

# Mental Health Issues Toolkit

## Distress looks different for everyone

A military career can be very rewarding but also can impact a person's wellbeing through the demands of the role and exposure to traumatic events like combat, accidents, assault, or witnessing widespread suffering. Over time, stress at work and the cumulative impacts of trauma can challenge your loved one's ability to cope and affect their physical and mental health.

Everyone has a unique response to stress and mental health issues. Some people report:

- Physical problems like headaches, muscle tension and sleep difficulties (including difficulty getting to sleep and staying asleep).
- Acting differently and become irritable or unmotivated.
- Being overprotective and even controlling of family members, withdrawing from their friends and family.



*"My partner returned from deployment a few months ago and since then, there have been times when she has forgotten to pick up the kids from school. Each time she forgot I could smell alcohol on her breath. She also has seemed down quite a bit of the time."*

Most people recognise that challenging aspects of the job like deployments, or potentially traumatic events like accidents or bullying can cause stress and mental health issues. But it's not easy to predict the type of event which can be the 'straw that breaks the camel's back' – sometimes it can be everyday things, or even positive events that lead to problems surfacing.

For example, someone may be holding on and coping, but a conflict at home or a significant event like a new baby or a promotion can overwhelm a person's ability to cope.

## Signs that someone isn't coping

There are some common signs that it might be time to encourage your loved one to seek help.

Signs to look out for:

- Changes in thinking
  - Thoughts of suicide or self-harm
  - Tiredness and loss of energy
  - Difficulty with attention and concentration, confusion, feeling disoriented
  - Difficulty making plans
  - Intrusive thoughts and images of past events



- Worrying more than usual
- Constant questioning such as 'what if I had done something different?'
- Unwanted memories or bad dreams
- Being constantly on the lookout for danger and planning for the worst
- Emotional signs
  - Feeling tense, agitated, irritable or angry outbursts over small issues
  - Sadness, hopelessness, fear, shame
  - Feeling emotionally detached or 'numb'
- Body changes
  - Feeling keyed up, 'on edge' and jumpy
  - Muscular pain, headaches, teeth grinding, digestive issues such as heartburn and irritable bowel
  - Blood pressure or blood sugar problems
  - Fatigue and sleep disturbances, including difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Behavioral signs
  - Unhelpful coping strategies such as taking risks, gambling, drinking and/or taking drugs (self-medicating), increased use of medication (e.g., pain relief) or spending a lot of time on electronic devices
  - Constantly doing things to feel like you and everyone else is safe like checking doors and windows or planning exit strategies
  - Controlling day-to-day activities or behaviours of family members, becoming frustrated or angry if others don't do as they want them to
  - Withdrawing from family and friends
  - No longer doing the activities they used to enjoy doing with loved ones
  - Change in work patterns like arriving at work late or throwing themselves into work and overworking

## Some issues are easier to admit than others

It can be difficult for people to show vulnerability, especially when it comes to admitting that they are struggling.

ADF members spend significant time training to be self-reliant and to manage stressful and high-pressure situations. It can be hard for them to give up that expectation and accept that they are not coping.

It is important to be able to start a conversation and remind your loved one that it is okay to admit that they are not coping, and that there is effective support available to them.

For more information, visit



*"My partner kept getting tense every time we went out. She would keep looking around, doing that 'scanning for danger thing' that she does, and losing track of what we were saying. It got to a point where we just gave up on going out."*

[https://www.openarms.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-12/supporting\\_your\\_partner.pdf](https://www.openarms.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-12/supporting_your_partner.pdf).

## Mental health issues can affect the whole family

Within your family, changes in behaviour due to mental health issues for one family member can mean changes for all.

You may notice changes in your loved one's mental health when they are no longer doing activities they like, arguing more, losing their temper, or closely controlling family members. This can indicate that your loved one may be struggling behind the scenes.

Some signs that a family unit needs support:

- If you notice having more fights or arguments than usual.
- If you find communicating is more difficult and this is not improving over time.
- If you no longer enjoy being together as a family, especially if this is different from how it used to be.
- If it's becoming harder to feel physically and emotionally close.
- If you notice your loved one no longer engaging in family activities or refusing to see people who used to be part of your life.
- If you notice your loved one being more controlling over you and family members, e.g., restricting social outings.
- If you see some changes in parenting style, like becoming less tolerant, over-protective or disengaged.
- If your children are suddenly changing their behavior or regressing because of what is happening, like bedwetting again, refusing to go to school or becoming withdrawn.



*"I've been getting panic attacks that seem to come from nowhere. I can't control them and don't want to tell anyone. I feel like people will say to just suck it up and not be weak. I had to leave my mate's BBQ the other day because my heart was racing, and I couldn't slow it down. I made an excuse and just left."*

If you are feeling scared of your loved one, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or contact the Defence Member and Family Support Helpline on 1800 624 608.

## Look after yourself too.

While it can be tough at times to get the balance right, it is important that you take care of yourself while supporting your loved one in their recovery from mental health concerns.

For more information, visit <https://www.openarms.gov.au/resources/publications/mental-health-information>.