlook this and default to the GI Bill.*

Job & Financial Resources to Start Exploring Now

FINANCIAL READINESS & PLANNING

Military OneSource

Offers free financial counseling, transition planning, and resources.

TIP *Use this while you still have access —it's significantly easier than navigating things after separation.*

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

Required, but often underutilized.

REALITY *Take what's useful, but don't rely on it as your full plan.*

RESOURCES I WANT TO LOOK INTO, AND BY WHEN:

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Strategy Prompts

How much financial pressure will I have right after separation? Where does it come from?



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SECTION FIVE

Identity Shift

What Actually Changes

When you separate from the military, you're not just leaving a job; you're stepping out of a system that has shaped how your life functions, often for years. And whether you loved it, tolerated it, or are counting down the days, that shift is bigger than most people anticipate.

WHAT YOU'RE ACTUALLY LOSING

Structure

Your days are no longer pre-defined – no formations, no set expectations, no externally enforced schedule. At first, that can feel like freedom, but without structure, it's also easy to feel ungrounded or directionless.

Clarity of Role

In the military, your role is clear. You know what's expected of you, how success is measured, and where you stand. In civilian life, that clarity disappears. You may find yourself asking: "What am I supposed to be doing right now? Am I on track, or falling behind?"

Built-In Purpose

Even on the hardest days, there's a sense of mission. There's a reason you show up. When you separate, that external sense of purpose doesn't automatically transfer, and figuring out what replaces it can take time.

Automatic Community

In the military, connection is built into the environment: shared experiences, shared language, shared expectations. After separation, that disappears almost overnight and building new community takes intention.

NOTES:

What That Feels Like (For Most People)

Even if you're excited to leave, you may experience:

Restlessness without knowing why

Difficulty focusing or staying consistent

A sense of "floating" without direction

Frustration that things don't feel as clear or structured

Moments of questioning your decision, even if it was the right one

The Gap No One Talks About

There's a period after separation where your old identity no longer fits, but your new identity isn't fully built yet. That in-between space can feel uncomfortable, and most people aren't prepared for it.

Why This Matters (While You're Still 12+ Months Out)

You have time to prepare for this, whereas most people don't – and that means you can start building routines outside of military structure, explore what purpose looks like for you beyond service, and begin identifying what kind of community you want to be part of.

Instead of losing everything at once, you can start creating what comes next – right now.

A Better Way to Think About It

You're not just "getting out." You're rebuilding:

How your time is structured

How you define success

What gives your life meaning

Who you surround yourself with

That doesn't happen overnight, but starting early makes it a lot less disorienting when the shift happens.

Identity Reflection

What parts of military life did I actually value?



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Identity Reflection

What parts of military life do I want to avoid carrying forward?



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Identity Reflection

What does “success” look like outside the military?



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SECTION SIX

Relationships

The Impact

Separation doesn't just affect you, but also your partner, and your daily dynamics – and most of the time, expectations are unspoken. That's where problems start.

What Actually Changes (Even If No One Talks About It)

When you leave the military, your life structure shifts almost overnight. Things that were once fixed become fluid:

Your schedule

Your income

Your sense of purpose

Your stress levels

Your availability at home

For many service members, this means going from:

- Highly structured → completely self-managed
- Constantly needed → figuring out where you fit
- Mission-driven → self-directed

That shift doesn't just happen internally, it shows up in your relationships.

For Your Partner

Your partner has likely adapted to military life in ways you may not fully see. They may be used to handling things independently, managing the household in your absence, and operating within a certain routine.

When you separate, that dynamic changes, and even positive changes (like being home more) can create friction if expectations aren't aligned.

COMMON (UNSPOKEN) TENSIONS:

"Why does everything feel off now?"

"I thought this would be easier."

"We never talked about what this would actually look like."

The Impact

For Your Family

Family members may have their own expectations about your transition:

More availability

More involvement

More stability

But if you're navigating job uncertainty, identity shifts, or financial pressure then you may not have the capacity they're expecting. That mismatch can lead to frustration on both sides.

For Your Daily Life

This is where the impact becomes very real. Your day-to-day will likely shift from scheduled and externally driven to unstructured and self-directed – and that sounds freeing, but for many people, it's disorienting. Without a plan, it can look like:

Inconsistent routines

Loss of momentum

Increased stress or restlessness

Feeling “off” without knowing why

What No One Prepares You For

You can be completely ready to leave the military and still feel unsettled once you do. That doesn't mean you made the wrong decision.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW (12+ MONTHS OUT)

You have time to:

Start conversations early

Set realistic expectations

Reduce unnecessary friction later

A Better Approach

Most people wait until they're already stressed to talk about these things, and that's when conversations turn reactive instead of productive. Start small, but start now. Instead of trying to figure everything out, focus on:

Getting aligned on the big picture

Understanding each other's expectations

Identifying potential pressure points early

The goal isn't perfection, it's fewer surprises.

Conversation Prompts

What are we expecting financially after separation?



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Conversation Prompts

What lifestyle changes are coming?



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Conversation Prompts

What support do we need from each other?



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SECTION SEVEN

Your Timeline

Strategic Timeline

12–10

months out

- Begin documentation
- Identify patterns
- Start collecting records

10–8

months out

- Continue consistent medical visits
- Research post-service options

8–6

months out

- Strengthen documentation
- Begin thinking about claim structure

MY DATES AND MILESTONES:



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Final Thoughts & Next Steps

You're ahead of the curve just by working through this guide – by thinking about your transition this early – and you're already doing what most service members don't. And that matters because the difference between a stressful, reactive transition and a steady, intentional one usually comes down to one thing: Preparation.

What You've Started Here

You've begun to:

- Shift out of autopilot and think intentionally about your future
- Understand how VA claims actually work (and why timing matters)
- Recognize what needs to be documented now—not later
- Think beyond “just getting a job” and toward building stability
- Start preparing for the personal side of transition—not just the logistics

That's the foundation.

What Comes Next

You don't need to have everything figured out today, but you do need to keep moving forward. Over the next several months, focus on:

- Continuing to document your health and symptoms
- Staying consistent with medical visits
- Organizing your records
- Refining your transition plan as your timeline gets closer

Small, consistent actions now will make a significant difference later.

NEXT STEPS

When It Comes to Your VA Claim

This is where many service members feel uncertain, and where mistakes are most common. If you're thinking "I'm not sure if this counts," "I don't know if I have enough documentation," or "I don't want to mess this up" — you're not alone, and you don't have to figure it out by yourself.

At Essential Veteran Services, we work with service members and veterans who want to approach their claims process with clarity. If you're preparing for separation and want a clearer picture of your situation, we're here to help.

WE FOCUS SPECIFICALLY ON

Mental health nexus evaluations

Understanding how conditions connect to service

Documentation that aligns with what the VA is actually looking for

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EVALUATIONS & NEXUS LETTERS

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