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STANDING BY THEIR SIDE: THE IMPACT OF ADAPTIVE SPORTS ON VETERANS' FAMILIES AND CLOSE ONES

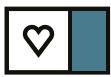
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Come Back Alive Initiatives Centre
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The Analytical Department of the **Come Back Alive Initiatives Centre** was established in May 2018. The **Come Back Alive Initiatives Centre** is a non-governmental organisation dedicated to strengthening Ukraine's defence capabilities. We conduct research in the fields of security and defence, develop effective solutions, and advocate for them throughout the implementation stages in public policies.

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Contents

Introduction	4
Empirical Research Methodology	5
Overview of Sources Related to the Research Topic	9
Key Findings of the Research	14
Findings of the Research	19
The Impact of Adaptive Sports on the Recovery of Veterans: the View of Family Members and Close Ones	26
Relationship Dynamics Under the Influence of Adaptive Sports	33
What Are the Challenges in Adaptive Sports: the Opinion of Veterans' Families and Close Ones	40

Introduction

In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the recovery of veterans has become increasingly relevant. One of the most effective tools for helping service members return to active life is adaptive sports, which have already proven their effectiveness in the physical, psychological, and social recovery of veterans. In a previous research by the Come Back Alive Initiatives Centre "Joy of Movement," Yaroslava Bratus explored how adaptive sports impact the recovery of veterans¹. In this research, we attempt to examine the recovery process and the role of adaptive sports through the eyes of veterans' families and loved ones.

A wound, injury, or illness of a veteran significantly affects not only their physical and psycho-emotional state but also their close circle. At the same time, the role of families and loved ones in the recovery process often goes unnoticed. In many approaches to veteran rehabilitation, families and loved ones are viewed primarily as a source of support for the veteran, rather than as individuals with their own needs, experiences, and challenges. Their participation in the process is often reduced to the role of "support persons" whose emotional, physical or organisational support is intended to contribute to the rehabilitation success, while their own experiences remain overlooked. Such an approach fails to take into account that families also experience significant changes related to the injury or illness of their loved ones and needs to be recognised as active participants with their own paths of adaptation and recovery. In contrast, this research aims to focus on the experiences of families and loved ones in the recovery process of veterans following injuries/wounds, or illnesses.

The research of how veterans' participation in adaptive sports influences their families and loved ones is an important next step in exploring this phenomenon. While earlier research focused on the role of adaptive sports in the physical and psychological rehabilitation of the veterans themselves, it is now important to understand how these changes affect those closest to them. After all, it is often this close circle that plays a key role in the rehabilitation of veterans.

Previous research has shown that the families and loved ones of veterans are often key participants in the recovery process, facing their own challenges related to stress, psychological strain, and the need to support their loved ones. A veteran's participation in adaptive sports can alter the dynamics of family relationships, influence the family's level of emotional well-being, and shape new patterns of communication and support.

The findings of such research will contribute to a deeper understanding of whether adaptive sports promote the strengthening of social bonds within the family, reduce tension, and improve the overall well-being of the veteran's family. This also opens up opportunities for the development of support programmes that takes into consideration the needs not only of the servicemembers themselves but also of their wider circles.

¹ Research titled "The Joy of Movement: How Adaptive Sports Help Veterans Recover," Come Back Alive Initiatives Centre, 2024 <https://cbacenter.ngo/page/radist-ruxu-iak-adaptivnii-sport-dopomagaje-veteranam-ta-veterankam-vidnovitisia>

A photograph of an older couple smiling. The woman, on the left, has short brown hair and is wearing a yellow sleeveless top with a floral pattern, a necklace, and a ring. The man, on the right, is bald with a mustache and is wearing a blue t-shirt with a logo. They are holding a white, orange, and blue beach ball. The background is blurred, showing other people and what might be a beach or pool area.

Empirical Research Methodology



The research aims to outline the main trends and identify promising directions for further studies on the impact of adaptive sports on veterans' families and loved ones. This research opens up a broad scope for further work—not only concerning how the family contributes to the recovery of veterans through adaptive sports, but also regarding how the sports themselves influence family relationships, what changes occur within the family, which risk factors may arise, and so forth. This is a pilot, descriptive research. We did not aim to identify specific trends in this area or find correlations. In this project, we are trying to find answers to the following questions:

- Does the participation of veterans in adaptive sports contribute to strengthening family relationships?
- What challenges did families and loved ones encounter when encouraging veterans to participate in adaptive sports?
- How do families and loved ones perceive the impact of adaptive sports on the recovery of veterans?

To obtain more illustrative findings, several groups of respondents were selected, differing in their degree of kinship with the veteran and in the extent of the veteran's participation in adaptive sports.

Research respondents:

- Wives and partners of veterans who sustained injuries, wounds, and/or illnesses as a result of combat operations and have commenced practising adaptive sports;
- Wives and partners of veterans who sustained injuries, wounds, and/or illnesses as a result of combat operations commenced participating in adaptive sports and became members of Ukrainian national teams competing in veteran events (Air Force 2024, Invictus Games);
- Close friends of veterans who supported them throughout the recovery process following injury, wounds, and/or illness, and observed the impact of adaptive sports on this process.

The key research objective is to determine how veterans' participation in adaptive sports influences their families and loved ones.

Main objectives:

1. To understand how the relationships between the family/loved ones and the veteran have changed following involvement in the recovery process through adaptive sports.
2. To determine the role that the family and loved ones believe sports play in the recovery of the veteran.
3. To distinguish the positive and negative factors of adaptive sports' impact on the lives of veterans as perceived by their families and loved ones.

4. To assess the involvement of the families and loved ones in veterans' participation in adaptive sports.
5. To identify areas for improvement: what more can be done to engage as many veterans as possible in adaptive sports.

Data collection methods

For the preparation of this report, a **literature review** was conducted which primarily helped to better understand the role of family members, partners, and loved ones in the recovery of veterans following injuries, wounds, and illnesses. This review provided a more comprehensive perspective on the family's role and informed the development of topics for the interview guide.

Primary data collection was carried out using the semi-structured interview method. Specifically, an interview guide with thematic sections related to veterans' recovery through sports and the role of family members and close friends in this process was created for conversations with respondents. Additionally, respondents were given the opportunity to share their thoughts on other issues not covered in the guide.

Research limitations

It should be noted that this research is exploratory in nature. All conclusions presented in the report are primarily descriptive and highlight the significance of family and loved ones in the recovery process of veterans, as well as their attitudes towards adaptive sports. We cannot extend these findings to all similar families, as this would require a quantitative study with a representative sample.

At this stage of the research, we were unable to involve the mothers and fathers of veterans, so their experiences and perspectives are not represented in the report. At the same time, this particular group of relatives represents an important part of the overall family context, and their involvement in the future will allow for a deeper understanding of the impact of adaptive sports on the family as a whole.

We were unable to recruit respondents with experience of negative impacts from adaptive sports, although we are well aware that such cases do exist. This topic was partially raised in the respondents' narratives, where they conveyed the thoughts and observations of their acquaintances. Evaluating both positive and negative experiences is extremely important, as it helps to form a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, identify potential risks and challenges, and develop well-founded recommendations for addressing them. In particular, resistance or cautious attitudes from family can be one of the factors hindering veterans' involvement in adaptive sports.

Within the scope of this research, we focused exclusively on the experiences of the families of those veterans who are already involved in adaptive sports. At the same time, we did not cover the experiences of those who, for various reasons, do not participate in sports or who previously engaged but later discontinued their involvement in sports activities. This area warrants further investigation, as it can offer a deeper understanding of the barriers, challenges, and motivational factors associated with adaptive sports.

The research does not include husbands and male partners of female veterans who participate in adaptive sports following injury, wounding, or illness. Nevertheless, to maintain a gender-neutral perspective, the experiences of men should also be considered.

Ethical aspects of research

All information collected during the research was provided voluntarily by respondents. All participants in the research were informed that the interviews would be recorded. Before the interview, all respondents were assured that they could decline to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. The text of this report contains no identifying participant data, and quotes are presented in a manner that prevents respondent from being recognised based on any characteristics.



Overview of Sources Related to the Research Topic



In Ukraine, there has been almost no research on the impact of family on the rehabilitation process of veterans through adaptive sports. In the global context, the number of similar research studies is also limited, and this topic remains understudied. However, family involvement in the rehabilitation of veterans in general, without focusing specifically on sports, is a fairly common area of research. This issue has attracted the attention of specialists in various fields and is discussed in scientific works on psychology, social work, medicine, rehabilitation, sociology, etc.

