Author’s response to reviews

Title: Perceived stigma and barriers to care in UK Armed Forces personnel and veterans with and without probable mental disorders

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Dear Dr Lyons,

We are delighted to have received reviewer comments for our manuscript entitled ‘Perceived stigma and barriers to care in UK Armed Forces personnel and veterans with and without probable mental disorders’ (Reference: PSYO-D-19-00183). We are very pleased that the reviewers considered our manuscript to be well written and we have addressed their minor comments as detailed below. Changes have been highlighted in yellow. We are, of course, happy to make further edits as required.

Yours sincerely,

Victoria Williamson,
On behalf of the authors

We thank the reviewers for their thoughtful feedback, we found their comments very helpful.

Referee 1

1. Suggestion that we explain ‘AF’ abbreviation

We thank the reviewer for raising this and we have amended this point as suggested.

2. Recommendation that we explain why the findings reflect that the sample was comprised of those who had a mental health or emotional problem within the last three years
In the present study, we included participants who in a previous research study answered ‘yes’ to the question, ‘have you had a mental health, stress or emotional problem in the past three years?’. We describe this sampling strategy on page four.

3. Query whether those meeting criteria for an alcohol misuse problem may not perceive their drinking as a ‘mental health problem’

This is certainly a possibility. Although, as described above, participants were included if they self-reported experiencing an emotional or mental health problem in the last three years. Thus, it is equally possible that they do see their drinking as problematic. Unfortunately, it was beyond the scope of this study to ask whether participants meeting criteria for likely alcohol misuse felt that their drinking was problematic, but it is something that could be considered in future research.

4. Suggestion that the concerns endorsed in PTSD may reflect the perceived time commitment required for PTSD treatment

We thank the reviewer for this suggestion and have incorporated a statement to this effect in the discussion (page 12).

5. Suggestion that the difference in stigma profile between disorders could reflect variability in understanding of each disorder in the AF

We thank the reviewer for their insight and have incorporated a statement to this effect on page 11.

Referee 2

1. Recommendation that the tense of the Abstract is amended.

We have amended the tense used in the Abstract.

2. Suggestion that a data analysis and design section is included in the abstract

We have followed BMC guidelines regarding the abstract headings (e.g. Background, Methods, Results, Conclusions) but are happy to take further instruction from the Editor on this point.

3. Query whether key words should be dissimilar to those in the title

We have given this point careful consideration. As the purpose of keywords is to help other researchers find our manuscript when they are conducting a search on the topic, it is essential to include and select relevant keywords. We consider that our current keywords will facilitate this process.

4. Suggestion that editorial lapses are amended

We thank the reviewer for bringing these points to our attention. We have specified that AF means Armed Forces. We have included an additional reference to the Iversen et al. publication. We have changed the tense of our study aim on page four.
5. Suggestion that we describe the study design prior to our ethical approval statement

Our study design and procedures are thoroughly described in pages 4-6 and, in the interest of staying within journal word limits, we have chosen not to include this additional statement. We are, of course, happy to take further instructions from the Editor.

6. Query regarding participant inclusion/exclusion criteria

The present study was sampled from a large cohort study of UK military personnel/veterans, the protocol of which has been extensively describe in several previous studies. We have described this on page four and included several references for interested readers. We have specified the participant inclusion criteria for the present study on page four and trust this clearer for readers.

7. Query regarding internal validity, reliability and external validity as topics for discussion in the strength/limitations section

We describe on page 13 that our study had a high response rate and collected data independently from the military. At the same time, we acknowledge that self-report questionnaires were used, and study inclusion required participants to self-report a mental/emotional problem within the last three years which may have impact the results. As such, we consider that we have noted the relevant biases that could have affected the validity and reliability of our findings. However, should the Editor require further comment we are very happy to do so.

8. Suggestion that we include a practical recommendations section

In the interest of the journal’s word limit, we are not able to have a section for practical recommendations. However, throughout the discussion (pages 10-14) we have made several concrete recommendations for future clinical practice and research which we trust will be helpful to readers.