



Essential Veteran Services

EVALUATIONS & NEXUS LETTERS

EVS DIGITAL PRODUCT SERIES • ACTIVE DUTY TRANSITIONING OUT

# The Exit Strategy

## 1 Year from Military Separation

You're about a year out from separation and this is where things start to feel real. This guide is built to make sure you don't drift, because at 12 months out, the goal shifts from awareness to execution.

01 Action Plans

02 Decision Frameworks

03 Claim Strategy

04 Timing

05 Checklists

BY DR. SHEENA GLOVER

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Seven sections, each focused on one area of the execution phase. Every entry below is a link; the prompt and checklist pages are designed to be written in and revisited.

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### CREATED BY ESSENTIAL VETERAN SERVICES

Veteran-led, independent psychological evaluations that document the connection between military service and mental health — clearly, honestly, and in the language the VA expects.

# One Year from the Rest of Your Life

You're about a year out from separation and this is where things start to feel real.

You're no longer "thinking about getting out," you're actively moving toward the transition, whether you feel ready or not.

THIS IS THE PHASE WHERE ONE OF TWO THINGS HAPPENS

01

You start taking intentional action

02

Or you stay in planning mode until time runs out

THIS GUIDE IS BUILT TO MAKE SURE YOU DON'T DRIFT, BECAUSE AT 12 MONTHS OUT, THE GOAL SHIFTS FROM

FROM

Awareness

TO

Execution

FROM

Thinking about options

TO

Committing to direction

FROM

Passive preparation

TO

Strategic action

NOTES:

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# How to Use This Guide

This is your execution phase and everything in here is designed to help you narrow your focus, make decisions, and take consistent action. You'll see:



Action plans



Decision  
frameworks



Claim  
strategy  
guidance



Real-world  
timing  
considerations



Structured  
checklists

*This is not the time to keep everything open-ended, it's time to start choosing.*

## NOTES:

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SECTION ONE

# The Clock Starts Now

# The Timeline Reality

At 12 months out, your timeline matters more than your intentions.

## Here's what most people underestimate:

The VA process takes time

Job searches take longer than expected

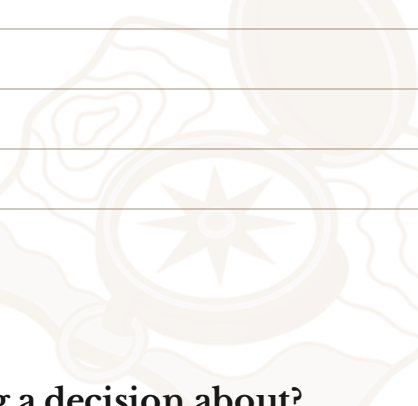
SkillBridge approvals are not instant

Medical documentation still needs to build consistency

*If you wait until 6 months out to get serious, you will feel rushed.*

## NOTES:

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making a decision about?



SECTION TWO

# Your VA Claim Gets Serious

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# This Is Your Documentation Window

You are now in the most important phase for your VA claim because this is the window where your medical record starts telling a story; and that story is what the VA will rely on when they decide:

Whether your condition is service-connected

How severe it is

And how it impacts your life

## What You're Building (Whether You Realize It or Not)

Every appointment, every note, every follow-up creates a timeline that answers:

When did this start?

How often does it happen?

How severe is it?

Has it gotten worse over time?

How does it affect your ability to function?

IF THAT TIMELINE IS CLEAR AND CONSISTENT

*Your claim is stronger.*

IF IT'S SCATTERED OR INCOMPLETE

*Your claim is harder to prove.*

### NOTES:

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# This Is Your Documentation Window

## Why Timing Matters So Much

At 12 months out, you still have time to:

- Establish patterns (not just one-time complaints)
- Show progression (how symptoms have changed)
- Correct gaps in your records
- And ensure your conditions are actually documented properly

If you wait too long, you lose the ability to build that consistency, and consistency is what makes your claim credible.

