

## Breaking the Stigma: Mental Health Care in the Military

By: Doug Blocksma

Being a military member is not the same as it was generations ago, where (largely) young men signed up for tours that asked an incredible amount of bravery and much larger percentages for death – if not significant injury. The reality in how the American military has completed it's missions can be seen in these figures; there were roughly 2000 deaths in the Afghanistan campaign over a 13 year span, as compared to 58,000 deaths in the Vietnam War and 407,000 in WWII. Even with this development, however, many of the traditional 'tough-it-out' mentalities still exist within the ranks when it comes to mental health care – and they are hurting even more than our standard deployment schedules.

The idea that military service, and specifically deployment, negatively impacts mental health has been shown to be true at a significant rate (1, 2). Recent studies have demonstrated that while new procedures and resources have been put into place to facilitate the use of mental health services, they aren't being utilized enough. For soldiers referred to mental health services for PTSD, less than half actually received minimally adequate care, most did not follow up with treatment whatsoever (3). Further, a 2010 study found that only half of veterans of OEF/OIF who needed services actually received through the VA hospital system.(4)

This is not to say that with the new focus on the "War on Terror" that America is ignoring the impact of PTSD and other mental illnesses. While the rates of suicide among military members peaked in 2012 (22.7 people per 100,000) it came back to the national average of 18.7 in 2013 (5). This is good news, and possibly the fruit of the increased attention given to mental health issues. However, it is not yet enough.

The historical reputation of the military being tough enough for any job has served our armed services well. With the increase of mental health research and subsequent improved understanding of how severe stressors impact overall wellbeing, we recognize our Forces and our country are actually weaker than stronger. Being "tough" doesn't have to exclude asking for assistance when life becomes unmanageable. Even better, seeking help before it becomes unmanageable shows true strength and resilience.

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### Military Crisis Line



1-800-273-8255

The Military Crisis Line is free to all service members, including members of the National Guard, Reserves, and Veterans. Hundreds of men and women in the military call them every day, and start to get back on track.

The Military Crisis Line is staffed by caring, qualified responders from the VA—many of whom have served in the military themselves.

They understand what service members have been through and the challenges members of the military and their loved ones face.

If you're a service member in crisis or know one who is, confidential support is only a phone call, click, or text away—24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year (6).

# What Exactly is PTSD?

By: Mark Russell

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a condition that can result from exposure to a traumatic event. Trauma is complicated and can be understood in many different ways. A starting place for understanding trauma is with its definition. PTSD can be defined as "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (DSM 5). This exposure can be direct or indirect and impacts individuals in many different ways. Regardless of how trauma specifically impacts an individual, there is one lingering impact of trauma that can cause significant issues – intrusion. Traumatic events in the past have a tendency to invade the present and color our experiences. Most people have heard the phrase "looking at the world through rose colored glasses". Trauma can be understood in a similar manner but rather than rose colored, the glasses are trauma colored.

As previously stated, people are affected by trauma in many different ways. One such way is hypervigilance or hypersensitivity. People who experience trauma often experience increased sensory stimulation and feel an increased need to protect themselves from potential harm. One example of such sensitivity would be a veteran who experienced missile fire while stationed overseas reacting strongly to fireworks at a holiday celebration. However, there are many different ways that someone who has experienced trauma can be emotionally triggered. Frequently, while the triggered emotion is fear or powerlessness, the emotional response will often be one of anger or at very least irritability. Understanding that this emotional response is an attempt to protect rather than a desire to lash out or do harm is a key to engaging someone who has experienced trauma.

I cannot stress enough that PTSD is a complicated and difficult issue to overcome, but it is possible! There are multiple research-based approaches for treating PTSD including: Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PET), and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR). One last aspect of PTSD that is important to highlight is the tendency toward isolation and withdrawal. If you or someone you care about has experienced trauma in the past, I would strongly encourage you to seek professional help in addressing such issues. They are complicated and difficult to engage alone. Having someone to walk with you through the process can make all the difference in the world.



The Real Warriors Campaign is a multimedia public awareness campaign designed to encourage help-seeking behavior among service members, veterans and military families coping with invisible wounds. Launched by the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE) in 2009, the campaign is an integral part of the Defense Department's overall effort to encourage warriors and families to seek appropriate care and support for psychological health concerns.

Real Warriors Campaign features a variety of strategies including outreach and partnerships, print materials, media outreach, an interactive website, mobile website and social media. The campaign features stories of real service members who reached out for psychological support or care with successful outcomes, including learning coping skills, maintaining their security clearance and continuing to succeed in their military or civilian careers. These Real Warriors are proving through example that reaching out is a sign of strength that benefits the entire military community.

