



When your parent is having problems

For young people aged 13–17 years

**Coping with trauma
in a military family**



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs



Living with a parent who's coping with trauma

When people are in the military they might have to deal with situations that really affect them and stay with them for a long time.

When someone has a terrifying and overwhelming experience, it can be very traumatic. In the military, traumatic events can include combat, being injured, or seeing people suffering or being hurt.

“Dad was pretty out of it. **He didn't seem to care** what was going on with us. **I was really angry with him.** Mum explained some stuff later and I get now that he's sick. He's trying, but **right now, just getting out of bed is hard for him.** I know now that **he still cares about me**, and if he was up to it, we'd be hanging out together like we used to. But **we have to give him time.**”



If your parent or care-giver has experienced trauma, they may behave differently, and have very intense emotions.

These are some of the ways trauma can affect people:

- **Having intense memories or nightmares** about what happened. Sometimes these are so real that it feels like they're right back in the traumatic event.
- **Feeling jumpy or on edge.** They might get angry easily, be irritable and tense, and find it hard to relax and sleep.
- **Avoiding doing certain things or seeing certain people** because it reminds them of the bad things that happened.
- **Having upsetting thoughts and feelings** like feeling scared, sad, or angry. They might feel as if they're different from other people, or out of touch with what's going on around them.
- **Seeming distant or uninterested** in things they used to enjoy, or disconnected from the people they care about.
- **Drinking too much or using drugs as a way to cope.** This can cause other problems like being secretive or moody, and spending less time with the family.

It can be hard living with a parent who's experienced trauma and is unwell.

If you're finding things hard, you're not alone.
Do any of these thoughts look familiar?

Is she going to be OK?

Why can't he get over it?

I didn't even do anything wrong, why is she so angry?

I wish I could make it all better

I feel guilty when I have fun

I'm worried I'm going to have problems like this in the future

My life is ruined

I wish I had a different family

I'm alone

I feel angry all the time

Do you have thoughts or feelings you find hard to deal with? Write them down here:

When life is hard, what do you do?



“Mum started seeing a psychologist. I thought that would fix things, but it didn’t quite work like that. She started to get better slowly. **She had good days and bad days**, but over time the bad days happened less often. She started to smile more often. She looked less exhausted, and became interested in doing things with us again. **Our family is not the same as before.** We’ve all changed a little bit. **But things are OK**, and I’m pretty sure they’ll keep getting easier.”

Will they get better?

Most people who find it hard to cope after a traumatic event will feel better with time. Some people will need extra help to get better.

Your parent can get help if they need to.

Keep in mind

- Your parent can get treatment and support
- Things will change
- It's not your fault
- Your parent's behaviour is caused by the trauma they experienced, not you or something you did
- You're not alone. There are other families out there who are learning to cope with this type of problem.



Staying strong

It's important to look after yourself, to keep yourself healthy and happy. When things are not going well at home, it's even more important than usual.

There are lots of things you can do to stay strong and positive. Start with trying out one of the suggestions below.

 **Keep up the activities that are important to you**


 **Do something you enjoy**


- Play music
- Play sport
- Go to the gym
- Listen to a podcast
- Dance
- Go to a gallery
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 **Get some exercise**

 **Plan something fun**

 **See friends**

 **Talk to someone about how you're feeling**

 **Try out an app to help you relax, meditate, or manage your stress.**

A good one is the Headspace app. You can find it by Googling 'The Headspace App'.

What do I enjoy doing?

Don't just think about it, do it.

It's one thing to think about doing something to stay strong, but change only happens when you actually give something a go.

Make a plan now for when you're going to try out some activities that will help you feel good.

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							

When you need to relax

This is a simple exercise you can do anywhere and anytime you're feeling stressed or upset and need to relax.

Move to a quiet space

Get comfortable in a chair or on the floor and close your eyes

Take a breath in. As you do, pay attention to the air coming in your nose, filling up your lungs, and causing your belly to rise.

If thoughts come into your head, try to let them go and return to focusing on the air moving into your body.

Breathe out deeply. As you do, pay attention to the feeling of the air as it leaves your nose, causing your belly to drop, and your chest to fall.

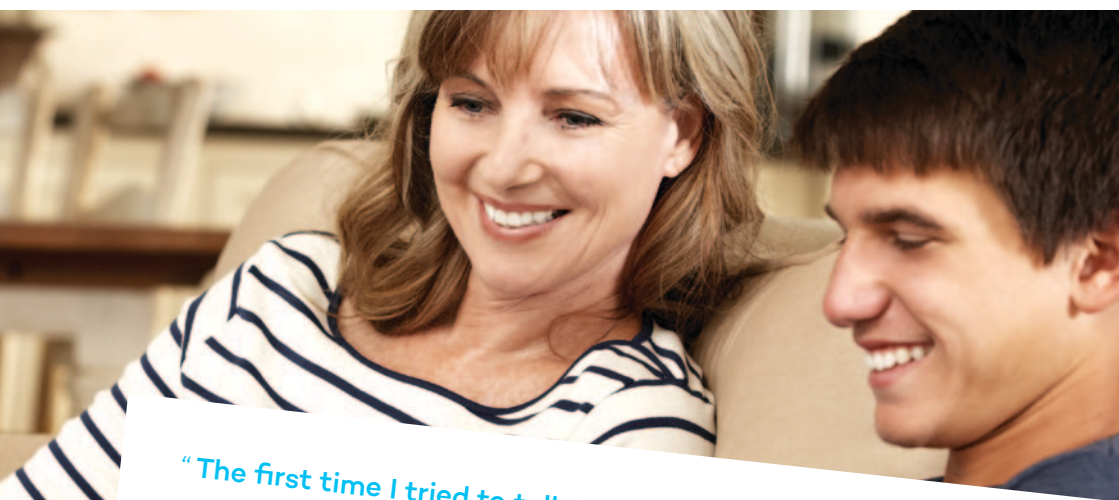
Again, if other thoughts come into your head, put them to one side – you can think about them later – and focus on the air moving out of your body.

