



# Supporting your son or daughter

**Coping with trauma  
in a military family**



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Veterans' Affairs**



**PHOENIX**  
AUSTRALIA

Centre for  
Posttraumatic  
Mental Health



**This booklet is for the parents of a serving, transitioning, or ex-serving member of the ADF who has been affected by trauma.**

The booklet will help you to understand the impacts of trauma, especially on relationships. You'll find advice for helping your adult son or daughter, and ways to support your relationship with them.

# 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 son or daughter can't stop, or the gambling causes financial stress and relationship difficulties.

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

# Trauma and your family

## When your daughter or son has been through a traumatic experience, it can affect you as well.

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

Being a parent can be difficult at these times. If you're finding it hard, you're not alone. Many parents report feeling:

- **Worried** about their son or daughter and grandchildren.
- **Helpless** to fix things and uncertain where to get help.
- **Unsure** of their role, whether they should intervene, or what they can do to help.
- **Shut out** of their son or daughter's life.
- **Overwhelmed** by the responsibility they feel towards their son or daughter.
- **Angry** about what their son or daughter has gone through.
- **Frustrated** by their son or daughter's behaviour.

**“He became much more distant. I didn't know what to do, or what was going on for him. He shut down. It was so hurtful. He wouldn't open up to me. The counsellor told me it's part of his PTSD symptoms. Apparently it's quite normal for people with PTSD to shut people out. Knowing that helped a little. I don't take it so personally now, but it still hurts.”**



“ She was always so capable and independent. She’s like a **shadow of herself**. Having her home with us again is good, but also hard. She can be **tough to be around, quick to anger**. Her friends ask what they can do. I told them, **let her know you care. That’s what she’s said really helps, to know we’re here for her.** ”

# How can I look after myself?

**By looking after yourself, you'll be better able to look after your family.**

Sometimes you need to put your own health and wellbeing first so that you have the strength and energy to help others.

**Here are some things you can do.**

1. Get regular exercise
2. Eat well
3. Keep in touch with friends and family
4. Find a space where you can be yourself. It might be doing an activity you love, or making sure you have some time alone
5. Make a regular time to gather your thoughts and recharge
6. Do something you enjoy
7. Celebrate good times and small improvements
8. Say 'yes' when help is offered
9. Be kind to yourself. Expect to have mixed feelings towards your child. No one is perfect and everyone has limits.
10. Get help when you need it. We all need help at times.





# 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							

“I didn’t want to interfere, but I could see she was struggling. I said, ‘Darling, I can see things are tough right now, and I’m worried’. She didn’t say anything, but she raised it later, and said she’d get help if I insisted. I explained it’s hard for me to see her suffer, because I love her and want her to be happy. I said I did want her to get help, not for my sake, but because I want the best for her.”



# How can I support my daughter or son?

**There are things you can do to help your child.**

- Offer to listen when and if your son or daughter wants to talk.
- Find ways to show you care.
- Get informed. Knowing about the effects of trauma can help you make sense of what your son or daughter is going through.
- If you used to do particular activities together, make time for this and encourage your son or daughter to join you.
- Encourage your son or daughter to keep in touch with friends.
- Encourage your son or daughter to seek help.
- Share information and resources about mental health with your son or daughter 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 18 of this booklet.

"My ex-wife was worried. She said we should get him treatment. **I felt pretty helpless.** I tried to raise it with him, but **he just kept saying he was fine.** I really didn't know what to do. I told him, 'All right. I'll back off. But **when you're ready, I can help you find help.**' I put the **ADF all-hours support line number on the fridge**, and said, 'I'm going to leave this here in case you need it. I'll stop pestering. **You have my support**, whatever you decide.'"

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 son or daughter that experiencing a mental health problem is common and that you are there to support them.

# How can I start the conversation?

**Below are some tips for talking with your son or daughter about your concerns and the problems you can see they're having.**

- **Be curious.** Sometimes we don't ask questions because we don't know what we should say, or don't have a solution. That's OK. Just by asking you're showing that you care, and that is helpful.
- **Listen.** Listening well means putting yourself in the other person's shoes. Sometimes we think we're listening, but we're actually thinking about what to say next, or how we feel about what's being said. Instead, try to focus on what your son or daughter is saying, and understand where they're coming from.
- **Show you care.** Look your son or daughter in the eye, nod, and say things like 'uh huh' or 'hmm'. This shows you're interested.
- **Reflect your understanding.** If you can repeat what your son or daughter has said in your own words, it shows you've been listening. If you don't think you've quite understood, ask another question, or say what you think they mean, and ask if you've got it right.
- **Allow some silence.** If your son or daughter pauses, or becomes silent, wait a while before jumping in. They might be gathering their thoughts, or feeling a strong emotion. Chances are they will continue their story or share something more if given time.
- **Be clear and to the point.** When sharing your own thoughts or feelings, be direct. It can be helpful to think beforehand about what you want to say.
- **Don't give advice unless it's asked for.** Your son or daughter probably has plenty of ideas already about changes they'd like to make in their life, but is finding it hard to put these changes in place. Telling them what you think they should be doing can make them feel worse. Before giving your advice, listen first and show that you have understood the problems they're experiencing.