This demonstrates the relevance of the chosen direction and the need for further research into the role of the family in the context of adaptive sports as one of the tools for recovery. This perspective enables a better understanding of how the family environment can either support or hinder the recovery process, and what conditions are necessary for sports to become a resource not only for the veteran but also for his/her close ones.

The research "*Mental Health Therapy for Veterans with PTSD as a Family Affair: A Qualitative Inquiry into How Family Support and Social Norms Influence Veteran Engagement in Care*"² aims to analyse how family support and prevailing social norms influence the engagement of veterans with PTSD in therapy. The authors conducted interviews with both veterans who engaged in therapy and members of their families. The key finding is that the family plays a critical role in the veteran's decision to seek psychological help or to avoid it. In many cases, it is partners, wives, or other loved ones who act as catalysts for seeking professional help, while simultaneously providing emotional support throughout the process. At the same time, if the family does not understand the symptoms of PTSD or perceives seeking help as a sign of "weakness," this can demotivate the veteran and lead them to refuse treatment. Veterans who had trusting relationships with their family and received support and understanding from their close ones found engagement in therapy easier. In such cases, the family helped overcome internal barriers, provided meaning to the treatment process, and acted as a partner in long-term recovery.

This research is illustrative in the context of our topic, as it emphasises that the **family is not merely a background to the recovery process but a full-fledged participant in it**. It also sheds light on an important dynamic that may be seen in the context of adaptive sports: family support can both facilitate and hinder the veteran's participation in recovery activities. Studying these effects is an important direction for further research and the development of support programs.

² Shepherd-Banigan, M., Shapiro, A., Sheahan, K. L., Ackland, P. E., Meis, L. A., Thompson-Hollands, J., Edelman, D., Calhoun, P. S., Weidenbacher, H., & Van Houtven, C. H. (2023). Mental health therapy for veterans with PTSD as a family affair: A qualitative inquiry into how family support and social norms influence veteran engagement in care. *Psychological Services*, 20(4), 839–848. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000742>

The article "*Family-Centered Care for Military and Veteran Families Affected by Combat Injury*"³ examines the concept of family-centered care in the context of supporting military and veteran families affected by combat wounds.

The authors emphasise that combat injury affects not only the veteran's physical and psychological condition but also profoundly alters family dynamics, including roles, responsibilities, emotional climate, and functioning.

The central thesis of the research is that effective recovery of a serviceman after wounding is impossible without the active involvement of the family, particularly during the early stages of medical, psychological, and social support. The authors analyse the experience of rehabilitation centres of the US Department of Defence and the Veterans Affairs (VA), where a multidisciplinary model is practically implemented that addresses the needs not only of the injured person but also of his/her relatives. The article emphasises that **wounding is not solely an individual experience but a shared crisis for the entire family, necessitating adaptation and the restructuring of life strategies**. This is particularly evident in partner relationships and relationships with children. Involving the family in treatment and rehabilitation enhances recovery effectiveness, promotes long-term psychological stability, and reduces the risk of secondary trauma among family members. The researchers also emphasise the need for systemic changes, including adapting medical institutions to work with families, providing specialised training for staff, and recognising the emotional needs of relatives as an integral part of the overall treatment system. They propose a clear model of the "family-centered approach," which encompasses mutual support, shared decision-making, respect for the family's experience, and open communication among all parties involved.

This source is essential for understanding how **family support evolves from an informal resource into a structured component of rehabilitation**, directly influencing the effectiveness of the veteran's adaptation to new life circumstances following injury.

The article "*Perspectives of Family and Veterans on Family Programs to Support Reintegration of Returning Veterans With Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*"⁴ analyses the views of both veterans with PTSD and their family members regarding support programs aimed at easing the reintegration process into civilian life. The authors conducted a qualitative analysis of interviews with veterans and their family members to understand how family involvement in support programs—particularly those within the Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare system—is perceived. The research showed that both veterans and their loved ones view the process of adapting to life with PTSD as a shared challenge. The family here is not merely a background but a full-fledged participant in the recovery process. One of the serious barriers to participation in the programs was the stigma attached to seeking psychological help. Some programs are perceived as

³ Cozza, S. J., Holmes, A. K., & Van Ost, S. L. (2013). *Family-Centered Care for Military and Veteran Families Affected by Combat Injury*. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 16(3), 311–321. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-013-0141-3>

⁴ Fischer, E. P., Sherman, M. D., McSweeney, J. C., Pyne, J. M., Owen, R. R., & Dixon, L. B. (2015). Perspectives of family and veterans on family programs to support reintegration of returning veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. *Psychological Services*, 12(3), 187–198. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000033>

superficial and do not take into account the real-life circumstances of families, leading some to avoid participation or distrust such initiatives. Participants in the research emphasised that support programs should be flexible and personalised. They should take into consideration the unique experience of each family, adapt to different formats (for example, online sessions or evening meetings), and be accessible and practical.

The research separately highlighted **the issue of emotional fatigue and burnout among the partners of veterans**. These individuals often experience frustration, guilt, and exhaustion from constant pressure, yet they remain overlooked by the system. This underscores the importance of developing programmes that not only support the veteran through their family but also provide direct support to the family as an independent target group.

This article is an important source in the context of our research, as it provides an opportunity to see real evaluations of existing programmes through the eyes of those who are meant to use them. It emphasises that without the systematic involvement of families and consideration of their real needs, any initiative risks failing—regardless of resources or good intentions.

The article "*Veteran perspectives on family-serving recreation and leisure programs*"⁵ examines the impact of family-centered recreational programmes on the reintegration of veterans into civilian life, with particular attention to the role of the family. The authors conducted 18 interviews with veterans who participated in programmes run by *America's Warrior Partnership*. They sought to understand how such initiatives influence family relationships, communication, and joint adaptation after service. The veterans noted that participating in the programmes helped their families restore connections, reduce tension, and improve communication and emotional interaction. The programs created a space where partners could take a break from their role as "full-time caregivers" and spend quality time together. Some participants emphasised the importance of involving children: through shared activities and psychological support, the children gained a better understanding of their parents' emotional state and adapted more easily to changes within the family. The veterans' loved ones also benefited from communicating with other programme participants: this helped to normalise their own experiences, reduced feelings of isolation and enabled them to follow effective practices. Some programmes helped families to rethink their roles, particularly after a veteran's wounding, and helped to build new ways of interacting.

Therefore, the research emphasises that **involving the family in the rehabilitation of veterans significantly increases the effectiveness of programmes and contributes to more sustainable reintegration**. The authors recommend adapting the programmes to the needs of different families and involving not only veterans but also their loved ones in future research.

⁵ Hicks, N. R., Sharaievskaya, I., Tsykalova, L., Townsend, J., & Miller, B. L. (2025). Veteran perspectives on family-serving recreation and leisure programs. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 11(1), 80–94. <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v11i1.675>

A review of the literature shows that both veterans themselves and their loved ones consider family involvement in recovery to be critically important. At the same time, even in systems with a long history of veteran programmes, such as in the USA, there remain many structural, emotional and communication barriers that complicate the implementation of this participation. Families often remain insufficiently informed about available programmes, are unable to adapt them to their own living conditions, or face mistrust due to the stigma surrounding mental health.

Of particular importance is the conclusion that families should be supported not only as a "supporting link" but as independent participants in the process. Partners, children, and parents of veterans often experience emotional exhaustion, lack of understanding, and feelings of isolation. Therefore, family support must be two-way: on the one hand, helping the family to support the veteran, and on the other, providing systematic assistance to the family itself in maintaining its own psychological and emotional well-being.

These findings are also important for understanding how participation in adaptive sports can influence not only veterans, but also those around them. Taking into consideration the needs of the family, creating accessible formats, normalising family participation in programmes—all of this can increase the effectiveness of rehabilitation measures, strengthen social ties after returning to civilian life, and improve family relationships.



Key Findings of the Research



Difficulties and challenges faced by veterans and their loved ones after wounding, injury or illness

1. The shared recovery process and the involvement of families and loved ones

The recovery of veterans after wounding, injury or illness is a shared process in which families and loved ones play a key role. Not only do they provide emotional and practical support, but they also often take on administrative, domestic and logistical responsibilities, while remaining constantly engaged.

2. State of disorientation in the early stages after wounding

Immediately after a veteran is wounded, their family often finds themselves in a state of deep disorientation. This period is accompanied by shock, a lack of information, and uncertainty about what to do next. Loved ones do not know how to behave, how to provide support, or what steps should be taken next, which causes feelings of confusion and anxiety. Most often, no one is prepared for such an experience, so adaptation begins essentially from scratch, in a state of emotional and informational uncertainty.

