



Supporting your partner

**Coping with trauma
in a military family**



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs



PHOENIX
AUSTRALIA

Centre for
Posttraumatic
Mental Health

“He’s not been the same since his last deployment. **He’s home, but he’s not really here.** There have been a couple of times when **the memories of his deployment really get to him** – it’s like it’s happening all over again for him. **It’s really hard to see him go through that.** I feel so helpless.”



This booklet is for the partners of serving, transitioning, or ex-serving members of the ADF who have been affected by trauma.

The booklet will help you to understand the impact of trauma on relationships. You'll find advice for looking after yourself and for helping your partner manage his or her symptoms. It also provides some ideas for keeping your relationship strong.

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.



The impacts of trauma

Trauma can sometimes lead to mental health problems, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and 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 your partner can't stop, or the gambling causes financial stress and relationship difficulties.

If you notice any of these problems in your partner, encourage them to seek help. They can talk to their GP, Medical Officer or Open Arms as a first point of contact.

Trauma and relationships

When someone you care about has been through a traumatic experience, it affects you and your family as well.

Trauma can change a person's feelings and behaviour, and that can have an impact on your relationship.

If your partner is not coping, it can change your role in the family. You might find you have to take on greater financial or parenting responsibilities. This might feel overwhelming or frustrating at times.

Sometimes, it can also be hard to feel physically and emotionally close following trauma. Many people withdraw or lose interest in having sex when they experience mental health difficulties.



“He gets really irritable these days. We’re all walking on eggshells around him, not wanting to set him off. I try to be understanding, but I find myself getting angry. Sometimes, I’m not sure I can deal with it anymore.”

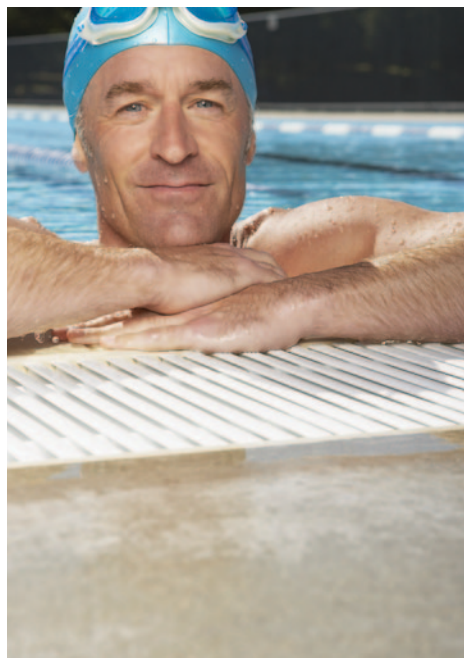


“Sometimes it all seems too much. I can’t carry our family through this. I need her to step up. And then I feel terrible for thinking that when it’s not her fault – she’s unwell. Of course, **there are the other times too.** Times when things seem normal, when it’s like it was before. Then I remember why we’re still together.”

How can I look after myself?

Here are some things you can do.

1. Keep doing activities that are important to you
2. Get regular exercise
3. Eat well
4. Keep in touch with friends and family
5. Find a space where you can be yourself. It might be doing an activity you love, or making sure you have some time alone
6. Make a regular time to gather your thoughts and recharge
7. Do something you enjoy
8. Celebrate good times and small improvements
9. Say 'yes' when help is offered
10. Be kind to yourself. Expect to have mixed feelings about what your partner is going through, and try not to judge yourself harshly for having these feelings.
11. Get help when you need it. We all need help at times. Organisations that can assist you and your family are listed on page 14.



“It helped to keep going swimming together each week. Sometimes I had to talk her into it, and I often felt too exhausted, but we did it, and **we always felt better afterwards**. We felt closer to one another. It's something we've always done together.”

Don't just think about it, do it.

Change happens when you do things differently.

Make a plan now to look after yourself by doing one or more of the activities listed on the previous page. They don't have to be big things – it could be as simple as making a time to have a relaxing bath.

Too busy? Don't know where to start?

Pick just one activity and make a time to do it each week.

Week 1 activity

Week 2 activity

Week 3 activity

Week	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
1							
2							
3							

“She kept wanting to tell me all about what she went through in Timor. I couldn’t listen to it. I tried, but it was too disturbing. Then she’d feel guilty about offloading onto me. It wasn’t a good cycle we were in. When I explained to her how upsetting it was to hear what she’d suffered, it prompted her to get some help and speak to a professional. Things got a bit easier for us then. I didn’t have to hold it all.”



How can I support my partner?