“I don’t talk to my folks much. I don’t like to worry them. But out of the blue, Mum said, **‘You know I’m here for you if you ever want to talk’**. It was good, hearing that, knowing she was up for listening. I told her how hard things have been. I thought she’d start on about all the reasons I should be grateful. She usually does that. But she didn’t this time. **She just listened.** I found myself saying more than I’d planned. She didn’t say much, but I know she got it. **We just sat together** for a while. It was nice.”

# Coping with difficult behaviours

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

- **Set clear rules** for acceptable behaviour. Your son or daughter 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 son or daughter's experiences, explain that to them. If you can, talk to your son or daughter about who else could help.
- **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.

**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.



- **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 son or daughter what has made them upset.

- **Work together to get mentally and physically fit.** If you live with or nearby to your son or daughter, look for opportunities to develop routines together that calm the mind and body, such as going for walks, getting outdoors, practising yoga or meditation, praying together, or going to the gym.

There are many resources that your son or daughter can access to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Go to page 18-19 for the names of useful websites and apps.

# How can I support our relationship?

**Trauma can have a significant impact on relationships. It can be helpful to have an honest conversation with your son or daughter about how you can best support them.**

## What you feel able to help with

*e.g. Check in via phone weekly? A willing ear? Pick up granddaughter from kindergarten? Pet-minding?*

## What your limits are

*e.g. How will this fit with your existing commitments? Do you have the resources? How will you know if you're overloaded or stressed? What will you do when you notice this?*

## What signs of love and care your child appreciates

*e.g. Ask your son or daughter: what makes him or her feel loved? What can you do that shows you care, even from a distance?*





### What help your child wants from you

*e.g. Ask: what would help you out right now?*

### Who else is available to help your child?

*e.g. Ask: What friends are around? Who does he or she trust?  
What support services are nearby?*



“I asked my son if I could help. But as usual he said, ‘I don’t need help.’ He is very proud and doesn’t want to rely on anyone. So I said, ‘I know you can take care of yourself. But I’d like to do something.’ He wasn’t sure I could help at first, so I offered some suggestions. ‘I can look after the kids so you and Bec can have some time alone. I could work on the garden.’ He was still reluctant, so I told him, ‘I’m here for you, and if it’s OK I’ll keep checking in from time to time and see if you need anything.’ He agreed.”

# I'm not one for words

**It can be difficult at times to find the words to say how much you care. But there are other ways to communicate how you feel.**

I'm not really one for words. I invited him around to watch the footy. At the end I said, 'I'm here for you son'. That's all I said, but he knew what I meant.

As soon as I walked in she said 'I'm not up for talking today'. I said, 'OK. I'll never ask you to share anything you're not comfortable with'. Her look of relief was enough for me. So we spent the day together without talking – just enjoying each other's company.

We don't have a very close relationship. But I decided to call her. I left a voicemail saying I'd been thinking about her and hoped she was doing OK. I felt better knowing I'd at least said that much.

When he told me about the things he'd seen, the things in his nightmares, I couldn't say anything. It was horrible. I just gave him a hug. That was all I could do.

# Where can I go if I need help?

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 son or daughter or an ADF member.

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

provides free, confidential counselling and group programs specifically designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of currently serving and former ADF personnel and their families, including children of all ages.

Its counselling services can support families through different stages in life, including:

- Dealing with the absence of a parent during deployment, and adjusting when they return home

- Helping children deal with changes and stressors like making friends at a new school
- Working through relationship breakdowns and challenges
- Building a blended family
- Support for the family if a serving member has died.

Call 1800 011 046  
or visit [www.OpenArms.gov.au](http://www.OpenArms.gov.au)



# What help is available for my son or daughter?

**If your son or daughter is experiencing trauma-related mental health problems, effective treatments are available.**

Your daughter or son can speak to a GP, Medical Officer, or mental health professional for further information. They can also access the services below directly.

- **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.

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.



“It was when I saw him laughing with his niece that I realised **how far we’d all come**. It has taken time, but **he’s enjoying life again**. He’s no longer so fearful, and he doesn’t shy away from the places he used to avoid. He still has bad nights, but he said he’s starting to feel more in control. **I’m so thankful we got him the help he needed.**”

This booklet is intended for the parents of serving, transitioning, or ex-serving members of the ADF who are experiencing mental health difficulties following trauma.

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#### SUPPORTING YOUR SON OR DAUGHTER – COPING WITH TRAUMA IN A MILITARY FAMILY

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