3. The difficulty of expressing one's own emotions, with a focus on the needs of veterans.

For the families and loved ones of veterans, it is often difficult to express their own emotions, especially in the period immediately after wounding. They consciously block their own emotional state, focusing solely on the needs of the wounded person. Later, during the recovery stage, attention continues to focus on the veteran, while their own needs remain on the periphery. Such prolonged emotional blocking gradually leads to a loss of contact with one's own feelings and may result in inner exhaustion. In the long term, this condition can lead to burnout, which often goes unnoticed or unrecognised.

4. Deepening of the relationship within a couple

Sharing the experience of being wounded often deepened the relationship within the couple. Support, trust, and care shown during the most difficult moments became the foundation for even greater closeness between the partners.

How do the families and loved ones of veterans perceive the impact of sports?

1. Improvement in emotional state

The families and loved ones of veterans often notice a significant reduction in stress and anxiety levels after they start doing sports. Physical activity helps stabilise the psychological state, brings back that feeling of being in the moment, and provides energy and positive emotions. Families see veterans becoming more open to communication and less alienated, which creates a basis for deepening or restoring trust in relationships.

2. Positive impact on physical health

Adaptive sports activities promote physical recovery after injuries, wounding or illnesses. Respondents noted improvements in mobility, endurance, and overall well-being among veterans. Sports also restore the sense of control over one's own body and gradually shapes a new physicality, where acceptance of changes, confidence, and pride in achievements emerge.

3. Support for socialisation and reduction of isolation

Adaptive sports become a "bridge" for veterans during their return to civilian life. Their loved ones notice that sports help to establish new social connections, communicate with brothers and sisters-in-arms and friends, and meet new people in sports sections. This reduces isolation, forms new habits and structures everyday life. Moreover, sports stimulate the emergence of goals to strive for, which is very important after a prolonged period of loss of function or social alienation.

How does participating in adaptive sports influence relationships with family and friends for veterans?

1. Improving the quality of communication

Respondents note that sports provide new topics for dialogue, shared emotions and strengthens trust. Sports create an environment in which veterans become more emotionally accessible and partners feel closer.

2. Strengthening partnerships

Supporting sports activities often brings families or friends together. Shared experiences, excitement about participating in competitions, the joy of victory, and participation in training sessions form new rituals that bring people closer together. The family spends more time together in a new context, where there is mutual pride, support and understanding.

3. Expanding or changing one's social circle

Involving veterans in the sporting community often helps to expand the circle of communication for the family as well. Respondents mentioned meeting other families of veterans, with whom it is easier to find common ground due to similar experiences. This creates a sense of belonging, reduces isolation and strengthens social ties not only for veterans, but also for their family members.

4. Positive impact on children

In families with children, adaptive sports also influence relationships with them. Firstly, new forms of leisure activities emerge: children sometimes join in joint training sessions or take part in sports events.

Secondly, children begin to feel proud of their father or mother, which strengthens the emotional bond within the family. Also, by following their parents' example, children develop a positive attitude towards physical activity, endurance, and mental strength. This helps foster resilience, a value that takes on special significance in times of war.

5. Impact on intimate relationships

Adaptive sports influence intimate relationships. Positive changes in this area of life are supported by improved physical fitness, reduced pain, increased self-confidence, and a partner's enhanced sense of attractiveness thanks to engaging in sports. Respondents also emphasise the importance of open discussions about sexuality after wounding, both within the couple and in broader social discourse.

6. Impact on the amount of time spent together

Participation of a veteran in adaptive sports has various impacts on the time spent together with the family. In some cases, this creates new opportunities for shared activities, such as training sessions or participating in competitions. In other families, the amount of time spent together may decrease due to busy schedules; however, respondents do not view this negatively. At the same time, they note that in other families, such changes sometimes lead to conflicts or misunderstandings.

7. Engaging in sports as a source of pride in a partner

Taking part in adaptive sports becomes a source of pride for both partners and children. Family and friends see veterans' achievements in sports as an important part of overcoming challenges, which strengthens emotional bonds and enhances positive feelings towards their loved ones.

Difficulties and challenges

1. Lack of infrastructure and opportunities for sports activities

One of the most pressing issues respondents mention is the lack of inclusive infrastructure. For many veterans with injuries or reduced physical abilities, simply leaving the house becomes a challenge. Even in large cities, there are high curbs, stairs without ramps, entrances unsuitable for wheelchairs, and so on. All of this creates significant difficulties in accessing sports activities for veterans with severe injuries, wounds, or illnesses, even when local sports sections and facilities are available. This also includes a lack of specialised gyms, absence of transport, coaches, and so forth. This is especially relevant in local communities.

2. Insufficient number of events or their lack of coordination

Loved ones of veterans note that they either face difficulties themselves in finding up-to-date information about training sessions, competitions, or rehabilitation events, or have heard about such challenges from others.

The absence of a unified system for coordinating competition schedules forces veterans to choose between different events, which in turn reduces their opportunities to attend all competitions. Families and loved ones also draw attention to the insufficient number of family-oriented events where the whole family can be involved to share these emotions together.

3. Lack of a sense of agency in family members

Families and loved ones of veterans are often not seen as full participants in the recovery process. Their role is reduced to a "supportive" one: to assist, organise, and provide, but without recognition of their own needs and experiences. This creates feelings of invisibility, emotional isolation, and exhaustion. This problem is especially faced by female partners who take on the emotional, organisational, and domestic burden but themselves receive no support. Without recognition of their agency and active involvement, the potential of adaptive sports as a recovery tool remains incomplete. This is one of the key findings of this research. Because even during conversations with family members, the focus was mostly on the feelings of their partners, friends, rather than their own.

Findings of the Research



The period after wounding: difficulties and challenges faced by families and loved ones of veterans

The journey of injured, wounded, or ill veterans to recovery through sports varies in length and is filled with numerous obstacles. At the same time, most veterans have the support of their families and loved ones, who go through this journey alongside them. Injuries, wounds, or illnesses pose a challenge not only for veterans but also for their loved ones, families, friends, and brothers and sisters-in-arms, as it is these close people who accompany them on the path to recovery, overcome obstacles together, and provide crucial support. Therefore, all stages of veterans' recovery should be viewed from the perspective of those who supported them.

It often happens that during the difficult stage of recovery, the relationships between loved ones undergo change. The reasons for this may include intense emotional strain, loved ones' own fears, conflicts, emotional tension, or lack of preparedness, among others. Or, conversely, when speaking about positive changes, they may result from the shared traumatic experience—a situation in which one partner was, for a time, dependent on the other. Teamwork, attentiveness to each other's needs, the willingness to listen and truly hear, and empathy—all of this helps not only to preserve the relationship but also to deepen it and bring it to a new level. Respondents noted that after the wounding, relationships within the couple became significantly stronger. And it was the support of a loved one that motivated rehabilitation and faster recovery.

I would say that our relationship has changed, but for the better. It brought us much closer together. It was probably an important moment for him—that I stayed, that I stood by him, helped him, and believed in him. One phrase of mine keeps him going. He always says that the first thing I said to him was, "we'll dance together again." It really keeps him going. It still keeps him going; he remembers it, and whenever people ask about us, he always says, "That's what keeps me going, and I promised her we would dance."—partner of a wounded veteran.

Within the scope of the research, we were unable to speak with respondents whose relationships deteriorated during recovery from injury, wounds, or illness, but we assume that such cases are not uncommon. Nevertheless, family dynamics and the development of relationships within couples during recovery from injury, wounds, or illness remain an important topic and require deeper study in the future.

Within the research, we were able to learn about the difficulties faced by the relatives and friends of veterans during their recovery from injury, wounds, or illness. Respondents shared a variety of perspectives and experiences. Valuable for the research is the fact that some of them were directly involved in caring for the veteran and actively participated in the rehabilitation process. Others observed the process more from the sidelines: as friends, acquaintances, or relatives who did not live nearby but still remained emotionally involved. This diversity of perspectives allows for a deeper understanding of the needs of a veteran's support network in different situations.

Disorientation

Overall, some respondents admitted that they could not comprehend the situation when they first received information about the wounding of a family member/loved one. No one was prepared for this experience. It is worth adding that, to some extent, such matters could have been discussed beforehand to understand the course of action in case of injury or wounding, but for the most part, it was unexpected, and families/loved ones had little information about it. This is especially true for those who were wounded during the anti-terrorist operation/joint forces operation period.

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the number of wounded veterans has unfortunately increased significantly, as more people have become involved in the defence of the state. Currently, there is significantly more information in the media space about the lives of veterans after injuries, wounding, or illnesses. Therefore, for some families/loved ones, the urgent need for information at the initial stages of wounding or injury has diminished, as they can now obtain it from open sources, unlike those families and loved ones who had this experience during the anti-terrorist operation/joint forces operation period.

