



Helping your children

**Coping with trauma
in a military family**



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs



PHOENIX
AUSTRALIA | Centre for
Posttraumatic
Mental Health

“The hardest thing about what I’m going through has been seeing the toll it’s taken on my family. **I want to be the dad I used to be**, but things have changed. My daughter is upset that I’ve been missing her soccer games, but I can’t go – I feel exhausted, and I get really wound up when I’m around that many people. **I don’t know how to explain to my kids what I’m going through without scaring them.** I worry about whether I’m doing a good enough job as a parent.”



This booklet is for parents or care-givers who are serving, transitioning, or ex-serving members of the ADF and are managing the impacts of trauma.

You might have been through trauma yourself, or it might be your partner or ex-partner who has experienced trauma. Either way, this booklet will help you to understand how the effects of that trauma can impact on your children, and your parenting. You'll find advice for helping your children understand what's going on in your family, and for how you can help your children to cope.

Trauma and the military

Experiencing or witnessing an event that is life threatening, or has the potential to cause serious injury, can be traumatic.

A military career can involve exposure to multiple traumatic events. This may be through combat experience, but may also be from physical or sexual assault, being injured, or witnessing widespread suffering, poverty, or natural disaster.

Traumatic events are emotionally distressing. With the help of family and friends, most people who go through something traumatic cope well. But some people will experience ongoing problems after trauma and need professional treatment.



“Night time is the worst. He has nightmares and his shouting wakes the kids. **They’re teenagers and they get that he’s unwell. Still, they worry a lot about him and whether he’ll be OK.**”

The impacts of trauma

Trauma can sometimes lead to mental health problems, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression or anxiety.

These problems can include the following experiences:

Reliving the traumatic event

through flashbacks, nightmares, vivid and unwanted memories, and intense reactions when reminded of the event.

Feeling tense and wound up

including feeling angry or irritable, being easily startled or constantly on the lookout for danger, and having trouble sleeping or concentrating.

Avoiding reminders

such as activities, places, people, thoughts or feelings that bring back memories of the traumatic event.

Difficult thoughts and feelings

such as sadness, hopelessness, emptiness, fear, anger, guilt, and feeling numb or cut off from friends and family.

Loss of interest and pleasure

including losing interest in activities that used to be enjoyable, or feeling less joy than usual.

Tiredness and loss of energy

including needing to sleep much more than usual. Other unexplained physical symptoms, like pain, nausea, and loss of appetite can also result from mental health difficulties.

Reliance on drugs or alcohol to cope

This can be a problem if the use of drugs or alcohol stops a person from spending time with family, leads them to take risks they wouldn't normally take, or causes further health problems.

Reliance on gambling to cope

Gambling can be a problem if a person can't stop, or the gambling causes financial stress and relationship difficulties.

If you notice any of these issues in yourself, talk to your GP, Medical Officer, or call Open Arms as a first point of contact.

“At first the drinking seemed to help, it loosened him up. But now **he does things that really scare me** – picks fights, and insists on driving home. The next day he’s really **angry and irritable**. It’s affected the kids too – they keep their distance now.”



Trauma and parenting

Parenting is challenging for everyone at times. It can be especially challenging if you're managing the impacts of trauma.

If you're feeling irritable, angry, or cut off from other people, including your family, it can be distressing for both parents and children, and it can be very difficult to be the kind of parent you want to be.

“My youngest asked, ‘Is Mummy angry with me?’ I explained, ‘No, **she’s a bit sad at the moment, but not because of you. She loves you very much.**’ My wife told him the same thing the next day. He seemed reassured.”



Talk to your children

Regardless of how old your children are, it's important to talk to them about what you're going through.

Here are some examples of how other people have explained their experiences to their children.

When families don't talk about the impacts of trauma, it can cause more problems. Children who are kept in the dark may make up their own stories about what is going on, and they often assume it is somehow their fault.

Older

Sometimes I can't stop thinking about some bad memories. That's why I might seem distracted or uninterested.

You don't need to worry when I'm jumpy like this. Sometimes I feel like I'm back in the past, but it doesn't last long. I remember I'm here, and safe, and then I'm OK.

I'm sorry I got angry. It's not because of you. I feel on edge at the moment. My body is all tense and wound up.

Younger

I'm feeling a bit sad today, but I feel better when I see you having fun playing.



“I snapped at Jamie the other day. He went into his shell. I wanted to talk to him about what’s going on, but **I didn’t know how, or where to start.** I decided to get out the guitars. We used to play together before my last deployment. **It helped, doing something while we talked.** I said sorry for snapping at him, and **explained I’m working on my temper** with a counsellor.”



