



How to Help Military & Veteran Families

FOR MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS

Combat-intense, lengthy, and multiple deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have characterized the new millennium. The U.S. military has never been better trained; but concerns over potential lasting effects of deployment on long-term health continue to mount.¹ As a health care provider, you know the importance of establishing a relationship of trust and care with your patients. Understanding military culture can help you to open clear communication channels with service members, military families and veterans.

While military families are generally strong and resilient, separations and the stress of potential deployments, injuries or death can challenge even the healthiest of families. In some cases, these stresses can lead to a variety of symptoms. Whether providing patient care in an office, specialized or immediate care clinic, hospital, or emergency room, health care providers and their support teams are key to ensuring a full continuum of care for military families. The compassionate care you deliver can help answer critical questions, minimize stress and anxiety, and strengthen the resilience of the entire military community.

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Did you know?

- » Since 2001, nearly 2.5 million service members of the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard and related Reserve and National Guard units have been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, according to Department of Defense data.²
- » While injuries remain one of the most significant health problems of the armed services, it is the secondary result of injuries, especially musculoskeletal conditions resulting in permanent disability, that exact the greatest and most lasting toll on our service members.³
- » Musculoskeletal injury-related disability has been growing rapidly over past decades, as has the cost of care, rehabilitation and compensation for service-connected disability.⁴
- » According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, traumatic brain injury has been described as a “signature injury” of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq.⁵
- » In addition to changes in health risks such as smoking, increased drug and alcohol use, and weight issues possibly associated with deployment-related stressors, psychiatric disorders, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, also need significant attention.¹
- » The Center for Deployment Psychology offers several courses for health care providers to address psychological health needs of warriors and their families related to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and traumatic brain injury.⁶

Practical Applications

- Establish a system to determine a patient's military affiliation, past and present. One suggested method is to include a question pertaining to military service on your patient intake forms or inclusion of a military history question in your patient history assessment. Follow-up through face-to-face communication along with documenting this information for patient care can greatly reduce the burden for health care providers.



- Ensure at least one person on staff is dedicated to learning about the medical benefits and other services offered to military members and veterans through the Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs.
- Add military health care topics, such as signs and symptoms of illness, to your ongoing in-service education classes.
- Understand that each branch of the military has a language all its own. Check with the patient to be sure you understand his or her meaning.
- When treating children, find out if he/she is experiencing the deployment of a parent. Many stress responses manifest in physical symptoms.
- Be aware of military mental health resources and be prepared to refer patients if needed. TRICARE and Veterans Affairs can provide service members and veterans with a wide variety of mental health services.
- Utilize services and resources at the national, state and local levels that support recovery, rehabilitation and community reintegration of service members and veterans.
- Educate your staff on post-traumatic stress disorder, combat stress and traumatic brain injury. The Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs and National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder have many resources for recognizing signs and symptoms.

Additional Resources

Family medical practitioners hold trusted positions within civilian and military communities and serve as key outreach contacts in providing support for military service members and their families. Multiple and diverse resources are available to healthcare providers working with current service members, their families and veterans. Using these resources and professional development opportunities can significantly strengthen the health, security and safety of our nation's families and communities.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » *Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress: Resources for Recovery*, www.cstsonline.org/resources
- » *Deployment Health Clinical Center, Emerging Health Concerns: Combat/Operational Stress*, www.pdhealth.mil/op_stress.asp
- » *Force Health Protection & Readiness*, fhpr.dhhq.health.mil
- » *Iraq War Clinician Guide*, www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/manuals/iraq-war-clinician-guide.asp
- » *Military Health System*, www.health.mil
- » *National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, www.ptsd.va.gov
- » *National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: Traumatic Brain Injury*, www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/tbi
- » *National Resource Directory*, www.nrd.gov
- » *TRICARE Online*, www.tricare.mil
- » *U.S. Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms*, www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary
- » *U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*, www.va.gov
- » *War-Related Illness and Injury Study Center*, www.warrelatedillness.va.gov

For a printer-friendly version of this please visit www.mfri.purdue.edu/howtohelp



About MFRI

The goal of the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University is to create meaningful relationships that bring organizations together in support of military families. Working with researchers and practitioners from both the military and civilian communities, MFRI strives to develop outreach and research programs grounded in scientific evidence.



About the *How to Help* Series

The *How to Help* series equips communities to better serve service members, veterans and their families. The series offers effective, evidence-based guidance on how best to help military and veteran families given the unique challenges they face. Each *How to Help* addresses a different segment of that community, such as extended family, friends and neighbors; teachers; early childhood educators; faith-based groups; and professional service providers. We hope that by increasing understanding of the unique stresses, obstacles and opportunities that often accompany military service; we can strengthen communities by building their capacity to better support the military families within them.

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United States Department of Agriculture
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