"...I had no idea what was happening, what it would be like, or how it could even be possible. You simply cannot imagine it at all—that experience is completely absent, and you can only picture it in some catastrophic scenarios. And then gradually... I entered... [the ward], you fear your own reaction, you fear his reaction, you don't know what will happen between you, how everything will unfold in different aspects: in daily life, in sex, in the relationship, and in understanding it all,"—the wife of a wounded veteran.

Bureaucratic difficulties

Some family members and loved ones spoke about difficulties with completing the necessary paperwork, obtaining certificates, and navigating other bureaucratic procedures. Most often, in situations where one spouse is wounded or injured, it is the other who takes on the entire administrative burden. This is explained by the fact that the veteran is at that time occupied with treatment and undergoing rehabilitation, and often simply does not have the physical strength or time to deal with such matters. In addition, they may feel disoriented in the information landscape, as it is perceived as a sudden shift from ordinary everyday life to a more unstable environment, where they find it difficult to manage on their own.

At the same time, no one exempts the partner from daily responsibilities: work, caring for the children, and managing the household. All of this together creates a significant burden, which can lead to exhaustion and requires dedicated attention from the state and support services.

A brief overview of the obstacles faced by veterans with injuries, wounds, or illnesses makes it clear that their loved ones are an integral part of the recovery process. And throughout this process, these people also have their own needs that should be acknowledged, given attention, and further explored. Improving the recovery experience for veterans—both for those who have sustained injuries, wounds, or illnesses and for

their closest circles—is an important mechanism for enhancing their future well-being and easing the process of reintegration into civilian life.

Lack of opportunity to process one's own emotions

Some female respondents spoke about the emotionally difficult period that followed immediately after their partners were wounded. During this time, much effort was spent not so much on dealing with everyday or bureaucratic matters as on holding back their own emotions. Respondents said they tried to be a steady pillar for their husbands—standing by them, reassuring them that things would be fine, and concealing their own fear or disorientation. In situations where the veteran was in poor physical condition, suffering from phantom pain, or experiencing severe stress, their family members often put their own emotions aside so as not to create additional tension. However, these emotions later find no outlet, which over the long term can lead to burnout and exhaustion.

"You're constantly holding yourself back, he's lying there—the very first stage after the wounding—and he was experiencing phantom pains, these episodes that no medication could ease. And it was so hard to watch, but you're constantly holding back your emotions and just bottling everything up. I understand, I want to give him the reassurance that I'm here, everything is alright, so that he feels comfortable with me and doesn't shut himself off."

"But at that moment, emotionally, I probably shut down my own feelings because I thought, 'Yes, I need to endure this, it will all pass, slowly'—so I held back more," said the wife of a wounded veteran.

Challenges of social reintegration

Friends and relatives of veterans who took part in the research spoke about the difficulties they observed their loved ones facing during the process of returning to everyday life. It wasn't just about physical rehabilitation, but also social adaptation—the effort to reconnect and engage once again in everyday interactions with society. According to them, veterans often encountered emotional tension in public spaces: loud noises, crowds, traffic noise, or bright lighting could trigger anxiety, irritation, or even panic attacks.

These difficulties made it harder to take part in activities that are routine for many people: visiting public places, using public transport, or even simple walks. Families and loved ones noted that at such times, veterans often withdrew into themselves, avoided contact, or only slowly re-engaged with their usual social circles. This indicates that adaptation after combat experience is a complex, multi-stage process that requires patience, support, and understanding from both close ones and society as a whole.

"Firstly, after the wounding, it was very difficult to be outside, where mopeds rush by, cars roar, and so on. And we were simply learning to walk along those streets,"—veteran's partner.

Overall, the process of socialisation and reintegration into society after returning is complex and multi-faceted. Difficulties arise not only at the stage of adjusting to the civilian

environment with all its triggers (which include not only auditory and visual triggers but also interactions with other people) but also when searching for means and spaces that support the recovery of veterans. For some, this may be a work environment, provided their physical and mental health allow them to perform their duties; for others, an educational setting; and for yet others, a sporting environment. The process of searching for and attempting to understand one's own needs, difficulties in regulating emotional states, and disorientation within the social environment represent only a small part of the obstacles faced not only by veterans but also by their family members and close ones, as they are the primary source of support during this stage of reintegration.

The issue of reintegration is not the primary focus of this research; therefore, only a brief overview is provided here of what veterans and their families/close ones may experience during this period.

Beginning sports activities after injury, wounding, or illness: doubts, challenges, motivation

Starting adaptive sports after wounding, injury or serious illness is always a challenging process, where physical capabilities, psychological readiness, and external circumstances all play a crucial role. According to family members and close ones, each veteran's journey to sports is different: some overcome internal barriers, others seek external support, while some only need a small push to get started. Below, we present the main types of pathways described by our respondents.

For some, it all began with a recommendation from a rehabilitation specialist or another professional who suggested trying physical activity as part of their recovery. In such cases, sports were perceived as a natural extension of medical rehabilitation.

"Yes, it was recommended by his doctor. His doctor specifically advised him to take up archery,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

"He began engaging in sports almost immediately because it is a mandatory part of rehabilitation; the sooner you start moving and preparing your body, the easier the prosthetics process will be. In fact, sports now play a rather important role, as rehabilitation is a lengthy process,"—partner of a wounded veteran.

For some, it was a personal initiative, based on previous experience with sports, an understanding of its benefits, and a desire to return to regular activities as quickly as possible. We are unable to determine whether prior experience in sports influences engagement in adaptive sports after injury or wounding, but this was not the aim of the research.

"That was his supporting structure, and as soon as the doctor in the hospital allowed him to stand, he immediately got on crutches, we went outside, and he would walk a little, then sit down, walk some more, then sit again.

In other words, he started training himself, and as soon as rehabilitation began, he was the first there. He said, "I come, I wait for my physiotherapists, where are

"you, let's get started." In that respect, it was somewhat easier for him because it was something he was already familiar with,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

For some, the beginning of their participation in adaptive sports was through engagement with a veteran sports community.

"Yes, that's where it started... We saw various sports gatherings, there was a project called the "Heroes' Games," I believe. That's what they were called. And he joined those "Heroes' Games." And it was quite soon after the wounding. And he started doing sports,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

Thus, despite the variety of pathways, one of the key factors for engagement, according to the respondents, is the presence of support from professionals, the community, or family. At the same time, for many, the decisive factor is not only external support but also the inner readiness to take a step towards activity despite doubts, pain, or fear. It is the combination of support and personal motivation that creates the conditions under which adaptive sports become not an obligation, but a resource for recovery.

Challenges faced by veterans' families and close ones at the beginning of their recovery journey through adaptive sports

Family members and close ones noted that, for many veterans, starting sports activities was physically challenging. After a prolonged period of treatment, rehabilitation, or a sedentary lifestyle, the body required time to adapt. Even basic exercises could cause fatigue, pain, or frustration due to movement limitations. These physical difficulties often became obstacles at the outset, reducing motivation and fostering doubts about one's own abilities.

However, in most cases, according to the respondents, these difficulties were eventually overcome. Regular training, support from coaches and the team, and gradual increases in intensity contributed to physical progress: endurance improved, bodily tension decreased, and a sense of control over movements developed. This not only strengthened physical condition but also had a positive impact on overall wellbeing and self-confidence.

"There definitely were [difficulties], I know that for certain. The challenges were that he needed to start moving in order to begin working as actively as he wanted. Even just standing up and walking was hard, because he had not fully recovered yet,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

Moreover, overcoming these physical challenges became a source of respect and inspiration for their close ones. Observing how the veteran gradually regained control over his/her body and persevered despite pain and fatigue, his/her family saw a display of strength, endurance, and resilience. For many, this strengthened relationships: fostering pride, emotional closeness, and a sense of shared victory. The veteran ceased to be merely a recipient of support—his effort and perseverance earned respect and helped to redefine his role within the family.

As noted earlier, the recovery journey through sports for veterans often takes place not in isolation but with the support of family and close ones. For some, this support takes

the form of assistance with logistical challenges; for others, it comes through verbal encouragement; and some begin participating in sports alongside their loved ones, making it a shared leisure activity. At the same time, the beginning of the recovery journey through sports for veterans is not always easy—challenges and obstacles often arise. Therefore, it is important to consider this through the perspective of family members and close ones, who are an integral part of the process.

Overall, family members and close ones did not share many difficulties during the research; most reported that there were no major issues—only those primarily related to the physical aspects of the rehabilitation process.

