

Getting the Help You Need to Recover Your Emotional Health

Overview

How to get help when you are dealing with painful feelings or stress reactions

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- Services available in communities
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Are you adjusting to the home front after combat as well as you’d expected? Has a close friend or family member suggested that you talk with a counselor? Most of us find it hard to ask for help when thoughts, feelings, or memories are bothering us. We keep them to ourselves and hope they’ll go away on their own. As a service member, seeking help with problems can be especially difficult, because you may worry that by admitting that you aren’t where you’d like to be -- even to yourself -- you are letting down your unit members or your leaders. It may seem safer to endure these feelings than to let them out where you or anyone else can see them.

But when problems don’t go away on their own, asking for help is the right choice for a lot of reasons. If you are having a severe or prolonged reaction to combat or operational stress, and it is not getting better on its own, you could endanger yourself or those around you. Getting professional help can be the shortest route to feeling better. Most people recover more quickly from stress reactions when they address their issues early on. And deciding to get help at a time and place that you choose -- and there are choices -- offers a level of privacy that you will not have if you are ordered to seek help.

“Toughing it out”

The military values toughness, but also good judgment. The service is trying to help its members understand that there are times when even the toughest person may have a reaction to stress that doesn’t go away on its own. When weeks or months go by, and you continue to feel angry, sad, isolated, or numb; or you keep having nightmares or flashbacks; or the way you feel begins to interfere with your work or your relationships; then your distress is putting you at risk. No one suffers alone. Getting help may also help family, friends, and co-workers who may see the difficulties you are experiencing but feel unable to help.

Some leaders are more likely than others to acknowledge the importance of talking about concerns and can make it easier for service members to confide in each other for support or to seek professional help. But many service

members do not seek help. Several groups of recent returnees from Iraq or Afghanistan took part in a study three to four months after their return. Most of those who were suffering from a stress reaction acknowledged that they were having problems. Yet at best, only two out of five had asked for professional help.

Help with healing

Most people who seek help dealing with emotional problems find relief, recovery, and healing. They don't forget what they've been through, but they learn ways to make sense of their experience so that it doesn't control their lives. More is known now than ever before about how to help people deal with the complicated feelings that may have come home with them from a war zone. For example,

- A combat or operational stress reaction, or COSR, is a normal response to a terrible experience that intensifies so that it interferes with your work and your life. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is, broadly, COSR that continues for more than four weeks.
- Addressing the problem early can prevent longer-term problems.
- Learning skills such as anger management, communication, and conflict resolution can help protect your family and your job as you deal with the stress.
- Addressing specific job or family stress that you may face when you return from a war zone can help you deal with the war-related stress.
- “Medicating” yourself with alcohol or drugs can slow down your recovery.

Knowing when you need help

Making the decision to ask for professional help is not easy. You might begin by checking whether any of the following describe your situation:

- Am I feeling worse -- or not any better -- as time passes?
- Am I unable to do my job in the way I know it needs to be done?
- Is my family suffering because of the way I am acting?
- Am I drinking more alcohol than usual?
- Am I using drugs?
- Am I having trouble sleeping, or wanting to sleep too much?
- Have I had these problems for more than a few weeks?

Where do I start?

You do have choices when it comes to getting help. As you sort out your options, it's important to understand that help is available from various sources, both medical and non-medical: inside the military system, through the One Source program, and in the community. There are several things to consider as you decide what would work best for you.

Medical and non-medical services

In general, a visit to a doctor or a counselor at a medical facility generates medical records, whether you are inside or outside the military system. When a service is covered by health insurance, the records tell the insurance carrier what to pay for. These records may also be necessary when veterans seek benefits or make disability claims. There are privacy laws that protect these records to some extent.

Through non-medical social programs, either in the military, in organizations that serve military members, or in your community, you can also find psychologists, social workers, and other professionals who are licensed to do many different kinds of counseling. These programs, some of which are free, generally are not covered by health insurance, do not generate any medical records, and may not require any preauthorization or chain-of-command knowledge. Some agencies have received special grants to provide trauma-related services for free or on a sliding scale.

Information that cannot be kept private

People who work in the helping professions, whether inside or outside the military, have one strict limitation on the level of privacy they can offer. If a professional learns that someone has harmed or intends to harm him or herself or someone else (as in a case of child or domestic abuse), the counselor is required by law to report this information to a legal authority. This type of information is by definition not confidential under any circumstances.

A military doctor or counselor is governed by additional regulations that require him or her to inform service members' commands if their condition could impair their ability to do a job or could pose a threat to the mission. Otherwise, there is no need for them to share the results of their consultation, and military counselors are very serious about protecting their clients' privacy. However, they have to balance their responsibility to their client with their responsibility to the military. While they honor privacy laws, they are required to make exceptions when a service member's command requests information.

More stringent rules apply to service members on flight status, on the Personnel Reliability Program (PRP), or who have a high-level clearance. They must have periodic examinations by a military doctor, and the results are

reported to their command. When these same people seek help from the One Source program or in the community, they are obliged to notify the appropriate person in the chain of command that they have sought out help.

You choose the time

Your chances of privacy are much greater, even in the military system, if you decide to see a counselor on your own than if you are directed to do so by your command. In this latter case, the results of your evaluation must be reported to your command. (The rules that govern the process of command requesting an evaluation are outlined in the 1997 DoD Instruction 6490.4, “Requirements for Mental Health Evaluations of Members of the Armed Forces.”)

By seeking help on your own, you avoid the risk of having your command request an evaluation. Then, before you make an appointment with a counselor, you can ask the counselor about the level of privacy that he or she is able to offer.