“I was feeling so low that day. I could see she was a bit upset, but I didn’t feel up to reassuring her. Instead, I **put a little note in her lunch box saying ‘I love you’.**”

How much do my children need to know?

What you decide to share with your children will depend on their ages and what you think they can understand.

In general, it is best to be as honest as possible, and be guided by your children when deciding how much they need to know.

It is better that you don't tell your children about the details of the traumatic event itself. It is more important to explain how it has impacted you. Make sure you give them examples that they can relate to. You can help your child understand by reminding them of a time when they felt a similar way.

“You know when you had to speak in front of the class, and you felt all wobbly and a bit sick before it? That's how I feel when I hear people talk about fighting or war.”

The most important thing for any child is to know that they are loved.

It doesn't have to be said with words. You might say it through physical touch, praise, spending time together, or by showing you are interested in what they are doing.

How can I help my children?

To help your children cope with the effects of the trauma you have experienced, it is important to manage your stress, keep a sense of routine in their lives, and for all of you to express your feelings.

Managing stress

- The most important thing you can do is to take good care of yourself and get the help you need.
- This includes working out what people, places or things remind you of the traumatic event, so that you can start to predict and manage your behaviour.
- When you are feeling stressed, explain this to your children. You can also teach them how you cope with stress, to help them learn ways of coping.
- Apologise to your children when it is appropriate, for example, if you lose your temper.

“I was feeling out of control with frustration. I told my daughter I needed a break, left the room, and took some deep breaths. Later, I came back and told her that I’d been feeling really angry about something that happened in the past, and reassured her that I was not angry with her. I explained that I’d left to calm down, and that breathing slowly and deeply helped me feel better. The next time she was feeling upset, I reminded her that I’d had feelings like that too, and we did some breathing exercises together until she calmed down.”



Maintain a routine and a sense of safety

- Maintain a routine so that your children feel secure and safe. For example, have regular mealtimes together or a bedtime routine.
- Monitor your children's media exposure about war and terrorism: make sure content is age-appropriate.
- Spend some one-on-one time with your children each day.
- Have a daily ritual that you do together, such as going to the park after school.
- Take part in your children's activities when you can. When you can't, encourage them to still take part and have fun.

Express emotions

- Encourage your children to express their emotions. This does not mean you have to accept inappropriate behaviour such as shouting or calling people names.
- Help your children to describe how they feel. For older children, that might mean finding a time to talk. For younger children, ask them to draw or point to where they feel things in their body.

Young children

What's important for young children?

- Having a routine at home.
- Spending time with you. For example, reading a bedtime story together each night.
- Reassurance that you love them and that they have not done anything wrong.

Annie, age 5

“ We noticed Annie was behaving like a little kid again. She became really clingy and was having tantrums. It wasn't until we spoke to a psychologist that we realised it might be because of the tension in the house.”



Helping younger children express how they feel

Ask your child:

“Which face is closest to how you feel right now?”



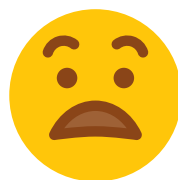
Happy



Sad



Angry



Scared



Shy



Confident



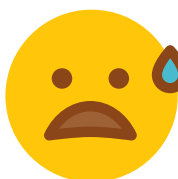
Surprised



Ashamed



Disgusted



Tired



Confused



Bored

Older children

What's important for older children?

- Explain your feelings and behaviours using simple language they can relate to.
- Encourage your children to express how they feel. This might be through words, writing, drawing, or play.
- Model and explain healthy ways of dealing with emotions.
- Check how they are going at school by talking with their teachers.

Ben, age 9

"I thought Ben was fine, but his teacher said he hadn't been concentrating in class. When she talked to him, he burst into tears and said his mum was sick with PTSD and didn't love him anymore. We didn't even know he knew the term PTSD! Knowing that really helped. We were able to sit down and explain things to him."

Claire, age 12

"Claire seemed to take it in her stride. She's always been mature for her age, and she started doing more around the house. She would say things to her younger brother that sounded just like her mother, tutting at him and saying he needed to be patient with me. It was sweet, but we realised it wasn't right. We want her to have a childhood, not think she has to be a grown-up already."

Adolescents

What's important for adolescents?

- Remember your children are trying to form independent identities separate to the family. Give them some space and freedom for this.
- Support your children to spend time with peers. Help them find words to explain to others what is happening in the family if they need to.
- Remember that routine, reassurance, and feeling loved by you are still very important at this age.
- Talk with your partner or someone close about how the effects of trauma might be impacting on your parenting (for example, being overprotective), and come up with ways to address this.

