

SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN



COMBAT/OPERATIONAL STRESS
INVISIBLE INJURIES





In this brochure, you will learn more about combat/operational stress injuries and steps you can take to help heal them. You will discover that there are people and organizations ready to support you. You will see how, by taking care of yourself and your spouse, you can take better care of your young child. Choose an idea or two to support your child, your family, and yourself.

Combat and operational stress is defined as “The expected and predictable emotional, intellectual, physical, and/or behavioral reactions of Veterans who have been exposed to stressful events in war or military operations other than war.”

—(DoD Dictionary of Military Terms)

Overview: Invisible Injuries

It is not unusual for Veterans to still be dealing with combat and operational stress as they re-enter civilian life. Simply put, combat and operational stress injuries are subtle physical changes in the brain. They occur when stress is too intense or lasts too long. These injuries affect the brain’s ability to handle and adapt to stress, sights, sounds, movements, and memories. Stress injuries are true physical injuries. Sometimes people doubt they exist. Why? There is no outward evidence of injury other than changes in behavior. They’re not a result of weakness. Even the strongest Veterans can suffer stress injuries.

Being in combat isn’t a prerequisite to experiencing a stress injury. Stress injuries can be caused by a traumatic event (or events) or the build-up of low-level stress over time.

No one suffers stress injuries alone. Adult family members may be frightened or unsure of what to do when faced with personality changes and unusual behavior of their Veteran.

Your baby or toddler can sense the tension in the air. When you are upset, on edge, or just plain exhausted, it can be hard to give her the hugs, cuddles, and time to play and laugh together that help her feel loved and safe.

WHAT YOU MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

To support your child, begin by trying to understand your experiences and feelings.

It is normal to feel stress in a war zone. However, when stress becomes too severe or long lasting, it can cause stress injuries.

Combat and Operational Stress Injuries

A stress injury is no one's fault. It is not a sign of weakness. Like other injuries, stress injuries often require treatment, time, and the support of family and friends to heal.

There are three types of stress injuries:

- Traumatic stress injuries are caused by events involving terror, horror, or helplessness.
- Operational fatigue injuries. These injuries are due to the wear and tear as small stressors build up over time (or after repeated deployments) such as hardships, monotony, and not enough rest and recuperation. Everyone will experience these if stressed long enough.
- Grief injuries are due to loss.

Symptoms may include difficulty sleeping, finding it hard to calm down, being jumpy or easily startled, troubling memories, panic attacks, rage outbursts, feeling shocked and numb, thinking constantly about someone who died, feeling guilt over someone's death, sadness, and loss of interest in life. Other reactions can include risky and dangerous behavior, alcohol and/or drug abuse, and violence.

Each of these symptoms can be a natural response to combat and operational stress that lasts a few days to a few weeks. However, when they are severe, are lasting, and interfere with everyday activities, the help of a professional is needed.

It is hard to know who will suffer from a stress injury or what the symptoms will be. These injuries can show up weeks or even months after homecoming. Often they are first noticed by a family member or friend.

Symptoms may lead to problems at school, work, or in other daily activities. Concentrating may be difficult. For some Veterans, "battlemind"—the combat behaviors and reactions that helped them survive, such as combat alertness and anger—cause problems when they are not adapted for life at home.

Stress injuries can lead to tension between spouses. Some Service members may be comfortable talking about what they are feeling. Others may withdraw and seek out the company of buddies who shared similar experiences, leaving their partners feeling rejected and hurt. The spouse who tries to hold everything together may experience "compassion fatigue," the stress associated with caring too much.



WHAT YOUR CHILD MAY EXPERIENCE AND FEEL

Next, try to understand what your child experiences and feels.

Your baby or toddler relies on you to meet his basic needs for food, nurturing, and love. He needs you to help him understand his world and to handle the ups and downs of everyday life.

As you meet her needs day after day, she builds the trust and confidence she needs to explore, discover, and learn about her world and her place in it. She is curious and takes pleasure in life.

When you are living with a stress injury, you may find yourself on automatic pilot while feeding, bathing, dressing, and keeping your child safe. You are there physically but not emotionally. The smiles, silly songs and games, laughter, and joy that you usually share together are gone. Your child will notice.

Behaviors You Might See in Your Child

Watching your child from the outside can help you understand what she is experiencing on the inside. Here are some ways your child may be saying, "This is a hard time for me":

- Increased clinging, crying, and whining
- Increase in aggressive behavior
- Withdrawal
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Easily frustrated and harder to comfort
- A return to earlier behaviors, such as waking up at night, toileting accidents, and thumb sucking
- Increase of attention-getting behaviors, both positive and negative

Depending on her personal style, your child may withdraw, fuss, or cling more than usual while looking for reassurance. She may go back to old behaviors such as sucking her thumb or forgetting to use the potty. These are all ways she is saying, "I am having a hard time. I need you to be here for me."