There are things you can do to help your partner:

- **Offer to listen** when and if your partner wants to talk. This does not mean you have to ask about the details of the traumatic events or discuss information that you find difficult to cope with. A counsellor can help your partner make sense of difficult memories.
- **Create routines** that involve your partner in family activities.
- **Show you care.** If you're not one for words, you can do this by spending time together, showing an interest in your partner's day, or through physical touch.
- **Get informed.** Knowing about the effects of trauma can help you make sense of what your partner is going through.
- **Make time** for the things you enjoy doing together.
- **Encourage your partner to keep in touch** with friends and family.
- **Encourage your partner to seek help.**
- **Share information and resources about mental health with your partner** and ask 'Have you seen this?' This can be enough to make them aware that help is available. A list of resources is available on page 14 of this booklet.

"I felt helpless, and he felt terrible. We'd have fights about his temper and his drinking. **We talked about how to help him stop. He said what really helps him is when I remind him that there's no shame in getting help, and that I love him. He said he's not ready to see a counsellor, but he agreed to see his GP, and said that we would talk again. In the end, it's up to him.**"

Some people worry that admitting to mental health problems is a sign of weakness or that they may be judged for needing help. Remind your partner that experiencing a mental health problem is common and that you are there to support them.

Coping with difficult behaviours

Strong feelings like fear and anger can be very hard to deal with. If your partner is experiencing strong feelings, the following ideas may be helpful.

- **Set clear rules** for acceptable behaviour. Your partner might be suffering, but that does not give them the right to shout or slam the door. Sit down together when you're both calm and set rules for what behaviour is OK, and what isn't.
- **Understand your limits.** If there are times when you feel you're unable to be supportive, or hear about your partner's experiences, explain that to them. You need to look after yourself first, or else you can't be a strong support for them.
- **Take time out.** If conversations become too difficult or heated, take a break. This gives you time to unwind and the space to think more clearly. Try to say that you're taking a break before you go. Always come back to continue the conversation after you've had time out.
- **Work out what triggers memories of the trauma.** Being reminded of a traumatic event, especially if it happens unexpectedly, can cause an intense reaction, such as rage, fear, or mood swings. Memories can be triggered by a loud sound, feeling trapped, hearing upsetting news coverage, or a significant anniversary. If you know what can trigger the memories and cause distress, you can point out to your partner what has made them upset.
- **Work together to get mentally and physically fit.** Make this a joint task. Develop routines that calm the mind and body, such as going for walks, practising yoga, or going to the gym.



Download the 'PTSD Coach Australia' app.

This has tools that help people relax and get in touch with their surroundings.

Dealing with flashbacks and panic attacks

When someone experiences a flashback, they feel like they're right back in the traumatic event, as if it is all happening again.

Similarly, if a person becomes very anxious, and experiences a panic attack, they may become unaware of where they are. At these times, help your partner to become aware of their own body and surroundings.

- Say to your partner: 'You're having a flashback/panic attack. It feels real, but what you're experiencing is not actually happening. You're safe right now.'
- Tell your partner to look at what is around them and describe out loud what they can see.
- Tell your partner to take slow deep breaths. Count for them to help them slow down their breathing: 1, 2, 3, breathe in; 1, 2, 3, breathe out.
- Be aware that sudden movements and sounds can startle them – talk to your partner about their specific triggers so that you can support them in managing flashbacks and panic attacks.
- Ask before you touch them.
- Take time to look after yourself. These experiences can be scary or overwhelming for you. Talk to someone you trust about how it's impacting on you.

If you are concerned about your or another person's safety, contact the police on 000.

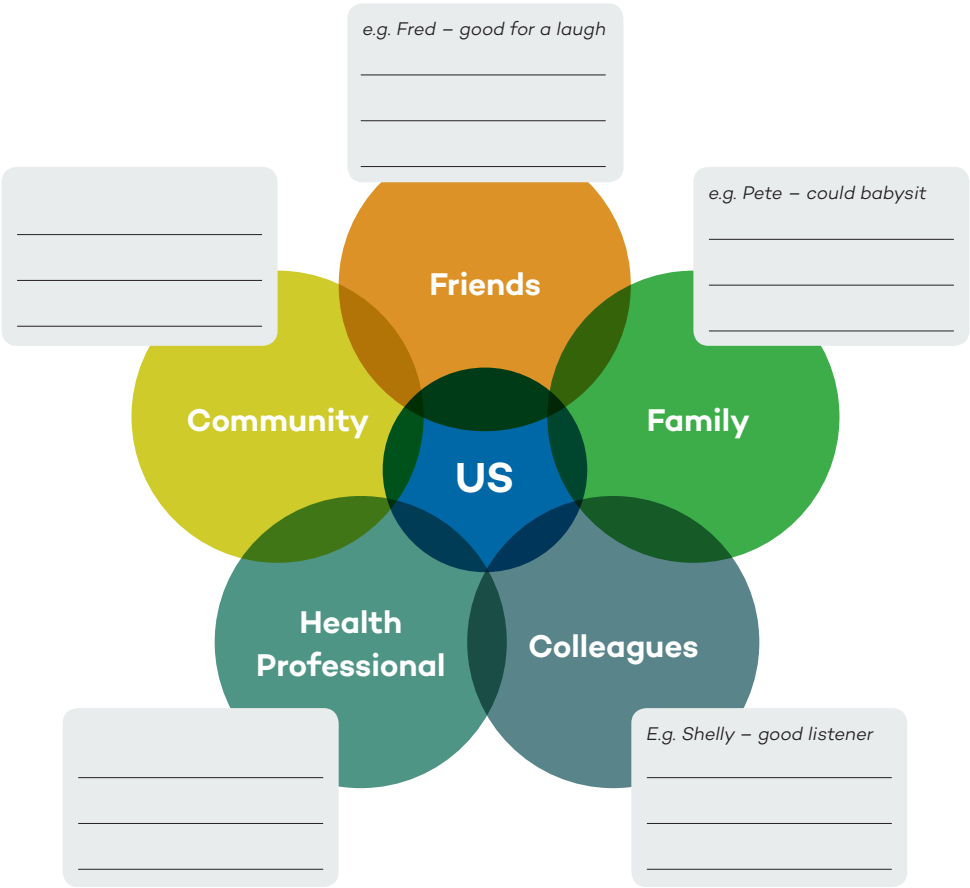
You can also call 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732)