In addition, the campaign encourages use of the DCoE Outreach Center, a 24/7 call center staffed by health resource consultants to provide confidential answers, tools, tips and resources about psychological health and traumatic brain injury. The Outreach Center can be reached by calling 866-966-1020, connecting through live chat or emailing [resources@dcoeoutreach.org](mailto:resources@dcoeoutreach.org). For more information, please visit <http://realwarriors.net/> (7)

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I am a military spouse. The life of a military spouse is littered with unique opportunities that I am often honored and excited to embrace. I value the diversity of experience that the military offers. I enjoy some of the free movie previews offered on base. I enjoy having friends all over the world. I love being a part of something bigger than myself. I embrace many of the perks.

There are also many moments that the military hands me that I am not eager to embrace. One of my least favorite, so far, is the drive to and from the airport. Saying goodbye at the airport to my husband, knowing it will be at least 5 months until I feel his embrace again, sucks. There is no way around it. It just sucks. Driving home with that sinking pit in my stomach sucks. Turning onto our street for the first time and seeing his car parked in front without him to drive it is sad. Opening the door to an empty house for at least the first week is tough too.

That is just a snapshot, a glimpse of the “suck” than many military spouses share as a part of military life. Add children to that scenario and the variety of challenges and emotional weight increases.

Military spouses are well aware of the not-so-funny laws that seem to be set in place for them during deployments or other long term separations. It's like Murphy's Law – if something can go wrong, it will. The basement will flood; the roof will leak; a tree will fall on the car; a mystery smell of unknown origin will grow in the house; the internet will go out; the AC/heat will go out; if you are in school at least one of your professors will be completely unreasonable; that mystery smell will evolve into an odor; your email account will be hacked; one of the kids will bring home the worst flu bug that you have seen in years and will never hit the toilet target when they vomit; a good friend will move away; the hamster will die; the toilet will back up (hopefully not related to the dead hamster); bills will get mixed-up; the odor begins to take over more rooms of your home and you launch a search and destroy mission to locate its origin – coming up empty; the grass grows 5000 times faster this summer; raccoons discovered how easy it is to knock down your fully loaded dumpster before trash night; your kids have unprecedented nightmares; your parent that lives 1000 miles away becomes severely ill; you have difficulties at work; the toaster catches on fire; someone has a mild to severe vehicle accident; and **WHAT IS THAT STENCH!?!?**

Through it all you are navigating an array of complex emotions brought on by the suck. Missing your spouse.

The heartstrings your kids pull as they attempt to navigate their own emotions connected with missing a parent. Sometimes you experience anger toward your spouse for not being present or toward the military for taking him/her away from you. There is loneliness. There is jealousy towards couples enjoying a date night, although you know the jealousy and anger are unfairly projected onto others. For me, I am not jealous of couples who are able to spend time together; I just miss spending time with my husband. I am not angry at my husband for not being present to team up with me on hunting down the mystery stench. I am unhappy with the situation, and sometimes it is easier to be angry toward a person than a situation.

I am often sad, lonely, and angry in these moments. These are the suck. At this point, some may accuse me of embracing pessimism or inviting the uncomfortable experience of negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Talk to two or more military spouses, and they will confirm that these seas of military separation are rarely smooth. Optimism does not keep a car from breaking down (although regular maintenance might help) or a tree from crushing the roof of your car. On the other hand, viewing the suck with a glass-half-full point of view doesn't summon the wind that leaned on the tree. This stuff happens.

Embracing the suck as a military spouse isn't about whether I view the glass as half-full or half-empty. My perception of the fullness of the glass is heavily determined by what type of beverage is in the glass. If the beverage is prune juice (don't ask me why I am drinking prune juice) it is to my benefit to view the glass as half empty. I view the contents from a delicious brew of coffee as half-full. I prefer to choose what goes in my cup. When I cannot choose what is poured into the cup, I choose how I perceive the contents.

Yeah, I can be mad that my husband left me with a glass full of suck to drink. Then I am mad, still holding the glass, and that beverage of not-my-favorite-choice hasn't magically evaporated. The suck remains. I could displace all my frustrations on everything and anyone who crosses my path. Doesn't change the contents of the glass – but it did change my mood and likeability factor with other people who witnessed my displaced fury and frustration.

There will be a glass. There will be a beverage. Not all beverages will be savory. I accept this.

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## Exceptional Family Members Program (EFMP)

Support for military families with special needs family members is provided through the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP). Although each Service has its own EFMP, they all serve the same essential function: coordinating the assignment process to ensure special needs families are not sent to locations that lack adequate medical or educational resources. Installation EFMP programs offer support programs and provide families with information about and referrals to local services. Enrollment in the **EFMP is mandatory** for active duty service members who have dependent family members with ongoing medical, mental health, or special educational needs.

