



Umair Majid<sup>1</sup>, Tom Hoppe<sup>1</sup>, Phoebe Priest<sup>1</sup>, Leane Lacroix<sup>1</sup>, Nicholas Held<sup>2,3</sup>, David Pedlar<sup>2</sup>, Kerry Kuluski<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation, University of Toronto, Canada <sup>2</sup>Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada <sup>4</sup>Institute for Better Health, Trillium Health Partners, Mississauga, Canada

# Tracing Chronic Pain, Reshaping Identity: Military Service and the Veteran Experience

## Introduction and Purpose

This study used transcripts from interviews with Canadian Veterans to explore how Veterans experience identity across three distinct pain trajectories. This revealed how injury and pain challenge Veteran's understanding of strength, resilience, and purpose.

## Methods

**20** Canadian  
Veterans  
interviewed

A narrative inquiry approach was used to understand how chronic pain influences identity. Life stages were categorized into (1) military service, (2) transition to civilian life, and (3) civilian life. Two sets of interviews were conducted from August 2024 to March 2025.

**3** Life Stages

## Findings

Military identity is like a tight braided rope, forged through discipline, unity, and a profound sense of purpose. Military-associated chronic pain and injury act as strain on this rope, pulling on the strands until the structure can no longer hold, and identity is completely frayed. This can occur with different experiences with injury, whether they are abrupt or gradual.

### Traumatic injury that caused immediate discharge from the military

Veterans who were suddenly released due to traumatic injuries had their military identity abruptly and acutely ended. This left them feeling disoriented, abandoned, and unprepared for civilian life. **Their rope was cut without warning, leaving them to gather the unravelling strands alone**

*"There was no real transition leaving the military to becoming a civilian. I was pretty much left, left to figure it out myself"*

### Injury that did not cause immediate discharge

Veterans who remained in service whilst in pain described a slow-burning identity conflict. Ongoing service hid a deepening conflict between body, military role, and self. **Their rope remained intact, but on the inside, it was fraying under pressure**

*"Suffering from severe, chronic pain, fatigue and exhaustion every day, you know. And I did all those things, and nobody would have known that there was anything wrong with me, you know, because I wouldn't let them, I wouldn't let them"*

### Regular 'wear and tear' but no known traumatic injury or accident

Veterans with gradual onset pain described an insidious erosion of identity, as their pain was left unvalidated by others, and themselves. **Their rope didn't break, but rather thinned and frayed slowly, until there was nothing left to grip**

*"It was like I was reinjuring myself every, you know, not every time, but periodically, just reinjuring the neck and back. And it just never, never really improved"*

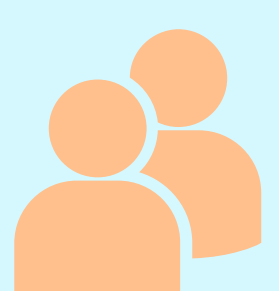
## Recommendations



**Veteran Centred Pain Services**



**Early Pain Detection and Education**



**Shift in Military Culture to Improve Willingness to Seek out Chronic Pain Services**

## Funding

This project was funded by the Chronic Pain Centre of Excellence for Canadian Veterans.