– the national family violence and sexual assault counselling service – to speak with a professional counsellor any time, any day. This service is free and confidential.

Making the most of your social network

It's common for people who've been through trauma to withdraw from family and friends.

This can make things worse and leave both you and your partner feeling alone and isolated. Work to maintain your social connections and reach out to people who care about your partner.



How can I support our relationship?

Trauma can have a significant impact on relationships.

It's easy to get fed up and grow apart, and it can be hard to feel love for one another and to keep a feeling of connection.

Communicating your needs and sharing with your partner what you find hard can help you to understand one another and keep a sense of closeness.

Tips for communicating

- **Pick the right time.** When do you both have time, energy, and privacy?
- **Listen without judgement.** Listening does not mean you're agreeing with what your partner says.
- **Allow your partner to finish talking before you speak.** Only when your partner feels fully heard will they be ready to listen to you.
- **Make sure you have understood what your partner was trying to say before you give advice or suggestions.** Repeating what you have understood helps your partner feel heard.
- **Voice how you feel.** Don't assume your partner knows how you are feeling or what you're thinking.
- **Plan what you want to say. It's important that you and your partner are able to communicate how each of you is being affected by mental health problems.** 'I'm finding some of your symptoms really challenging. I'm telling you this because I love you and want us to find a solution together.'
- **Tell your partner what you do want, not just what you don't want.** 'I want you to listen to how I've been feeling'. 'When I cry, I just want you to hold me.'

Where can I go for help?

**You don't have to go through this on your own.
Help is available when you need it.**

Confidential counselling for individuals, couples, or families is available. Speak to your GP for support or further information, or access the services below by contacting them directly. You do not need permission from your partner.

- **Open Arms – Veterans & Families Counselling (formerly VVCS)**

provides free, confidential counselling and group programs specifically designed to support your mental health and wellbeing. Any current and ex-serving ADF personnel with one day of full-time service can get support through Open Arms, as can their immediate family. Open Arms can also support ex-partners either:

- while they are co-parenting a child with someone who has served, until the child turns 18 years of age, or
- for five years after the relationship has ended.

Call 1800 011 046
or visit www.OpenArms.gov.au

- **Defence Community Organisation**

for current serving ADF members or reservists, and their families. This organisation offers a program to help families of ADF members manage stress better. Google 'DCO FamilySMART' for more information or call 1800 624 608.

- **The ADF confidential all-hours support line** for current serving ADF members or reservists, and their families. Call 1800 628 036 in Australia or +61 2 9425 3878 outside Australia.

- **Relationships Australia**
call 1300 364 277.

Where can my partner go for help?

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

Your partner can speak to a GP, Medical Officer, or mental health professional for further information. They can also directly access the services on the opposite page.

There are many resources that have been developed for military families. A good place to find out more is the Department of Veterans' Affairs At Ease portal. Google '**At Ease**' for more information.

The **High Res app** is designed to support current or ex-serving ADF members, their families, and their friends, to build psychological resilience and mental fitness. Find it in your app store or Google 'High Res App' for more information.





“I was so relieved when she said she was starting to find things more manageable. **I could see her starting to enjoy things more.** We all get frustrated at one time or another, but **I have hope now** that things are going to continue to get better.”

This booklet is intended for partners of serving, transitioning or ex-serving members of the ADF who are 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.

SUPPORTING YOUR PARTNER – COPING WITH TRAUMA IN A MILITARY FAMILY

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