It is worth noting that although our research focused on the impact of adaptive sports on the family members and close ones of veterans, during conversations we repeatedly observed a notable shift in focus: interlocutors often returned to the stories of the veterans themselves—their physical and psychological condition, motivation, emotional changes, experiences, and progress. **Family members primarily focused on how sports influenced the person they were supporting, while their own experiences remained largely in the background, mentioned only briefly or not at all.**

At the same time, family members often play a key role in the recovery process. The immediate social circle plays a vital role in supporting veterans' adaptation during their return to civilian life in general, and to family life in particular. Often, it is wives and/or close friends who take on the organisation of daily life, logistics, and support at competitions or training sessions. However, the role of family members is most often perceived as supportive; they remain a kind of "rear guard" tasked with providing stability, support, and peace of mind. In this dynamic, their own needs are often sidelined, both by their social circle and by themselves. They become accustomed to staying in the background, not adding any "extra strain," but standing by and keeping their composure even when they are the ones in need of support.

When family members consistently put themselves second, strive to be strong, avoid complaining, and do not express their own fatigue or concerns, this can, over time, lead to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and conflicts within the family.

Of course, this observation remains an assumption, as we cannot say with certainty how typical this dynamic is among all families of veterans with wounds, injuries, or illnesses who participate in adaptive sports. Our research was not quantitative, and therefore does not provide a basis for generalisation. At the same time, the recurrence of these patterns in the narratives of various interview participants indicates that these are not isolated cases, but an important area for further study and, potentially, consideration in family support programmes.



The Impact of Adaptive Sports on the Recovery of Veterans: the View of Family Members and Close Ones



In general, family members and close ones mostly see the role of sports in helping veterans recover as a good thing. Most respondents have no doubts about whether their loved ones—veterans—should engage in adaptive sports. The only type of concern that sometimes arose was related to security issues. Family members and close ones noted that they were primarily concerned that physical activity would not harm health or worsen the condition after an injury or wounding. Concerns were also specifically expressed regarding the potential risks of re-traumatisation—both physical and psychological. Certain types of adaptive sports, such as amputee football or contact games, can be quite physically demanding and potentially traumatic. Nonetheless, according to respondents, these concerns often subsided after initial positive results or explanations from specialists.

When discussing the positive impact on psychological aspects, research participants more often noted improvements in emotional wellbeing, easier socialisation, and a reduction in aggression levels. Improvements in physical condition were also frequently mentioned, as adaptive sports and physical activity are directly linked to this.

The impact of adaptive sports on emotional state

Respondents point out that sports have a positive impact on the emotional state of veterans. This is due to several important factors. Firstly, physical activity, according to them, seems to "activate" the brain, which had previously been in a state of shutdown due to traumatic experiences. There is an increase in energy, a desire to be active, and an interest in the surrounding world.

"And I see how positively sports have impacted their lives and mindset, how much more open they've become. It's a very significant, powerful, and remarkable journey," said the wife of a wounded veteran.

Secondly, sports help to shift focus away from difficult thoughts, allow concentration on the present moment, and restore bodily awareness that is often lost during prolonged stress or depression. Especially following injury, wounding, or illness.

"It definitely has a positive effect. Certainly in several ways—physically, because it's training, of course, and morally, because it's a good distraction, in those moments, you don't have to dwell on what you can or can't do, or how your life has changed. It's not that you shouldn't reflect on it, but when it turns into a constant chewing over things inside, it's good to be able to experience other emotions," said the wife of a wounded veteran.

Thirdly, during sports activities, veterans experience certain emotions that later carry over into other areas of their lives. In other words, if they achieve success during training, they tend to have a positive mood afterwards as well. One wife also noted that she noticed a shift to a more positive mood even when her veteran husband was merely preparing for training. This indicates that even the prospect of engaging in sports can have a stabilising effect on mental wellbeing.

"He changes; his mood shifts when he's getting ready for training. It's already happening mentally. When he's preparing, he's already there. He definitely feels happy and joyful. I think it's because he gets to connect with his peers," said the wife of a wounded veteran.

However, the positive impact of training is not solely due to the presence of success during it. Another important factor is the opportunity to socialise within a comfortable circle of peers. People who share the veteran's experience of war and rehabilitation following injury, wounding, or illness. Being in a safe environment allows for reduced anxiety levels and encourages more open expression of emotions. **Shared experiences foster a sense of support and understanding that is often lacking in everyday life.**

"He is always in a good mood after training. It seems to me it's like when we girls go out for coffee—it's the same for them to meet up, spend time together in that group, sometimes even without their wives, it's still great. I believe it has a positive effect on him, because spending time with his own people, having the chance to talk about things that matter to them—well, yes, we're always with him at training and everywhere else, and he talks about it—but being there with the guys, sharing that experience, I think it's important for him sometimes to be on his own too. So, I think his mood is generally good most of the time. Afterwards, I think he feels recharged. Even if he's tired after training, it's probably some kind of... I don't know, maybe a pleasant kind of tiredness, or something like that. His mood never worsens after that,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

An important factor in the positive impact of sports on emotional well-being is that they help set specific goals and progress towards them step by step. Firstly, they distract you from obsessive or negative thoughts. Secondly, they restore a sense of control over one's own life. Sporting achievements, even small ones, become a point of support that belongs entirely to the individual, lies within his/her sphere of influence, and does not depend on external circumstances.

The movement towards a goal is not merely a form of physical activity, but a means of self-affirmation that enables the individual to make decisions, influence circumstances, and see the results of his/her efforts. This is particularly important after traumatic events—such as injuries, woundings, illnesses, and subsequent long-term rehabilitation—when a person may have partially or completely his/her ability to work and been forced to depend on others. In such a state, the sense of autonomy is often lost, and sports can become the space where it begins to return.

"It's a new goal, something he can work towards. I can see that he's starting to act in a more coordinated way,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

"After any sports activity, he was always so motivated, so proud of himself—and I was proud of him too; he would listen to them and tell them, "Today I ran this much," or "I did that," "I will", when they were preparing for competitions. "There was archery there, I shot this many arrows, I managed to do it, I hit the target." He was so passionate about all of this that I never noticed it having any negative effect. Always just positive, positive, positive,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

Respondents also specifically noted that sports help veterans not only improve their mood but also release accumulated tension. During physical activity, emotional release occurs: anger, anxiety, and irritation, which might otherwise build up internally, find a safe outlet. This is important not only for the wellbeing of the veteran but also for his/her family members: due to the unstable emotional state and mood of their close one, they may experience increased tension.

"You know, when you're in pain you just want to snap at someone—simply because it hurts and you don't want anyone to touch you. And a regular amputation—that's constant pain. It hurts almost 24/7 and has been like that for six months now. This pain diminishes but never fully disappears. And, of course, I think the nervous system is kind of in shock. He holds himself very well; he never hurts me, and we don't have any issues with him being aggressive or anything like that. But, nonetheless, he can be a bit more quick-tempered. But with sports, it gets better—much better,"—wounded veteran's partner.

The impact of adaptive sports on physical health

Adaptive sports also play an important role in the physical rehabilitation of veterans. Regular physical activity helps improve blood circulation, increase endurance, and enhance mobility. This is especially relevant after a prolonged period of physical inactivity due to extended rehabilitation following injury, wounds, or illness. This is important not only for everyday functioning but also for regaining a sense of control over one's own body.

Family members and close ones of veterans have specifically noted how sports help them "feel their body again." After injuries or illnesses, the connection with the body is often disrupted. Sensitivity is lost, new limitations arise, self-perception changes, and new sensations appear in the body. Thanks to adaptive training, veterans learn to listen to themselves in new ways, accept these changes, and gradually rebuild trust in their own bodies. Moreover, with each training session, endurance improves, helping veterans manage daily tasks and boosting their confidence in their own abilities.

"I believe that sports play a very important role in his life. Because, firstly, blood circulation impacts the recovery of the entire body. Because if he didn't run or work out at the gym, he wouldn't be doing as well as he is now... Well, not exactly "doing well," but he wouldn't be walking as well as he does. Even the doctors said that he recovered so quickly because he set a goal for himself—to run a certain distance. He set clear goals, set specific dates, and he did that,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

The recovery process, which close ones observe from the sidelines, is deeply important for them. When a veteran gradually regains physical strength, mobility, and endurance, it not only reduces anxiety levels within the family but also changes how the person is perceived.

Close ones see in them an example of resilience, strength, and determination, which can become a source of inspiration and support for the entire family. In such cases, the

veteran stops being solely someone who receives help and instead becomes someone who, through their persistence and actions, shows that changes are possible and recovery is real.