Repeat. Then repeat again.

Finding the right words

Talking to someone you trust about how you're going can help you feel better.

It can also be helpful to tell your family when you're worried about them, when you need information about what's going on, and when you need help.



"The first time I tried to talk to Mum the words came out all wrong. I was too angry. I tried again when I was feeling calm. I said, 'Mum, I know you're worried about upsetting me. But I would feel a lot better if I knew what was going on with you. I can see you're not well and I'm worried'. She told me she's been having trouble sleeping since her last deployment, and it's making things hard. She didn't say a whole lot, but that was all I needed to know. It helped me understand."

If you're finding it tricky to speak to your Mum or Dad about your worries or thoughts, try planning it out beforehand.

You can also ask someone you trust to help.

1 **Pick a time when your parent is not distracted, tired, or busy.**

2 **Think about what you want them to know.**

e.g. 'I'm finding 'x' hard', 'When you do 'x' it upsets me'

3 **Think about how you're going to start a conversation.**

e.g. 'Dad, I'd like to tell you something', 'Mum, I want to share something with you'

4 **Think about what you want them to do.**

*e.g. 'I would like to spend more time with my friends',
'I would like you just to listen to me'*

What is it you want to say?

I'm worried.

I'd like to know what's going on.

You don't have to tell me what happened, but I want to know how I can help.

I've been finding it hard to concentrate.

I need some help.

I spend a lot of time thinking about what you've gone through.

I'm not feeling so good.

I want to know you love me.

I care.

Stressed at school, TAFE, or work?

When things are hard at home, then school, TAFE, or work can feel like the best place to be. But what's happening at home can also make it harder to study and work.

You might have trouble concentrating, have difficulty meeting deadlines, or just not feel like spending time with other people.

I just couldn't keep awake in class. I'd try to pay attention, but I'd end up reading the same sentence again and again.

I felt really angry a lot of the time. When I think about it now, there wasn't any real reason. I just got really annoyed by my mates and by the teachers, by anything really.

I felt pretty out of it. The other girls were talking about their outfits for the formal, their tans, how they were going to get there. That stuff just didn't matter to me. They didn't have a clue what I was going through.

School was my break from the stuff going on at home. I could spend time with my friends and focus on my classes. It was good to be busy.

You don't have to pretend you're OK when you're not.

- **Talk to your school counsellor or welfare officer.** You can do this without anyone else knowing.
- **Tell a teacher or tutor, who you trust, what you're finding difficult.** They may be able to help: give you extra time for homework, let you come late if you have an appointment, or let you repeat classes or retake exams.
- **Trust your friends.** Some friends are good to talk to. Other friends can help in some way, even if you don't tell them what's happening in your family. Hanging out with them or asking for help with practical things like homework can make a big difference.
- **Look out for study groups or free tutoring.** This can give you a space away from home to get your work done.
- **Share what you're going through with a workmate you trust.** Find out if you're entitled to take leave when you're unwell, to care for others, or when you have appointments to attend.



Who can I call on when things are hard?

**Spend some time thinking about who
you could go to for help.**

It might be someone who is good to talk to,
good to spend time with, able to drive you
places, or helpful in another way.

Who in your
family could
help?



Which **friends**
do you trust most?



Who at **school**,
TAFE, or **work**
is helpful?



Do you play sport
or have a hobby?

Are there people
involved in those
activities you get
on with?



Where can I get extra help?

There are places you can get confidential help or information.

- Speak to **Open Arms – Veterans & Families Counselling** on 1800 011 046 for support with the absence of a parent during deployment, adjusting when they return home, and understanding, identifying and working through trauma
- Check out **Children of Parents with a Mental Illness** (COPMI) online
- Speak to **Kids Helpline** for teenagers on 1800 551 800 or via email or web chat
- Contact **Headspace** for face-to-face, phone or online support.
- Take a look at **ReachOut** online. It has some good advice about families and helping others.
- Check out the **TeenSMART** program run by the Defence Community Organisation for teenage children of ADF members. Call the Defence Family Helpline on 1800 624 608 for details.
- Visit the **At Ease** website run by the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

“At first I didn't want to speak to anyone, but I got used to it. **It was good to have a space where I could say whatever was on my mind,** without worrying my parents or having them freak out. It's a relief sometimes to say it out loud and get the thoughts out of my head. **It helps me keep stuff in perspective.**”





“Things were hard at home for a while. The tiniest thing would set Dad off. One time I got home late and forgot to tell him where I was. Dad lost it! He totally overreacted! Stuff like that used to make me furious, but now I get it. He explained to me about trauma, and how it sometimes makes him feel scared or angry for no real reason. Knowing that, I try a bit harder now to help out, and I make sure he knows where I am so he doesn’t worry. Things have got easier, and we get along pretty well now. I see him getting a bit better each day.”

at-ease.dva.gov.au



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