The primary role of the EFMP is to prevent special needs military families from being sent to locations without adequate medical or educational services. As part of the assignment coordination process, personnel officials consult with medical and educational professionals at the proposed location to determine if a family's needs can be met there. Typically, if the determination is made that the family's needs cannot be met at an installation, another assignment will be found for the service member. Some special needs families choose to stay at their previous location and allow the service member to travel alone to the new assignment.

DOD policy allows (but does not require) the military Services to provide family support services specifically for exceptional family members at family centers on military installations with an EFMP. Available services vary among the military Services and from installation to installation. In some locations, EFMPs offer respite care and/or recreational programs that can accommodate family members with special needs. They may also provide information about local support groups, available advocacy services, and accessible housing. Families can call Military OneSource at 800.342.9647 and ask for a referral to a special needs consultant. (9)

### F.E. Warren Air Force Base

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Force Base and the 90th Missile Wing, home of the missileer, is proud of their close relationship with the Cheyenne community and contribution of 150 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles to the strategic deterrence of our nation. (10) For more information about health care services, newcomer information, security forces, force support, base tours, and news visit <http://www.warren.af.mil/>

FUN at Warren—Provides combat support and quality of life services for the FE Warren Community. (11) For links to dining, employment, lodging, youth programs, commissary/exchange, theatre schedule and to sign up for the recreation guide "The Antelope", visit <http://www.funatwarren.com/>



Military OneSource is a confidential Department of Defense-funded program providing comprehensive information

on every aspect of military life at no cost to active duty, National Guard, and reserve members, and their families. Information includes, but is not limited to, deployment, reunion, relationships, grief, spouse employment and education, parenting and childhood services. It is a virtual extension to installation services (8). For more information, please visit <http://www.militaryonesource.mil/>

## Embrace the Suck (Cont.)

After I change my perception of the glass contents, how do I actually embrace it?

- Know that there will be suck.
- Know that the suck is temporary.
- Accept that at some point, even the most well-meaning people will let you down.
- People will surprise you with their kindness – don't write anyone off.
- Embrace the suck is not the same as brace for the suck.
- ASK FOR HELP! – I cannot emphasize this enough. People often want to help but they do not know how. (article to come soon)
- If the suck is especially sucky on a particular day, let someone you trust in on your reality.
- Use the resources available – Opportunities provided by base programs, Networking opportunities, Military Discounts provided by generous businesses in the community.
- Don't keep your spouse completely in the dark. (article to come soon)
- Laugh at it. Just laugh at it.
- Consider counseling. Admittedly, I am a bit biased about the helpfulness of this resource.
  - Tricare offers coverage for mental health counseling.
  - Military Family Life Consultants are a free service with confidentiality that is available to military and their family.
  - The base chaplains are also available for completely confidential counseling. One does not need to be “religious” to utilize this service.
- Take pictures of the stuff that goes wrong and make a funny album of all the blunders.
- Embrace the opportunities provided during your spouse's absence. If you normally hold back on enjoying seafood (at home or eating out) because your spouse finds the smell of repugnant – then it is time to put salmon back on the menu. Catch up on the action-adventure movies that your spouse never seems to want to watch. Sign up for a class and throw yourself into a project. Learn. Create. Enjoy.
- Enjoy the flexibility of having one less person's schedule to plan around. Maybe you can catch a movie with a buddy at the last minute, enjoy a spontaneous road trip with your friends, spend extra time nourishing friendships, and jump on an impromptu play date for the kids.

This article is written with honesty and a touch of lightheartedness. It is not always easy to simply choose to perceive the glass contents as being radically different from its contents. There are times when tragedy strikes during separations, there may be underlying symptoms of depression or anxiety, or maybe the glass is overflowing with the suck. Maybe there are some toxic relationships in your life that are creating a difficult space to be able to cope and take care of yourself. This is not a “fake it till you make it” message. This is a message of acceptance and adapting. It is not a “how to” on happiness but meant to encourage finding a better way. Changing what is within your control (inner perception) and riding the waves of what is not (the suck).

One final note: I cannot speak for all military spouses. Each of our experiences are uniquely ours, have great variance, but many similar threads. The thoughts expressed are the thoughts generated from my own experiences and the experiences of many individuals who I have had the honor of knowing from past to present. Each of us has our own story, and I encourage you to honor each story by acknowledging its uniqueness.

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Resources: (1) <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=209441> (2) <http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=202463> (3) <http://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/abs/10.1176/appi.ps.201300307> (4) <http://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/abs/10.1176/appi.ps.201300111> (5) <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2015/01/16/defense-department-suicides-2013-report/21865977/> (6) <http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/Default.aspx> (7) <http://realwarriors.net/> (8) <http://www.militaryonesource.mil/> (9) <http://www.militaryfamily.org/info-resources/efmp-special-needs.html> (10) <http://www.warren.af.mil/> (11) <http://www.funatwarren.com/>