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD

Finally, use what you have learned to decide how best to respond.

Here are ways in which you can support your child:

Take Care of Yourself

Because you are so important to her well-being, take steps to heal the stress injury:

Know When and Where to Get Help

Sometimes Veterans and their spouses try to ignore or hide stress injuries, hoping that they will just go away—and sometimes they do. However, when reactions to stress do not improve, it is possible that a Service member could endanger himself and/or those around him. Symptoms that continue may develop into posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Professional treatment can help—the sooner, the better.

It may help to ask yourself these questions:

- Am I feeling worse—or not any better—as time passes?
- Is my family suffering because of the way I am acting?
- Am I drinking more alcohol than usual, or am I using drugs to cope?
- Am I having trouble getting to sleep, or am I always tired?
- Can I meet my child's basic needs such as feeding, dressing, and keeping him safe?
- Have I felt this way for more than a few weeks?



Sources of Information and Assistance

There are many resources available for Veterans and their families.

Veteran Combat Call Center: This call center is available 24/7 and allows the caller to speak directly with another combat Veteran. 1-877-WAR-VETS (1-877-927-8387)

The National Center for PTSD: This arm of Veterans Affairs is the center of excellence for research and education on the prevention, understanding, and treatment of PTSD. They have seven divisions across the country that provide expertise on all types of trauma—from natural disasters, terrorism, violence, and abuse to combat exposure. Their purpose is to improve the well-being and understanding of individuals who have experienced traumatic events, with a focus on American Veterans. Their website has links to better understanding PTSD and combat stress, as well as where to go find help. <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

State Veterans Offices: Veterans of the United States armed forces may be eligible for a broad range of programs and services provided by the Veterans Administration. Eligibility for most VA benefits is based on discharge from active military service under other than dishonorable conditions, and certain benefits require service during wartime. This link will help you find your state's VA office. <http://www.va.gov/statedva.htm>

National Resource Directory (NRD): The NRD is a Web-based "yellow book" for wounded, ill, and injured Service members, veterans, their families, and those who support them. The Directory provides over 10,000 services and resources available through governmental and nongovernmental organizations to support recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration into the community. To access the NRD, visit www.nrd.gov

Iraq–Afghanistan Veterans of America: Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) is the first and largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. Their mission is to improve the lives of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families through programs in four key impact areas: supporting new veterans in Health, Education, Employment, and building a lasting Community for vets and their families (HEEC). <http://www.iava.org>



Wounded Warrior Project: Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) takes a holistic approach when serving warriors and their families to nurture the mind and body and encourages economic empowerment and engagement. Through a high-touch and interactive approach, WWP hopes to foster the most successful, well-adjusted generation of wounded Service members in our nation's history. <http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org>

Child Care Aware of America (formerly NACCRA): Child Care Aware® of America works with more than 600 state and local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies to ensure that families in every local community have access to quality, affordable child care. They lead projects that increase the quality and availability of child care, offer comprehensive training to child care professionals, undertake groundbreaking research, and advocate for child care policies that positively impact the lives of children and families. <http://www.naccra.org>

ZERO TO THREE: ZERO TO THREE, the National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families is a national, nonprofit offering a wealth of information on the social, emotional, and intellectual development of babies and toddlers. The Military Family Projects page on their website supports professionals and military and Veteran parents with postings of articles, information, and resources. www.zerotothree.org/military

The effects of Combat and Operational Stress are experienced by ALL Soldiers spanning every type of military operation in both peace and war.
—U.S. Army Medical Department Army Behavioral Health (2009).

Remember—Stress Injuries Can Be Treated

Although things are difficult now, don't give up hope. There are treatments that are effective. Most counselors will use more than one approach. These include the following:

- Learning about the range of "normal" responses to stress and how recovery from stress injuries takes place.
- Help in developing coping skills or methods to help the Veteran manage day by day (e.g., to relax, communicate, and handle anger).
- Therapeutic talking, in which a Veteran tells about her experiences over time in a safe place with a trained professional. Often this kind of talking will help make memories less painful and frightening.
- Medication therapy that can work together with education and counseling.
- A friend or professional can sometimes be easier to talk with than a family member.

Community services include:

- Community mental health centers. Your state's office is listed at <http://www.ncd.gov>
- The United Way. You can find out about possible information and services in your state by going to <http://www.211.org>
- The American Red Cross. Local chapters are listed at <http://www.redcross.org>
- Local religious organizations
- Local social service agencies

Watch for signs that your child's behavior may be upsetting for the Veteran. For example, a toddler's clinging might feel extremely demanding to a parent who isn't sleeping well and is preoccupied. If at any time you think you or your child may be in danger, take steps to be safe. Turn to local resources as needed.