## The Reality Most People Don't Hear

The VA does not assume your experience and that means your documentation needs to reflect:

- What you're experiencing
- How often it's happening
- And how it impacts your daily life

### NOTES:

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# What Strong Documentation Looks Like

## 01

### Consistent

You've brought up the issue multiple times, not just once.

**EXAMPLE** *Reports headaches 3–4x per week over the past several months.*

## 02

### Specific

You describe:

Frequency

Severity

Duration

Impact

**EXAMPLE** *Sleep disrupted 4–5 nights per week, waking multiple times, affecting focus during duty hours*

## 03

### Connected

There is a clear, logical, and documented timeline that ties symptoms to your service.

*What This Means for You: You are making sure your record reflects reality, clearly and consistently.*

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#### NOTES:

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# What NOT to Do in Appointments

This is where military culture works against you because you've likely been trained to push through, minimize, keep your complaints to yourself, and stay mission-focused – but that mindset does not translate well to the VA system.

## COMMON MISTAKES THAT HURT CLAIMS

### Minimizing Symptoms

"It's not that bad"

"I can deal with it"

→ This can be documented as mild or insignificant

### Speaking in Generalities

"I don't sleep well"

"I get headaches sometimes"

→ This lacks the detail needed for evaluation

### Skipping Follow-Ups

You mention something once, but never return to it

→ The record may reflect that it resolved

### Trying to Be "Easy" for the Provider

Downplaying impact to avoid being a burden

→ Your record reflects less severity than reality

## What to Do Instead

Be clear. Be honest. Be specific. You are not exaggerating, you are documenting.

### A BETTER WAY TO COMMUNICATE SYMPTOMS

#### INSTEAD OF

*"I've been stressed"*

#### SAY

*I've been experiencing anxiety most days, difficulty sleeping, and trouble concentrating during work tasks for the past 2–3 months.*

# Action Checklist

## Medical & Documentation Actions

- ☐ Schedule follow-up appointments for anything ongoing
- ☐ Revisit previously mentioned conditions (especially if they've worsened)
- ☐ Ask providers to clarify or correct notes if something feels inaccurate
- ☐ Request copies of visit summaries and review them

## Personal Tracking Actions

- ☐ Track symptoms weekly (frequency, severity, triggers)
- ☐ Note how symptoms affect: sleep, work performance, relationships, daily functioning
- ☐ Keep a personal log (this helps you communicate clearly in appointments)

## Strategic Actions

- ☐ Start identifying how your conditions connect to service
- ☐ Pay attention to patterns (onset, progression, triggers)
- ☐ Be consistent, even when symptoms fluctuate

### NOTES:

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# Reflections

**What conditions have I mentioned once, but never followed up on? Why didn't I go back? Did they actually improve?**



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# Reflections

**What symptoms have gotten worse over time? How has that progression shown up in my life?**



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# Reflections

**What impact are these issues having on my daily functioning?**



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# Reflections

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**What is something I've normalized but would be considered a problem by someone outside the military?**



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SECTION THREE

# SkillBridge & Career Direction

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# This Is Decision Time

At 12 months out, staying in “open-ended exploration” becomes a liability because every month that you delay clarity:

Reduces your available options

Compresses your timeline

And increases pressure later

## What This Phase Requires

You don't need a perfect plan but you do need direction. That means narrowing down to:

2-3 realistic paths

Aligned with your interests, strengths, and goals

## Common Trap

*I'm keeping my options open.*

→ Translation: avoiding committing to anything

*Options are useful early, and direction is required now.*

### NOTES:

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# SkillBridge Strategy

SkillBridge can be one of the most valuable transition tools available but most service members underutilize it, or miss it entirely.

