



Instructional Guide for Family Members and Caregivers of Service Members and Veterans with Behavioral Health Conditions

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**Health and Human Services and the
Texas Veterans Commission**



TEXAS
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Introduction

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC)¹ and the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC)² recognize the sacrifice of people who love and care for service members and veterans. Service members and veterans sacrifice their time, and in some cases, their lives, in pursuit of caring for and protecting the United States (U.S.). Texas has the largest veteran population in the U.S. with over 1.5 million. In addition, Texas has approximately 120,000 active-duty military personnel.³

It is estimated that over 40% of veterans struggle with some type of mental health or substance use condition. Based on the current population of veterans in Texas, this means that an estimated 600,000 Texas veterans could have a mental health or substance use condition and may need treatment and other supports.⁴

This guide is meant to help family members and caregivers of service members and veterans identify and access mental health or substance use services and supports for their loved one.

HHSC and TVC thank service members, veterans, family members, and caregivers for your service to Texas and our country.

¹ [Texas Health and Human Services](#)

² [Texas Veterans Commission ★ Helping Texas Veterans Starts Here](#)

³ Mike Warren, [Texas now has the highest veteran population in the country](#) (Fox 7 Austin August 2023)

⁴ <https://www.thezebra.com/resources/research/mental-health-statistics/#:~:text=Veteran%20mental%20health%20statistics&text=Over%2040%25%20of%20all%20veterans,affairs%20mental%20health%20specialty%20program>

Assisting During a Mental Health Crisis

A mental health crisis⁵ is a situation in which a person's behavior puts them at risk of hurting themselves or others and/or prevents them from being able to care for themselves or function effectively in the community.

If you or your loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis that is an immediate life-threatening situation, dial 911 or go to your local hospital emergency room.

If you or your loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis, but it is not an immediate life-threatening situation. contact the [988 Lifeline](#) by dialing 988, (press 1 if you are a veteran), to get connected to a trained and confidential crisis counselor 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You can also contact the [Veterans Crisis Line](#) to [chat](#) online with someone or have a text conversation by texting 838255.

More crisis services information may be found in the [Health and Human Services Commission Crisis Services Guide](#) and at [MentalHealthTx.org](#).

The following sections outline some things you can do to help in a crisis situation.

Create a Safe Environment

Assess the possibility of physical and emotional danger to your loved one as well as to others. A safe home environment can buy you, or a person you're concerned about, time to get help. Safely storing household objects or substances that can be used to harm oneself or removing them from your home — even

⁵ [Navigating-A-Mental-Health-Crisis.pdf \(nami.org\)](#)

temporarily — can save lives. Ensuring safety is crucial during a crisis. See the information sheet at: [Safe Home Environment](#).

Listen

Listen intently and talk in a supportive, non-judgmental way. Stay calm and do more listening than talking. When discussing your concerns, stick to the facts and try not to blame or criticize. Validate what a person is feeling, thinking, or saying. Also be aware of non-verbal cues such as body language, recognizing small changes in posture, facial expressions, eye movements, and body position.⁶

Encourage Treatment

Approach your loved one with a caring attitude to avoid creating defensive reactions. Try asking questions, rather than giving advice. For example, “What do you think about talking to a therapist?” Choose empowering words and be attentive to their opinions and concerns. Locate mental health services in your area ([Local Mental Health or Behavioral Health Authority](#)) and explain different types of available treatments so your loved one knows they have options.⁷

Honor Your Loved One’s Experience

Emotional validation⁸ is the process of learning about, understanding, and expressing acceptance of another person’s emotional experience. Validating their emotion doesn't mean you agree or think their emotional response is warranted. Rather,

⁶ [Talking to a veteran when you are concerned](#)

⁷ [Talking to a veteran when you are concerned](#)

⁸ <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-emotional-validation-425336>

you demonstrate that you understand what they are feeling without trying to talk them out of or shame them for it.

Preventing Loss of Life to Suicide

Suicide is death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die.⁹ Every day, 17 veterans die by suicide in the United States.¹⁰ Veterans have a 50% higher risk of suicide than their peers who have not served in the armed forces.¹¹ Understanding the issues concerning suicide and mental health is an important way to take part in suicide prevention.

Increased Risk of Suicide in Veterans

thoughts of suicide can occur at any time, certain times in a veteran's life prove especially difficult such as:

- The first year after separation from service. During this time the suicide rate is two and a half times higher than during active duty.¹²
- Anniversary dates related to service, such as the date they joined or left service, or death anniversary dates of friends and battle buddies.