It takes courage to ask for mental health support.

—Walter Reed Army Institute of Research Land Combat Study Team (2006)

Interacting Day by Day With Your Child

If you are a Veteran:

- Give yourself time. Stress injuries make re-entry more difficult. It may be hard to feel pleasure in being with your child. This is a common response to trauma. Be patient.
- Walk away if you feel you are losing control. Let another adult know. If you are alone put your child in his crib.
- Show your child you love her in the ways you can. Watch her play, sit nearby when she eats, let her sit on your lap, tell her you love her. Try to join her in an activity she enjoys.

If you are a spouse:

- Give your Veteran time before handing over child care duties. You may be eager for a break—and you deserve it—but hang in a little longer. Your presence will help ease your spouse's re-entry to parenthood and your child will feel more comfortable.
- Spend time doing quiet, familiar, calm activities including snuggling and reading together, talking, going for a walk, drawing, working on a puzzle, and building with blocks. Coping with stress injuries can be tiring for all of you.
- Brainstorm with your spouse all the supports that are available to you. Reach out. Asking for a hand during a challenging time is a sign of strength.

To do together as a family:

- Stick to your family's daily routines the best you can. This gives your child structure and the sense of confidence and competence that comes with knowing what to expect. It will be comforting for all of you to have some predictability in your life as you face the challenges of stress injuries.
- If your child is in child care, share information about what is going on at home with his caregiver. This way, a caregiver can plan activities and help your child feel secure.

- Enlist the support of family members and friends your child knows and trusts. Invite them to spend time with your family. They can be a fresh supply of energy, patience, and humor when yours is running on empty. They may be able to give both of you time you need for yourselves or to be together.
- Have a plan in place to give the Veteran a needed break. For example, you might arrange a signal or cue when the Veteran is feeling overwhelmed or needs to be away from the child(ren). You can have a plan in place so that when you see the signal, you take your child(ren) into the backyard to play with you or over to their neighbor's, or your spouse may go downstairs or to see a buddy.
- Talk to your child's pediatrician or a mental health provider if her behavior changes dramatically.
- Be kind to yourself—and to each other. It is one of the best ways to take care of your child. You are doing the best you can in a difficult time. Put some flowers on the dining table, stock up on your spouse's favorite snacks, share a smile or a hug.

Remember the Wonder of the Everyday

When you are dealing with a stress injury, even the smallest effort can feel like too much. It may help for you to remember that simple everyday activities are fun and interesting learning experiences for your child. They become even more so when you do them with him. So try to join in, even if that means watching him as he pulls himself up on the coffee table and cruises around the living room, fills and dumps cups of water in the bathtub, puts on a dress-up hat and makes faces in the mirror, smells a flower in the park, chases a squirrel, climbs up and rides down the slide, digs in the sandbox, and cuddles next to you to "read" you a story. These everyday moments with you will help your child feel safe and loved during a challenging time. It may help you feel better too.

What do you think?

- What is a quiet, calm activity that your child enjoys?

The Little Things You Say and Do Can Make a Big Difference—In a Child's Words

Understanding what your child may be experiencing can help you see how much you are doing each and every day to support her:

When you . . .	You help me . . .
Maintain a regular routine	Feel secure because I know what to expect.
Stay patient and calm when I am upset and clingy	Trust that I can tell you what I feel. Feel in control again and safe.
Give me some extra hugs and cuddles	Know I am loved and safe.
Tell me what is happening in simple words ("Daddy will play with you later. Now he is feeling too sad to play.")	Understand what is happening. Know we can talk about anything.
Give me words for feelings ("Did it scare you when you heard Mommy yelling? Sometimes people yell when they are angry. She's going to take a walk to help her feel better. Then she'll come back and read the story with us.")	Learn that feelings can be talked about and shared.
Give me stuffed animals, dolls, puppets, and/or simple dress-up clothes, and play pretend with me	Explore my feelings in my play.
Give me play dough to roll and pound; let me play with water in the bathtub or in the sandbox; offer me crayons and markers to draw with	Explore my feelings in my play.
Set clear limits (e.g., "No climbing on the dining table" and "Outside is the place to throw balls"), knowing that I may need reminders to follow them	Help me feel safe because I can count on you when I need help to remember our rules.
Help me be successful (e.g., by giving me a safe place to practice sitting up, putting a stool by the bathroom sink so I can wash my hands before meals, and letting me choose between the blue shirt and green one when I get dressed in the morning)	Feel confident and competent—beginning steps in learning that I can cope with difficult times.

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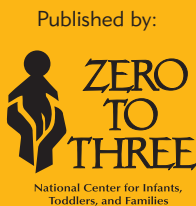
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