

A woman in a military uniform is holding a baby in front of a tent. The woman is looking up at the baby with a smile. The baby is wearing a white shirt and blue pants. The background is a tent structure.

How to Help Military & Veteran Families

FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

Since 2001, nearly 2.5 million service members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and related Reserve and National Guard units have been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, according to Department of Defense data.¹

Family 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. Compassionate first responders can help answer critical questions, minimize stress and anxiety, and strengthen the resilience of the entire military community.

More than 22.7 million veterans are now living in the United States as civilians.² Understanding military culture can help first responders who encounter current service members, military families and veterans to open clear communication channels that lead to more productive outcomes. As a result of a decade of prolonged conflict, first responders will undoubtedly answer more calls involving service members, veterans and their families who face the long-term physical and emotional scars of war.³



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Did you know?

- » Combat deployments have exposed troops to extreme physical and psychological stressors, while families deal with their own deployment-related challenges.⁴
- » After experiencing a deployment, service members are faced with the reality of family life and the need to fit into new family roles and routines; family members can be both eager and reluctant to get things “back to normal.”⁵
- » Due to the military drawdown, during the next five years an estimated 1 million active duty military members are expected to join the ranks of more than 22 million U.S. veterans.⁶
- » Increasingly, veterans are coming home with irreversible traumatic brain injury (TBI), leaving lasting effects, including depression, anxiety and aggression. Service members and veterans affected by TBI and their families often need help and support that takes into account their special needs.⁷
- » The Uniform Interstate Family Support Act (UIFSA) helps determine jurisdiction between states where family court orders exist. It provides certain enforcement mechanisms for inter-jurisdictional situations. While it does not specifically address military family issues, UIFSA helps to clarify and provide guidance on legal interpretation of salient issues such as domicile and residency.⁸
- » The Department of Veterans Affairs, seeking to “avoid unnecessary criminalization of mental illness and extended incarceration” among veterans, has established the Veterans Justice Outreach Program to provide services and case management in liaison with local courts and jails.

Practical Applications

- Establish a method to determine an individual's military affiliation, past and present. This includes learning whether the individual is a military dependent.
- Become acquainted with the various benefits offered to military members so that you might be able to make suggestions for support to a service member or their family.



- The military has a language all its own. It's essential for first responders to understand military culture when working with a service member. Knowing how to properly address one who has served in the military, having a basic understanding of the branches of service and recognizing the unique stressors they've faced will allow you to communicate more effectively and empathetically, while assessing the patient's condition and needs.
- Understand that stigma about seeking help can be even stronger in the military than in the civilian community.
- Find out if the person you are working with has experienced a deployment, or the deployment of a spouse, sibling, child or 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 the Department of 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 staff on traumatic brain injury, combat stress and post-traumatic stress disorder. The Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder have many resources for recognizing signs and symptoms.

Additional Resources

Many first responders, including firefighters, emergency medical services and law enforcement personnel, have served in the military, so it is helpful to be sensitive to military culture with coworkers as well as individuals encountered on calls. First responders can greatly assist these people and their families when they're experiencing a crisis. For example, service members or veterans in distress can be directed to local veterans' centers with access to services and assistance. There are also medical facilities and legal resources designed specifically for military members, veterans and their families.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary
- » *Department of Veterans Affairs: Help for Homeless Veterans*, www.va.gov/homeless
- » *Department of Veterans Affairs: War-Related Illness and Injury Study Center*, www.warrelatedillness.va.gov
- » *From Injury to Home: Integrating Networks of Medical and Psychosocial Support on the Road from Battlefield Injury to Recovery*, www.couragetotalk.org/documents/From%20Injury%20to%20Home%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf
- » *Journal of Emergency Medical Services, Heroes to Hometowns: When Veterans Come Home*, www.jems.com/article/ptsd/heroes-hometowns
- » *National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: Traumatic Brain Injury*, www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/tbi
- » *National Resource Directory*, www.nationalresourcedirectory.org
- » *Resources for Recovery: Combat Injured Family (Provider Sheet)*, www.cstsonline.org/resources-for-recovery-the-combat-injured-family-guidelines-for-care-provider
- » *TRICARE Online*, www.tricareonline.com
- » *TRICARE Mental Health and Behavior*, www.tricare.mil/mentalhealth

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.

Developed by THE MILITARY FAMILY RESEARCH INSTITUTE at Purdue University
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United States Department of Agriculture
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RESEARCH REFERENCES

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