"I even understand that if we end this relationship, I will still be proud of him simply as the person I knew. They are incredible people. Basically, anyone who walks on prosthetics—I want to shake their hand and say they're simply titans,"—wounded veteran's partner.

Additionally, after regaining physical sensations and improved mobility, veterans can once again engage in everyday household tasks, become more independent in daily life (if this independence was previously reduced), and manage to move around or handle practical tasks on their own. This reduces the burden on family members and restores the veteran's sense of involvement in everyday life, which also has a positive impact on family relationships.

The Impact of Adaptive Sports on Socialisation

Family members and close ones of veterans also emphasise the importance of sports as a tool for socialisation. Some veterans face difficulties when returning to civilian life. And sports become a kind of "bridge" here, as they are a civilian activity, but at the same time take place among "one's own circle".

"Social interaction is important both within the circle of fellow brothers and sisters, and with ordinary people—not only about war. This leisure time should be, you know, multifaceted. That's when a person truly becomes engaged in something. They develop new interests. It's like fresh air and a new perspective on life. You can't get this in a setting where everything is identical and nothing changes. This is only possible through external opportunities that are radically different from what the person usually experiences,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

In addition, sports often serve as a simple yet effective motivation to leave the house and interact with others. Some veterans, after being wounded, withdraw into themselves, avoid social contact, and spend much of their time in isolation. In such a state, even a simple act—like getting ready and going to training—becomes a challenge. Over time, training ceases to be merely physical activity and becomes an important ritual that structures the day and provides a point of stability.

"You could say that golf became the first routine. At least once a week, on Mondays, everyone meets and goes. At that moment, it gave him a sense of stability—something completely new, but he really liked it,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

The positive experiences gained during training, the opportunity to freely express emotions, and the chance to socialise without judgment all help gradually overcome internal barriers, fears, and social withdrawal. When there is a place to go and a familiar environment waiting, veterans gain confidence, strength, and a desire to engage with others—not only in sports but in life more broadly.

"Trips across cities in Ukraine began, with open training sessions. It was both a community, a form of recovery, and a way to understand one's own body. It was also a movement that was necessary during this adaptation period, to realise that everything is okay. I'm not just sitting at home, crying alone. It really had a positive impact,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

"First and foremost, this is psychological—not so much rehabilitation as resocialisation, I would say. The veteran doesn't get stuck after returning; he doesn't focus solely on himself and his problems. Even subconsciously, he starts reintegrating into society,"—friend of a wounded.

This has significant implications for family members and close ones, because as veterans develop their own interests, the family dynamic changes. The veteran becomes less dependent on constant attention, support, and involvement from his/her close ones. Families gain more space—both emotional and practical. A space in which there is room for everyone, not just the veteran. This helps gradually restore balance in relationships, where all parties can be heard, seen, and maintain their own resources.

"For us, it has always been very important not to be dependent on each other, not to lose ourselves in each other. And, of course, I am happy that when I come home from work, I have something to tell him about my day, and he has something to tell me. Because he was there, he communicated with someone, he saw something, and something went well or didn't go well. And this isn't just about rehabilitation, injections, and all that,"—wounded veteran's partner.

Respondents also noted that after returning, veterans need not only external resocialisation but also reintegration within their own families. During their absence, the family lived according to its own rhythm, adapted to new conditions, organised daily life, and redistributed responsibilities. The return of a veteran, especially after serious wounding, once again alters this dynamics. There is a need to restructure routines, find new ways of interacting, which requires time, patience, and additional effort. This process is particularly challenging when the veteran is unable, due to health reasons, to fully share responsibilities for household tasks or childcare. In such cases, the burden on family members increases, making the process of returning to shared life even more sensitive and demanding.

In conclusion, adaptive sports play a multifaceted role in the recovery process for veterans—not only physical and psychological, but also social and interpersonal. Its impact extends far beyond the training hall: it improves emotional well-being, helps restore motivation, and creates space for socialisation and the reclaiming of personal agency. At the same time, these changes noticeably affect family members: the burden on them is reduced, emotional stability in relationships increases, and there is more space for reciprocity and respect for the needs of each family member. Sports not only help veterans adapt to new life circumstances but also foster a healthier, more balanced family dynamic, where support becomes a shared process rather than a burden, providing strength to both sides.

It is worth noting that improvements in the well-being of one family member or within a close relationship almost always affect the overall quality of relationships.

When one person begins to feel better physically and mentally, tension decreases, communication becomes smoother, and interactions become more enjoyable. The improvement in mood, confidence, and engagement of the veteran creates a "chain reaction": not only does the individual change, but the surrounding psychological environment also shifts, allowing more space for dialogue, shared experiences, and mutual support.

A close-up, low-angle shot of a woman with long, light-colored hair and a man from behind. The woman is wearing a dark, floral-patterned dress and is looking towards the man. The man is wearing a dark t-shirt and a light-colored baseball cap with the words "new york" printed on the back. They are holding hands, with the woman's hand resting on the man's shoulder. The background is blurred, showing some yellow and green colors, possibly from trees or flowers.

Relationship Dynamics Under the Influence of Adaptive Sports



It should be noted that changes in family life and relationships with veterans usually occur for various reasons, especially in the period following wounding, illness, or during prolonged rehabilitation. This is a tough time for both the veteran and their loved ones. However, in this research, we focus specifically on the changes that, according to respondents, occurred after their loved one started exercising. They attribute these changes to the influence of adaptive physical activity.

The changes reported by the research participants are closely linked to the positive developments that occurred among the veterans themselves, namely emotional improvement, physical recovery, and increased social activity. In addition, the fact that sports gave many people the opportunity to spend more time together, find more topics for conversation, and share experiences and rituals also had an impact. Veterans became more involved in family life, which had a positive impact on their relationships with their partners and the overall atmosphere in the family.

Changes in the social circle

Some respondents note that the family circle has also changed over time. It now includes more families of other veterans or active military personnel. This is due to several factors:

- First and foremost, with the need to find a community that is similar in terms of experience. Communicating with those who are going through a similar experience allows you to feel supported and not have to explain basic things. After all, families who accompany veterans on their road to recovery from wounds, injuries, or illnesses face challenges that are difficult to understand for those who are not involved in the military sphere. That is why finding "your own people" becomes a natural and important need.
- The second factor of changing or expanding the environment is that families are involved in attending sporting events, competitions, festivals, etc. together. New acquaintances are made there with those who are also involved in the field of veteran rehabilitation through sports. Shared experiences, challenges, and questions help form new connections that eventually spread not only to this topic but also to other areas of life.

"I think our family started communicating more with other families. That has definitely changed. Now, most of our friends and social circle are people connected to the war in some way—either veterans themselves or those whose husbands are serving. But we've really expanded our friendships specifically with other veteran families. We often meet at different competitions, and that brings us together. So yes, our community has definitely grown—we've built very warm relationships with many of these families."—wife of a wounded veteran.

Strengthening and deepening communication between partners

Family members and close ones of veterans who participated in the research reported that their relatives' involvement in adaptive sports positively influenced the quality of communication within the family. This improvement was associated with changes in the veteran's emotional state, including reduced tension, irritability, and social withdrawal.

"Of course, things have changed because she's no longer so closed off. We talk more now. She's more interested, she asks questions — what's wrong, what's not," — friend of a wounded veteran.

In addition, new topics for conversation have emerged—about sports, training, and achievements. These have brought more liveliness and ease to their interactions.

"You know, the topics of our conversations have become more fun. Not that they were bad before, but now there are new things to talk about, more emotions—new goals, new directions. Clear ones, inspiring ones," — friend of a wounded veteran.

Shared emotions—joy over achievements, excitement before competitions, or support after a tough training session—also helped bring families closer together and created a sense of partnership.

At the same time, some respondents noted that they would like to be more involved in joint sports activities or to attend competitions together as competitions are deeply emotional moments. Sharing those emotions can strengthen family bonds—yet this opportunity is not always available.

"What I really like is when there's a chance for a wife or kids to come to the competition. It gives a sense of support and togetherness. It's more on an emotional level. You feel closer as a family. Everyone steps out of their comfort zone, into a space that feels unfamiliar. And that's what brings us together even more," — wife of a wounded veteran.

Impact on quality time together

Adaptive sports activities have different effects on how veterans spend time with their loved ones and families. It should be noted here that when assessing time spent together, we take into account the amount of time spent together, the quality of that time, and the respondents' own assessment of how it affected the family.

Respondents' opinions were divided on this issue. Some noted that they spent more time together, because in addition to the usual shared activities, everyday moments, and regular time together, they now had the opportunity to train together.