Know the Warning Signs

Warning signs can alert you to an immediate risk of suicide or they can be an indicator that a person is in a mental health crisis, which can potentially lead to suicide.

Warning signs that a service member or veteran may need help include¹³:

⁹ [Preventing Suicide: Suicide Prevention Fact Sheet \(cdc.gov\)](#)

¹⁰ [2023 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report \(va.gov\)](#)

¹¹ [Veterans are at higher risk for suicide. Psychologists are helping them tackle their unique struggles.](#)

¹² [Association of Suicide Risk with Transition to Civilian Life Among US Military Service Members](#)

¹³ <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/signs-of-crisis/>

- Appearing sad or depressed most of the time.
- Anxiety, agitation, sleeplessness or mood swings.
- Increased alcohol or drug misuse.
- Losing interest in hobbies, work or school.

Caregiver Tips

Caregivers play an important role in a service member or veteran's life—sometimes a lifesaving one. Whether you're the spouse, another family member or a friend of a service member or veteran, you may be the first to recognize changes in mood and behavior, such as expressions of anger or emotional pain or increasing alcohol or drug use. The following tips may help:

- Learn more about risk factors and how to recognize suicide warning signs.
- Watch the VA [S.A.V.E.](#)¹⁴ training video, which is designed to enable anyone to demonstrate care, support, and compassion when talking with a veteran who could be at risk for suicide.
- Take the VA [S.A.V.E.](#) Training Course. This free, online training video was designed in partnership with Psych Armor Institute to teach how to identify when a veteran may be at risk for suicide and to empower them to play a vital role in suicide prevention. Take the course at: www.psycharmor.org/courses/s-a-v-e.
- The S.A.V.E training course will teach you important steps to remember such as:
 - Offer to attend medical appointments with the service member or veteran to talk with their health care team to better understand their care needs and advocate to be involved in their care.

¹⁴ [VA S.A.V.E. Training One-Pager](#)

- Encourage the service member or veteran to pursue mental health treatment, including treatment of substance use disorders and—in this and other ways—help reduce the stigma they may associate with seeking treatment.
 - Support adherence to medication and to treatment plans.
- Participate in the service member’s or veteran’s safety planning¹⁵. Be familiar with the safety plan so you can reinforce coping strategies.
- Discuss access to suicide method safety. Suicide method safety is an evidence-based suicide prevention practice that involves making a suicide attempt method less available or more difficult to access immediately, therefore less likely to cause a fatal suicide attempt. Putting time and space between someone experiencing suicidal thoughts and their access to suicide methods reduces the risk of harm and can save lives.¹⁶
- Remember that thoughts about suicide are often short-lived. A safe home environment can buy you, or a person you’re concerned about, time to get help. Safely storing things that can be used to harm oneself, such as firearms and medications—can save lives. To learn more about safe home environments and means safety, visit: www.keepitsecure.net.
- Help support the service member or veteran’s sense of connectedness in the community, increasing social support and a sense of belonging.

¹⁵ A safety plan is a written list of coping strategies and sources of support that at-risk veterans can use before or during a suicidal crisis.

¹⁶ [Means Safety for Suicide Prevention | SAMHSA](#).

Suicide Prevention Resources

Many organizations and websites are dedicated to preventing the suicide of service members and veterans. The following are just a few of the options available for family members or caregivers to help someone.

If a service member or veteran is having thoughts of suicide and needs **immediate attention**, it's important they talk to someone who can help right away.

- To reach the [Veterans Crisis Line](#), dial 998 then press 1, use the [online chat service](#), or send a text message to 838255. The Veterans Crisis Line offers **free, confidential support, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.**
- The [Veteran Suicide Prevention](#) website offers the following information:
 - [How do I talk to someone right now?](#)
 - [Will VA cover my emergency mental health care?](#)
 - [How can I get ongoing support?](#)
 - [Information for family and friends](#)
 - [Related health problems you may want to learn about](#)
- The VA publishes a toolkit for caregivers of veterans: [VA-Suicide-Prevention-Toolkit-for-Caregivers](#).
- To learn more about suicidal thoughts and behavioral treatment options, self-help tools, and resources to help reconnect and find hope, visit Make the Connection..
- The VA makes additional veteran and military suicide prevention resources available through [Veteran and Military Suicide Prevention Resources](#).

- The Department of Defense Suicide Prevention Office also publishes reports, newsletters, and other resources at the [Defense Suicide Prevention Office](https://www.dspo.mil/). <https://www.dspo.mil/>.

Becoming Aware of Mental Health and Substance Use Conditions

One way to better understand mental health and substance use conditions and what services and supports are available to you and your loved one is to take a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training course.