## What Makes SkillBridge Powerful

- Real-world civilian experience
- Potential direct pipeline to employment
- Ability to test a career path before committing

## What Makes It Hard

- Requires command approval
- Timelines vary
- Not all programs are equal quality
- Competitive in some industries

## Smart Strategy

Start early:

- Research programs aligned with your target roles
- Understand your command's approval process
- Talk to others who have completed SkillBridge

### KEY QUESTION

*“If I don’t use SkillBridge, what am I replacing it with?”*

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### NOTES:

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# Career Direction Prompts

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**What kind of work do I NOT want to do anymore?**

→ Be specific (environment, hours, stress level, type of work)



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# Career Direction Prompts

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## What environment do I perform best in?

→ Structured vs flexible, team vs independent, high-pressure vs steady



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# Career Direction Prompts

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**What skills do I actually want to use moving forward?**

→ Not just what you can do, but what you want to keep doing



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# Career Direction Prompts

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## What kind of life am I trying to build?

→ Your career should support this, not compete with it



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# Action Checklist

## Career Direction

- ☐ Identify 2–3 potential career paths
- ☐ Research roles, salaries, and growth potential
- ☐ Explore SkillBridge programs in those areas
- ☐ Begin translating your experience into civilian language

## Resume & Networking

- ☐ Draft a civilian resume (it will evolve, just start)
- ☐ Identify people in roles you're interested in
- ☐ Have 2–3 informal conversations (no pressure, just learning)

### EXECUTION MINDSET

*Clarity comes from action, not overthinking.*

#### NOTES:

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SECTION FOUR

# Your Financial Strategy

# Reality Check: Income Gaps

Even with a plan, income doesn't always line up perfectly.

## Common scenarios

- Job start dates are delayed
- Hiring processes take longer than expected
- Benefits take time to activate

## What This Feels Like Without Preparation

- Financial stress
- Rushed decisions
- Accepting less-than-ideal opportunities

## What Preparation Creates

- Flexibility
- Decision-making power
- Reduced pressure

### NOTES:

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# What to Start Planning Now

01

## Savings Buffer

Aim for:

3–6 months of essential expense

02

## Expenses

Know your:

Fixed costs

Variable costs

Lifestyle expectations

03

## Income Sources

Potential sources include:

Employment

VA compensation

GI Bill housing allowance

04

## Strategy Mindset

Think in combinations, not single solutions.

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### NOTES:

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# Finance Prompts

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**What is my minimum monthly financial requirement?**

→ Strip this down to essentials



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# Finance Prompts

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**How long could I sustain myself without income? What does that look like?**

→ Be honest, this shapes urgency



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# Finance Prompts

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**What would reduce financial pressure the most and how?**

→ Savings? Job? VA claim? Education?



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SECTION FIVE

# Your Identity & Your Routine

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# Structure Doesn't Rebuild Itself

Structure does not magically rebuild itself after separation and if you don't create new habits intentionally, you will feel it.

## Most people notice:

Inconsistent energy

Lack of direction

Difficulty starting or finishing tasks

A low-grade sense of "what am I doing with my day?"

*The fix isn't motivation, it's structure – and the best time to build that structure is before you need it.*

## NOTES:

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# Build a Weekly Structure (Not Just a Daily To-Do List)

You're not trying to micromanage every hour, you're creating a baseline rhythm upon which your life can run. Start with:

01

## Consistent wake and sleep times

This stabilizes everything else (energy, focus, mood)

02

## Dedicated work blocks

Even if you're not working yet, treat something like work (job search, SkillBridge prep, documentation, etc.)

03

## Movement

This replaces built-in physical activity from military life

04

## Downtime

If you don't plan it, it turns into unintentional burnout or endless scrolling

05

## Social time

Community no longer happens automatically, you have to build it in

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### What This Actually Looks Like (Example)

INSTEAD OF

*"I'll just figure it out each day"*

TRY

Mornings = focused work / productive time

Afternoons = appointments, errands, admin

Evenings = recovery, social, or personal time

It doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be repeatable.

# Build a Weekly Structure (Not Just a Daily To-Do List)

Create Accountability (Because Willpower Is Not a Strategy). When everything becomes self-directed, it's easy to drift, but accountability gives your structure weight.

## Personal Goals

Define 2–3 priorities at a time and keep them specific and measurable.