Some respondents note that after a loved one started playing sports, they spent less time together. Training takes up a certain part of the day, and after training, veterans may feel tired. However, even those who mentioned this emphasise that such a change does not lead to conflicts or misunderstandings. On the contrary, there is an awareness

that these classes are important and beneficial, so the family supports this decision, even if it sometimes means adjusting to a new schedule.

This diversity of perspectives reflects the flexibility and engagement of family members and loved ones in the process, even when they do not always place themselves at the centre. It also highlights the importance of balancing the needs of all family members so that supporting the veteran does not become the sole axis around which family life revolves.

During the research, we did not have the opportunity to speak directly with respondents who viewed their close ones' or friends' participation in adaptive sports negatively. However, one participant shared the opinions of acquaintances whose views differed from the overall positive trend. In their perspective, sports can sometimes negatively affect family dynamics, creating tension, arguments, and misunderstandings. In particular, the point is that the time spent on training could be devoted to the family.

Since we were unable to engage directly with representatives of this viewpoint, it is difficult to determine the precise causes of such dissatisfaction. It is likely related to a general lack of free time, the inability to share sports activities together, or certain misconceptions about the role of sports in the recovery process. This aspect deserves special attention in future research, as it may help to understand how family members or close social circles can sometimes act as a restraining factor in a veteran's participation in adaptive physical activity.

Impact on children

Respondents who have children say that participation in adaptive sports has a certain impact on their relationship with their children. This manifests itself in several ways.

Firstly, children participate in joint training sessions and sporting events.

"I know things have only changed for the better because she's very proud—she really takes pride in it. And when they had the opportunity to meet, he went to Lithuania for rehabilitation, and she came because she was abroad. They met, let's say, on this neutral territory, and they went into the gym together. They went there, and he showed her the exercises. So sports brought them closer as well. When there was such an opportunity, of course... Well, it only has a positive effect,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

This, in turn, contributes to building a family culture of sports—particularly among children. Kids who previously were not involved in sports often begin to take up physical activities, following the example of their mother or father. This is an additional, less visible but highly significant outcome of veterans' participation in adaptive sports—one that can benefit not only the family but also society as a whole in the long term.

"Basically, when you set an example, children start participating more actively—that's for sure. She's still quite young, not at a fully conscious age yet, but even so, she's very clear about it. For example, last year he started skateboarding.

So she bought a skateboard. And she wants to skate like her dad too,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

Given that overall participation in sports in Ukraine remains low, every positive example counts. The spread of sports culture has a positive impact on many areas: it reduces the burden on the healthcare system, improves mental health, increases people's resilience, and contributes to the formation of healthier communities.

Getting involved in sports as a parent and as a child helps to generate new topics for conversation, even if you don't train together. Sports become an additional point of contact that helps build understanding between generations. When both adults and children share similar experiences—such as pre-training excitement, the joy of achievement, or overcoming challenges—it becomes easier for them to connect and find common ground. This creates a new level of closeness, where they can share impressions, support one another, and build trustful relationships that, in turn, extend into other areas of family life.

"Our child has started to take at least some interest in sports. We couldn't make him play football or anything else. Now he's asking to join a sports club. ...Our son is older, he's eight, more independent, and can take part on his own. Sometimes he and his dad even go out together without me—to run or do something. So now, with the growth of adaptive sports and more opportunities in general, this has had a positive impact on our son. They talk much more about sports now,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

The athletic achievements of a mother or father also give children an extra reason to feel proud and to follow a positive example.

"The kids are proud—they're always waiting for the next medal he brings home. The younger one tells all his classmates about it,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

Thus, when a parent engages in adaptive sports after an injury, wounding or illness, it sets an example of willpower and recovery after hardship—helping children develop greater resilience. Considering the realities of life in Ukraine, the resilience of future generations can, to some extent, be seen as a foundation for the country's survival.

Impact on intimate relationships

Given that sexual life is an important component of family relationships, as well as an integral part of human physiology, adaptive sports can also influence this area. According to some respondents, improved emotional state, increased self-confidence, and improved physical fitness had a positive effect on the sexual activity of veterans. This affects not only a person's self-esteem, but can also enhance the feeling of attractiveness of a partner in a relationship.

"I really liked it when he started doing more sports—I mean, physically. You know, the way his body changed—it was just really great,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

"But sports really help, because first of all, they don't hurt him as much anymore—the pain goes away. The rehabilitation specialists work on strengthening his legs and stumps properly. So when they told him during rehab that it's okay, that he can stand up and put pressure on the stitches, of course he realised—'Then I can do this at home too.' If I turn over in bed and press on the stump a bit, it's not dangerous. In the beginning, we were both scared—I was afraid of hurting him, and he was too, because the stitches could have come apart. So yes, sports definitely help. And besides, they build endurance—physical endurance—which also makes a difference,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

In some cases, respondents noted that their sexual relationship after the wounding even improved, as the recovery process strengthened their emotional bond and deepened their sense of intimacy.

"Maybe it happens a bit less often now, but it's a mutual choice, you know. Our relationship has just reached another level. Before, it was more about romance—we weren't sure yet if we were forever. Now, intimacy isn't a priority as a measure of love,"—partner of a wounded veteran.

Partners of wounded veterans emphasise the importance of openly addressing and discussing the topic of sexual relationships after injury, wounding, or illness. It is worth noting that the Veteran Hub team conducted research on the return of military personnel to sexual life after being wounded⁶ and published guides for male veterans⁷ and female veterans⁸, offering practical advice on how to adapt intimate relationships to new life circumstances.

Thus, adaptive sports have the potential to positively influence not only the physical and emotional recovery of veterans but also the sphere of intimate relationships. Improved physical fitness, reduced pain, greater endurance, and increased confidence in one's body create better conditions for both physical and emotional closeness. Combined with a renewed sense of attractiveness and partner support, these factors help sustain—or even strengthen—sexual connection within the couple.

Moreover, the experiences of veterans' partners show that intimacy in relationships may transform after wounding. Often, these relationships become deeper, more emotionally connected, and less focused on the physical aspect as the sole measure of closeness.

⁶ Research on the Sexual and Intimate Experiences of Wounded Service Members/Veterans and Their Partners: "Sex and War: What Is the Sexual Life of Wounded Service Members Like?" Veteran Hub, 2023. <https://veteranhub.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/doslidzhennia--seksualne-zhyttia-voinivpislia-poranen.pdf>

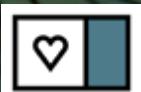
⁷ Guide on Intimacy and Sexuality for Male Service Members and Veterans. Veteran Hub, 2023. https://veteranhub.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/liubys_-posibnyk-z-intymnosti-ta-seksualnosti-dlia-cholovikiv-viyskovykh-ta-veteraniv.pdf

⁸ Guide on Intimacy and Sexuality for Female Service Members and Veterans. Veteran Hub, 2023. https://veteranhub.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/liubys_-posibnyk-z-intymnosti-ta-seksualnosti-dlia-zhinok-viyskovykh-ta-veteranok.pdf

At the same time, respondents emphasised the importance of openly discussing sexuality after injury—both within the couple and in the broader social context. Such openness helps to reduce stigma, support families going through similar experiences, and make the overall process of post-wounding recovery more holistic.

A photograph of a young girl with blonde hair in a wheelchair, wearing a patterned top, high-fiving another child on a basketball court. The background is blurred, showing other people and a basketball hoop.

What Are the Challenges in Adaptive Sports: the Opinion of Veterans' Families and Close Ones



The research also touched upon what, in the opinion of veterans' families and loved ones, is lacking in the field of adaptive sports. Participants shared a variety of views that demonstrate their deep involvement in the process, both emotionally and practically. Respondents formed their assessments not only on the basis of their own observations, but also taking into account what their close ones who are veterans and who directly participate in sporting events shared with them.

Lack of Support for Veterans' Family Members

When it comes to respondents who are partners or wives of veterans—those recovering from injuries, wounds, or illness—we often encounter situations where their own agency is undervalued or pushed into the background. During the rehabilitation process, attention is typically focused on the veteran: their needs, emotional state, and physical recovery. As a result, partners and wives often remain "behind the scenes," even though they play a vital role in providing care, emotional support, and managing everyday life. This dynamic can lead to frustration, a sense of unfulfillment, and the neglect of their own needs and interests. Over time, such experiences may result in emotional burnout, which in turn can create tension and conflict within the family. For these reasons, developing a dedicated approach to supporting family members of veterans is an urgent necessity.