Services available to members of the military

The resources that are available to you and your family differ among military services, Active and Reserve components, installations, and individuals, so you will need to explore what is available to you. Military benefits are generally available to active duty service members and their families. Active Reserve and Guard members and their families are eligible for many of these benefits, and there is usually a window of time before deactivation during which services are still available.

Military medical services

Active and activated service members and their families can receive medical care at a military treatment facility (MTF) or within their network of doctors. Call your regional TRICARE office and ask about mental health benefits or visit their Web site at www.tricare.osd.mil. Check whether you or a family member need a referral from your primary care manager (PCM) in order to see a counselor at your installation’s MTF or within the military network.

Military non-medical services

Many Family Service or Support centers on military installations provide short-term clinical counseling services and support groups. In many cases, these programs do not result in notations in medical records or notification of command.

Service-specific programs offer counseling, sometimes focused on one issue, such as substance abuse or family violence. The programs are too numerous to list, but a good starting point to find out more about these programs is the Defense Link Deployment Health Support Web site, deploymentlink.osd.mil.

From this site, you can find sites for each service branch, where programs are listed under various topics and departments. A few of the terms that can lead you to counseling services are *current deployments, family support, community, family, or personal services, family team building, suicide prevention, or return and reunion.*

Chaplains offer confidential counseling, as well as specific programs, such as the Warrior Transition program (www.usmc-mccs.org/MCFTB/warriortransition.asp).

The One Source program

The Military One Source program is an employee assistance program. The military has contracted with an organization outside the military to provide a 24-hour private help line that requires no preauthorization to use the services. The program is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve service members and their families regardless of activation or mobilization status.

Consultants provide advice over the help line and in many cases you can arrange for face-to-face consulting visits in your area. A consultant can help you figure out what you need, then either provide that help or refer you to someone who can help you. You can reach the program by telephone or through the Web site for your service.

- Army One Source at 800-464-8107 or www.armyonesource.com (user name: army; password: onsource)
- Air Force One Source at 800-707-5784 or www.airforceonesource.com (user name: airforce; password: ready)
- MCCS One Source, 800-869-0278 or www.mccsonesource.com (user name: marines; password: semperfi)
- Navy One Source at 800-540-4123 or www.navyonesource.com (user name: navy; password: sailor)

The Veterans Administration

It's important to find out about Veterans Administration (VA) benefits and policies while you are still in the military, as some benefits are available to active duty service members. For example, it is now VA policy to start treatment for COSR and PTSD in active duty members even before they separate from the service.

The Veterans Administration, at 800-827-1000 or www.va.gov offers services through their hospitals and clinics as well as through the Vet Centers located in many communities. These centers, separate from the medical system, provide support and assistance to veterans who served "anywhere during a

period of armed hostilities.” You can find the nearest center through the VA or the telephone book.

Services available in communities

You and your family may be able to find support in your community. DoD policy does not prohibit you from making the choice to use services other than those provided by the military. (As mentioned above, those on flight status, PRP, or with high-level clearances must report that they have sought out this help.) It’s important for all service members to know that

- DoD may not pay for counseling unless it is received in the military health care system (including the TRICARE network) or through the One Source program.
- DoD may not pay for any complications resulting from treatment outside the military health care system.
- Veterans may need their military medical records to prove the connection between their service and their disability in order to receive benefits.

Many organizations offer counseling or referrals at no or low cost. You can start with

- community mental health centers (your state’s office is listed at www.ncd.gov/mental.htm)
- the local chapter of the American Red Cross, listed at www.redcross.org
- United Way (www.unitedway.org), where you can find information and referral services that you can access in some states by dialing 2-1-1. You can find out whether the service is available in your state at www.211.org.
- local religious organizations
- local social service agencies

Understanding what counselors offer

Deciding to make an appointment with a counselor commits you only to that appointment. A counselor can’t force you to do anything you don’t want to do, including make another appointment. (This may not be the case if you are command-referred.) Once you’ve told a counselor about the kinds of problems you are having, you can work out a plan together for getting the help you need, taking into account your needs and your schedule. Most counselors will use more than one approach to a problem. Here are a few that have been successful in treating stress reactions:

- *Education* helps you understand the range of “normal” responses to stress and the process by which recovery takes place.

- *Help in developing coping skills* gives you specific methods you can practice and use to help you function day to day, such as anger management, relaxation, and communication.
- *Various kinds of therapy*, for an individual or a group, can help you recall events in a safe setting so that you can gradually change your current reaction to the event. Therapy can help you separate thoughts from feelings, so that thinking about an event doesn't trigger the disturbing emotions. The duration of therapy varies depending on the type of therapy and the issue you are addressing.
- *Family and marriage counseling* lets families practice using specific skills for coping with family problems.
- *Medication therapy* can work alongside education and counseling, because some antidepressants and other medications can help people through an acute phase, and some can help long term.

You can learn more about ways counselors can help from the National Center for PTSD (www.ncptsd.org), under "Information on the War in Iraq."

It's never too late

Sometimes depression, anxiety, and other stress reactions make you think that you will always feel the way you do at that moment, that you will never recover. Other times a reaction can be delayed for months or even years. Or a new bad experience can reawaken an old one: You may not have had any combat flashbacks for a year, and then after a car accident, you begin to have them again.

At the same time, one recovery lays a foundation for another. Seeking help once to get through a tough time, and coming out on the other side feeling better, gives you coping skills of your own. One of these is that you'll be better at knowing when it's time to ask for help.

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