- Career-related
- Health-related
- Transition-related

## Tracking Systems

This can be simple, what matters is visibility:

- A weekly checklist
- A notes app
- A planner

## External Accountability (If Helpful)

This could look like:

- A friend checking in
- A mentor
- A transition group
- Even informal conversations where you share your goals

MY 2–3 PRIORITIES RIGHT NOW:

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# Build a Weekly Structure (Not Just a Daily To-Do List)

Test Before You Separate (This Is the Part Most People Skip).

## Try

- Different routines
- Different productivity styles
- Different ways of structuring your day

Pay attention to: what helps you stay consistent, what drains you, and what feels sustainable

## Adjust Without Overcorrecting

Not everything will work the first time and you should expect to refine your systems. Small adjustments:

- Shifting your work blocks
- Changing your environment
- Adjusting expectations

## Reality Check

The goal is not to recreate military structure but rather a version of structure that:

- Supports your life
- Gives you direction
- And actually works for you long-term

WHAT I'M TESTING THIS MONTH:

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SECTION SIX

# Relationships

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# Now Is the Time to Talk

Avoiding these conversations now doesn't eliminate stress later – it just delays it, and usually, it shows up at the worst possible time:

When you're already overwhelmed

When finances are shifting

When routines are changing

And when neither of you has the bandwidth for misalignment

## Why These Conversations Matter More Than You Think

Separation isn't just a logistical transition, it's a relational one and even if your relationship is strong, this phase introduces:

Uncertainty

Shifting roles

New expectations

And, often, unspoken assumptions

*And assumptions are where things break down.*

### NOTES:

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# What to Talk About (And What That Actually Means)

## Finances

Talk about:

- Expected income (and timing of that income)
- Savings and financial buffers
- Spending expectations post-separation
- What happens if things take longer than planned

## Expectations

Talk about:

- What daily life will look like
- How your time will be spent
- What each of you expects from the other during this transition

## Lifestyle Changes

Talk about:

- Schedule changes
- Location (if moving)
- Social life and community
- Work-life balance expectations

## Roles and Responsibilities

Talk about:

- Who is handling what (finances, household, planning, etc.)
- How responsibilities may shift after separation
- What feels fair vs assumed

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## How to Approach These Conversations

You don't need to solve everything in one sitting. Start with:

One topic at a time

Low-pressure conversations

Curiosity instead of defensiveness

# A Simple Way to Start

## INSTEAD OF

*“We need to figure everything out”*

## TRY

*I’ve been thinking about what this transition might actually look like for us, can we talk through a few things?*

### Why This Matters Now (Not Later)

At 12 months out, you still have:

Time to adjust expectations

Space to have calm conversations

And the ability to make changes before pressure builds

### Bottom Line

Alignment reduces stress where assumptions create stress; and the earlier you replace assumptions with clarity, the smoother this transition will feel for all of you.

## NOTES:

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# Conversation Prompts

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What expectations have we not discussed yet?



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# Conversation Prompts

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Where could friction show up later?



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# Conversation Prompts

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**What does support actually look like during this transition?**



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SECTION SEVEN

# Execution



# Strategic Timeline

12–9

months out

- Consistent documentation
- Career direction decisions
- SkillBridge research

9–6

months out

- Applications
- Deeper documentation
- Financial preparation

KEY FOCUS

*Momentum, not perfection.*

MY DATES AND MILESTONES:

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## NEXT STEPS

# Final Thoughts & Next Steps

You're no longer early. You're in the phase where your actions directly shape your outcome, and the difference between a smooth transition and a stressful one is what you do next.

At Essential Veteran Services, we help service members approach their claims process with clarity, not guesswork.

## IF YOU'RE UNSURE

What qualifies

How strong your documentation is

Or how to move forward

*You don't have to figure it out alone.*

01 Book a consultation

02 Get a clear understanding of your situation

03 Move forward with confidence

Because at this stage, waiting is the only move that works against you.

## CONNECT WITH US TODAY



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