

Looking After Yourself Toolkit

Your safety matters

It is important to prioritise your own wellbeing and personal safety. Before you consider having a conversation with your loved one about their seeking help, you need to make sure you are safe and not putting yourself at risk of harm. If you are experiencing any of the following, you may need to get support to keep yourself safe:

- Physical threats, e.g. someone standing over you or punching the wall in front of you.
- Verbal threats, e.g. threats to hurt you or other people, or hurt themselves.
- Physical abuse, e.g. being hit, shoved or strangled.
- Emotional/ psychological abuse, e.g. being threatened, belittled or put down.
- Sexual abuse, e.g. feeling forced to witness or do sexual acts you don't want to do.
- Financial abuse, e.g. controlling money.
- Threats of harm to animals or property.
- Controlling social, family or employment relationships.
- Controlling use of phone, emails, social media, access to internet, and access to a car.
- Heavy alcohol use associated with any of the above or aggressive behaviors.



"It was little things at first. My partner kept asking to see my phone. He wanted to know who I had been texting, who I had been calling. He would tell me that if I really loved him, I would stop contacting those other people. My brother was really good. He saw the danger signs. Told me that wasn't right."

Family and domestic violence

Family and domestic violence includes any behaviour that is threatening, controlling or causes fear. It can include physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, psychological, legal, spiritual or financial abuse. If any of the above items apply to you, you may be at risk of family and domestic violence. If you are feeling unsafe or are worried about the immediate safety of a loved one, dial 000.

Support services are available:

- 1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732. This national service is open 24/7 to support people impacted by domestic, family or sexual violence.
- Defence Member and Family Helpline: 1800 624 608 is available 24/7. The ADF can provide temporary 'safe house' accommodation for the family of ADF members in situations of family and domestic violence.
- Open Arms 1800 011 046 or <https://www.openarms.gov.au/> A 24/7 free and confidential counselling service to anyone who has served at least one day in the ADF, and their families.
- Relationships Australia: 1300 364 277 <https://relationships.org.au/> Provides relationship support services for individuals, families and communities.

Prioritise your own wellbeing

Looking after others can take a toll. It is important that you prioritise your own wellbeing first. Being the partner, family or close friend of a Defence member who is having mental health difficulties can be demanding. It is easy to be affected and sometimes feel overwhelmed when a loved one is struggling.

Remember that you also need to look after yourself so that you can look after others.

Be compassionate with yourself. If you find yourself feeling emotions like anger, worry, disappointment or fear, don't try to push those feelings away. Make sure you have time to make sense of what you are feeling, get support from someone you trust and look after your needs.

Recharge your batteries

It is important to allow time to recharge your own batteries and develop healthy habits by finding ways to maintain and support your own wellbeing, such as:

- Keep doing activities that are important to you like arts and craft, playing an instrument, journaling, gardening or reading.
- Get regular exercise - consider going for a nature walk, playing a sport, jogging, swimming, walking with your dog.
- Eat well.
- Keep in touch with friends and family.
- Find a space where you can be yourself.
- Make a regular time to gather your thoughts and recharge.
- Celebrate good times and small improvements.
- Say 'yes' when help is offered.
- Be kind to yourself.
- Expect to have mixed feelings about what your partner is going through, and do not judge yourself harshly for having these feelings.
- It's ok to say 'no' sometimes when people ask for your help - let them know if you need time for yourself.
- We all need help at times. Get help when you need it.

Maintain your own social supports

One of the best ways to look after yourself is to develop and maintain your own social networks. Stay connected, don't become isolated. Supporting someone with a mental health condition can take a toll on you, sometimes so much so that your own health can be affected, and you can no longer help your loved one effectively.



"I was feeling really worn ragged and because I was so busy doing everything for the family, I had stopped doing all the things that I enjoyed and helped me to unwind and recharge my batteries. I mentioned it to a friend over a text message and she suggested that we meet up each week to walk the dogs and have a chat. Even on days when I felt like I didn't have the time, I was always glad we met up, as I felt better for it afterwards."

A consistent research finding is that people with good support networks tend to cope better, so it is vital that you take some time to reach out to friends and other supportive people in your community.

Social support map

Take the time to identify supports and resources you have.

You can get support from family and friends or work colleagues or from formal sources of support, such as a GP or an Employee Assistance Program.

Take some time to think about people from your social network who could fit into each of these support categories:

- People who can help with practical things.
- People I can share my experience with.
- People who spend social time with.
- Important relationships I'd like to strengthen.
- People who I can support and help.
- People who can help with advice and problem solving.



After a crisis

Being a loved one of someone experiencing mental health issues can mean dealing with occasional crises, which require your dedicated support. It can be easy to lose yourself when supporting a loved one, especially if it is taking up a large portion of your time and emotional energy or at the expense of your own needs.

After getting through that period, it is important to re-establish your own needs and reconnect with the people who care about you.

Support is available

You don't have to go through this challenge on your own. Help is available when you need it. Here are some of the reasons people have asked for professional support.

- Conflict in families can be a source of distress for all its members. When one family member is not travelling well it can impact on the wellbeing of other family members.
- Family conflict can make worse some of the symptoms that members experience. However, family members who feel safe and have their needs met can be a strong and positive influence on a Defence member with a mental health condition.
- Mental health difficulties can make parenting and relationships more challenging. Children can easily be on the receiving end of irritation and even anger when a parent is not coping well.
- Partners often have to take on additional responsibilities in the family home, which can strain relationships.

- Members may be more likely to seek help for their mental health if they believe it will be of benefit to their family or that it may save their relationship.

Resources

Government's Head to Health website offer online programs and tools to help members, veterans and their families to manage stress and build resilience:

<https://www.headtohealth.gov.au/>

Confidential counselling for individuals, couples, or families is available. Speaking to your GP or a mental health practitioner can provide you with information and the names of people and organisations that can help.



Alternatively, access the services below by contacting them directly:

- Defence and Member Family Helpline
 - <https://www.defence.gov.au/adf-members-families>
 - 1800 624 608, or +61 2 9425 3878 outside Australia
 - memberandfamilyhelpline@defence.gov.au
- Open Arms
 - www.OpenArms.gov.au
 - 1800 011 046
- Relationships Australia
 - <https://relationships.org.au/>
 - 1300 364 277
- SANE online carers forums
 - <https://saneforums.org/>