James, age 16

“Things were tricky with James. He got really angry at me, saying I didn't know what was happening in his life and didn't even care. I was able to explain then that I really did care, but that, because of my symptoms, I often feel irritable and it's hard to tune in to what's going on for him. This helped us a lot.”



Where can we go for help?

You don't have to get through this on your own. By identifying and strengthening your children's support networks the whole family will benefit. Think about who could provide support to your children and your family.

Family

Grandma

School

Favourite
teacher

School
counsellor

Community

Defence
Community
Organisation

What if my child isn't coping?

Your child may benefit from professional support if he or she:

- seems unusually anxious, sad, fearful, or upset
- is easily irritated or angry
- shows a marked change in sleep or appetite
- withdraws from activities they usually enjoy
- finds it difficult to concentrate or pay attention at school, is getting into trouble more, or is not achieving as well as usual
- engages in risky behaviours
- has difficulty separating from you or your partner (especially younger children)
- has regular physical complaints that are not easily explained by illness (especially younger children).

To access professional support for your child, speak to your GP about services available in your area, or speak to your child's school.



Where can we get more information or help?

Resources for you

Confidential counselling for individuals, couples, or families is available. Speak to your GP or Medical Officer for further information, or contact one of the services below.

Defence Community Organisation

supports serving members, reservists and their families. It offers information and support services for parents, educational assistance, and wellbeing programs and resources for youth. Contact them on their all-hours Defence Family Helpline: 1800 624 608, or email DefenceFamilyHelpline@defence.gov.au

The ADF confidential all-hours support line provides advice on ADF and civilian mental health services available for current serving members or reservists and their families. Call 1800 628 036 in Australia or +61 2 9425 3878 outside Australia.

Open Arms – Veterans & Families Counselling provides individual, couple and family counselling to veterans, current serving and ex-serving members of the ADF and their families. Call 1800 011 046 for more information.

You do not have to be a current or former ADF member, or have permission from an ADF member, to access any of these three services.

Relationships Australia provides counselling, family dispute resolution, and education and support programs. Call 1300 364 277.

SANE Australia provides online resources and a telephone and online help centre. Call 1800 187 263 or Google 'SANE Australia'.

Raisingchildren.net.au provides information about parenting and programs to support you in your parenting role.

Parent helplines. Google 'Parentline' along with your State or Territory to find out more.

Further resources. Have a look at DVA's At Ease website for mobile apps and other resources designed to support your mental health.



The impacts of trauma can make parenting more challenging. To support your family you need to support yourself first and get the help you need.

Resources for children

Kids helpline – telephone and online support for young people 5-25: call 1800 551 800.

Headspace – face-to-face, telephone, and online support for young people 12-25 years and their families: Google 'Headspace'.

ReachOut – online resources for youth and families: Google 'ReachOut'.

Children of Parents with a Mental Illness – an online resource for youth and families managing mental illness: Google 'COPMI'.

Child and Adolescent/Youth Mental Health Services – accept referrals for children from 0-18 with behavioural, mood and other mental health problems: Google 'CAMHS' and your state.

DVA's **At Ease website** has downloadable information booklets for children and adolescents.

Find out if your child is eligible to attend a SMART program run by the Defence Community Organisation. **TeenSMART** and **KidSMART** are programs that teach children coping strategies.

Treatments for trauma

If your partner is experiencing trauma-related mental health problems, effective treatments are available.

You or your partner can speak to a GP, Medical Officer, or mental health professional for further information.

You can also directly access the services on the opposite page.



“Speaking to a professional was awkward. But **it was good to be able to share what was on my mind**, without worrying I was going to overload someone else. The work we did in therapy was hard, but worth it. We moved at a pace I could cope with, and I realised how much the trauma I experienced has been interfering with my life. **I’m starting to feel I have some control again**. The best thing was being able to say to my daughter that **I was doing everything in my power to get better**, so that we could do all the fun things we used to do together. I felt proud, and I think it made her feel special. **I’m starting to be the kind of dad again that I want to be.**”

This booklet is intended for parents or care-givers where one or both is a serving, transitioning, or ex-serving member of the ADF experiencing mental health difficulties following trauma.

This booklet was developed by Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health with input from the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Open Arms – Veterans & Families Counselling, Defence Community Organisation (DCO), and the Australian Defence Force Mental Health Directorate. Phoenix Australia wishes to express appreciation to the current and former ADF members, family members, and ex-service organisation representatives who provided feedback on this booklet.

HELPING YOUR CHILDREN – COPING WITH TRAUMA IN A MILITARY FAMILY

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