"I'd really like to create something specifically for women—a space where they can come, relax, recharge. There are already some programs for men, and that's wonderful. Something just for women. To also give, because often these people don't take care of themselves, because they have to help others, and as Ihor Kholodylo even said, often those who are close to them are more traumatised. And that's really the problem,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

Such an approach should involve working not only with the family as a whole unit but also with each individual member—focusing on the specific needs of wives, partners, parents, or other close ones. It is essential that these individuals are seen not merely as "helpers of the veteran," but as people who maintain their own sense of agency, self-realisation, and inner balance.

"...This is such an invisible part of society, it is so large, because it includes mothers, wives, children, and others, and they must be included in this veteran-related policy somehow. I don't know exactly how—it's not about benefits, not about wanting free transportation or something like that, definitely not. It's about recognizing that each family needs some kind of meaningful support that truly fits their situation,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

Lack of Inclusive Spaces

Overall, the lack of inclusivity remains a painful issue across many areas of life. This concern is raised not only by respondents in our research but also by participants in broader surveys involving people with disabilities, veterans recovering from injuries, wounds,

or illness, and families with children. The non-inclusiveness of spaces stems from several factors: outdated Soviet-era architectural designs that failed to account for the needs of people with disabilities—a group that was heavily stigmatised at the time; insufficient funding for infrastructure adaptation; and a general lack of understanding of the importance of inclusivity and its positive impact on society.

The topic of (non)inclusive spaces is extremely broad and warrants deeper, separate research. However, even everyday observations reveal a clear pattern: while there have been some—albeit limited—improvements in larger cities such as Kyiv or Lviv, the situation in smaller communities remains much more challenging. Virtually everything needs reconstruction—from store entrances, public institutions, and community spaces to elevators and stairwells in old residential buildings.

The inaccessibility of sports facilities poses a major barrier to veterans' participation in adaptive sports. When adaptive sports are meant to be a tool for improving quality of life, in some cases they only complicate the situation, because in order to participate in sports activities, veterans with limited mobility require assistance from others and become literally dependent. This reliance can, in turn, negatively affect their sense of dignity and independence—especially for those who have lost the ability to move freely on their own.

"But we don't have those conditions. When we talk about infrastructure—we all live here, we see what's happening. These curbs are 30 centimetres high. There are no ramps at the entrances to buildings at all. That's the very basics. If a person can't support themselves, imagine how bad they feel—that they can't even leave their home or get back inside without difficulty. How can we even talk about sports after that? We first need to create the basic conditions for living safely and with dignity—only then can we move toward sports,"—friend of a wounded veteran.

Family members and close friends of veterans also noted that the lack of inclusivity in public spaces places an additional burden on them. When a veteran uses a wheelchair, it often falls on their close ones to check in advance whether a place has a ramp, whether it's accessible without stairs, or whether there's an inclusive restroom. The inaccessibility of the environment not only makes daily movement and participation in social life more complicated but also shifts part of this responsibility onto family members, who are already in a constant state of caregiving. As a result, they experience increased emotional and logistical strain, having to act simultaneously as coordinators, assistants, and facilitators for their loved one's participation in everyday activities.

Lack of Qualified Psychological Support for Veterans

While adaptive sports are an important part of the recovery process, they cannot fully replace psychological support where it is genuinely needed. Of course, not every veteran requires intervention from a psychologist or psychotherapist. However, in cases where such support is necessary, it must be of high quality, accessible, and provided in a timely manner.

According to respondents, psychological support for veterans is either lacking or insufficiently qualified. Their observations were not always limited to their own family members—often they reflected a broader concern about the state of psychological care available to veterans in general. This underscores the importance of a comprehensive rehabilitation approach, in which sports, psycho-emotional support, and social reintegration complement one another.

"I'll tell you this: I see a huge gap when it comes to psychological support from the state or society. For the military—those group therapy circles are a disaster. Honestly, a disaster. I'm sorry if that offends anyone, but it's true. There's more retraumatisation happening there than any real help. Each person needs their own approach,"—friend of a wounded veteran.

Lack of Quality Information About Events and Opportunities

Respondents emphasised a lack of communication regarding opportunities to engage in sports, particularly at the community level. Some participants noted that families already involved in adaptive sports are better informed about available opportunities because they know where to look for information. On the other hand, those who do not participate in sports may not be aware of this, which becomes a potential barrier to veterans' engagement in adaptive sports.

"It seems to me that there is a major communication gap for any kind of events or opportunities in the country, because no one knows what's available. In our community, communication is very poor—information isn't conveyed properly. I wouldn't say it's impossible for us to find out, but maybe there could be some advertising or something else. I think this is missing. The events exist, but the communication about them is lacking,"—wife of a wounded veteran.

Several approaches could potentially address this issue. First, communication could be improved through various channels, such as local administrations, rehabilitation centres, medical institutions, and social media campaigns. In this context, it is worth noting that the Veterans' Department of the Come Back Alive Initiatives Centre launched a website presenting various opportunities for adaptive sports within communities⁹. This serves as a good example of disseminating information about available opportunities. A second, more complex approach involves first engaging veterans and their families in shared veteran spaces, where information about sports events and opportunities can then be made readily available.

However, both approaches may be ineffective if the community simply does not have special sections for adaptive sports. This brings us to the next point.

⁹

<https://nashi.cbacenter.ngo/map>

Lack of Opportunities for Adaptive Sports

The absence of inclusive spaces for sports is an urgent issue, particularly in smaller communities. While larger cities and regional centers may have some opportunities—although not everywhere—the situation in small villages is far more challenging. One possible solution could be the provision of inclusive transportation for veterans by the local community. However, this requires significant funding, which is currently unavailable. In addition to financial resources, it is necessary to involve people who can accompany veterans to sports facilities. This creates a range of challenges that can be addressed, but doing so requires demand from local residents, veterans, and the willingness of the community to develop adaptive sports programs.

"For example, in our city, there's simply nowhere to practice adaptive sports, so he travels to Dnipro. And that takes a lot of time going there and back. They train for two hours, but the trip takes three to four hours. And it's like, if you're still going there, you'll get there quickly, but in the evening, on the way back, you have to read the bus schedules, and you kind of waste time on that. Well, that's it. They're in the evening. It's not really okay for him to drive either, because of his eye injury, and he tries not to drive at night. Well, that's how it is. That is, it's not everywhere... We generally don't go to the centre of Dnipro. Well, if you drive, it takes about forty minutes. And back. What about other communities?"—wife of a wounded veteran.

Challenges in Organising Events

Sports events are accompanied by a range of challenges that require attention. First, respondents noted that there are insufficient family-oriented events where veterans can participate with their families and spend time together. Shared experiences help strengthen family bonds and play an important role in veterans' reintegration into everyday life. In particular, participants highlighted the significance of experiencing emotions together—for example, shared excitement before competitions or joy over victories.

"As I said before, I would like to see more events, more family-oriented activities, more involvement of wives, because all emotions should be experienced together. This isn't just about helping them adapt to society, but also about adapting back into their families. Family adaptation is necessary too. To adapt... they lived in one world, then saw another, and veteran sports created yet another transitional space for them—a third world, like in 'Minecraft,'"—wife of a wounded veteran.

They also noted the insufficient number of competitions in general. Although adaptive sports differ from high-performance sports, where medals are the main focus, competitions remain a very important component. They provide veterans with the opportunity to spend time together, especially during events that bring participants from different cities.

"There aren't enough competitions like that. I wouldn't even call them competitions—it's more like a social gathering for veterans. But there aren't enough of these events. Apparently, more are planned this year. in May, for example,"—a friend of a wounded veteran.

However, there is a certain paradox: while veterans feel that there are not enough competitions, there are actually many. This occurs because there is no coordinated calendar of events. Competitions may be organised by the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, specialised NGOs, sports clubs, military units, or private initiatives. Without a shared calendar, organisers often overlook whether other competitions are scheduled at the same time. As a result, veterans must make choices and cannot attend all the events they would like to.

"There needs to be a coordinated calendar for veteran competitions. Right now, in May, many events overlap, and organisers aren't aware of each other. A veteran wants to participate in multiple events. And this creates a lot of discomfort. If the calendar were already planned and published—so the veteran knows which events happen on which dates and that they don't overlap, they could attend any number of events, not just one, but three. He/she wouldn't have to choose; he/she could participate in all three,"—friend of a wounded veteran.

This issue could be partially addressed through centralizing the organisation of competitions. For example, a single application system or a regularly updated schedule of events published on website by the Ministry of Veterans Affairs could help. Currently, no such coordinated approach exists, creating confusion, limiting access to information, and making participation more difficult. However, with the recent signing of the law on veteran sports, progress in this direction has become noticeable, offering hope for a more transparent and accessible system in the future.