MHFA training introduces participants to the signs and symptoms of mental health and substance use concerns and gives an overview of common treatments and resources.

Three MHFA courses are available:

1. Adult MHFA teaches adults (18 and older) how to support other adults.
2. Youth MHFA teaches adults (18 and older) how to support children and youth.
3. Teen MHFA teaches students in grades 10-12 how to support other teens.

Find a Course

Along with other services, many local agencies provide MHFA training. To find available trainings, visit [Where Can I Find Services?](#)

Service members, veterans, and their family members can receive MHFA training for free through their local mental health authority. View a [map](#) of where you can find your local mental health authority (LMHA) or local behavioral health authority (LBHA).

MHFA is just one way to gain an understanding of mental health and substance use conditions. Other educational opportunities are referenced throughout the guide.

Common Mental Health and Substance Use Conditions

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Your loved one may have thought a traumatic event was behind them, and as time passes, it's natural to think that the mind and body have healed and moved on. But symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can pop up months or even years later.¹⁷

Unlike a rash or broken arm, PTSD can be tough to identify, especially when it's happening in your own mind. Though it can look and feel like depression or rage, PTSD is different, it can affect everything from the way you sleep to your relationships at home and work.

Service members may be exposed to a traumatic event such as experiencing or witnessing a vehicle accident or the death of a close friend or fellow service member. When a person has PTSD, their symptoms can come and go. They might feel fine until they hear a car backfire loudly, for example. Suddenly, they become afraid. Images of their time fighting in a war flood back. Certain triggers can set off their PTSD. They bring back strong memories, and it may feel like they're living through it all over again. Triggers can include sights, sounds, smells or thoughts that remind them of the traumatic event in some way.

Some PTSD triggers are obvious, such as seeing a news report of an assault. Others are less clear, for example, if your loved one

¹⁷ The common mental health and substance use conditions discussed in this section used information sourced from:

[VA Caregiver Support Program Home Mental Health Home \(va.gov\) Conditions - Caregiver Tips - VA Caregiver Support Program Veterans' Mental Health Issues | RAND](#)

was attacked on a sunny day, seeing a bright blue sky might make them upset. Once triggered, these thoughts and feelings can continue to bother them for weeks, months and even years. This can mean avoiding places or things that remind them of the experience, which can lead to nightmares, sleeplessness or anxiety. They might feel numb or, conversely, hyperaware of their surroundings. Knowing their triggers can help you better cope with their PTSD.

The symptoms and effects of PTSD can disrupt everyday life. People with PTSD sometimes withdraw from their family members and friends. They can find it hard to concentrate, startle easily, and lose interest in things they used to care about. Some may try to dull their feelings by misusing alcohol or drugs.

Caregiver Tips

If you are a family member or caregiver of a service member or veteran who shows signs of PTSD here is what you can do to help.

Listen

If your loved one has PTSD and wants to talk about what they saw or experienced, encourage them to do so. Maintain a non-judgmental attitude as you listen and be sure to give them your full attention. If you want to ask questions, be mindful not to give advice or opinions unless your loved one asks for them. Give your loved one plenty of space and time to say what they need to, without rushing them.

Help Build Social Supports

However, willing you may be to support your loved one with PTSD, you should not be their only source of social support. Encourage them to maintain other relationships and confide in at least one other safe individual. Social withdrawal is a common symptom among veterans and service members with PTSD. Gently encourage your loved one to participate in social activities and interactions.

Create a Sense of Safety

Stability is deeply important for veterans and service members struggling with PTSD. While you cannot always drop everything at a moment's notice, you should take care to be a consistent, steady presence in your loved one's life.

Encourage Seeking Specialized Treatment for PTSD

If your loved one has not already sought and enrolled in specialized treatment for PTSD, encourage them to do so. This can help minimize the symptoms of PTSD but also reduce the long-term risk of developing additional mental health conditions and symptoms.

Do some research into the different [services and supports](#). This will not only help you understand what your loved one is experiencing, but also help you understand how to communicate with them.

Strengthen Trust and Safety

- Your loved one has experienced traumatic events and there may be a constant internal need to feel safe and cared for, especially by those closest to them. Trauma damages their ability to trust others and themselves, due to altering their outlook on the world as dangerous and untrustworthy. Express your commitment to the relationship and reassure your loved one that you're here to support them.
- Creating routines, structure, and predictable schedules can create a sense of stability and security.
- Look for ways to empower your loved one. Emphasize your loved one's strengths and speak of the future and make plans. This may give your loved one something to look forward to.

- Keep your promises, be consistent, and follow through; this will help rebuild trust.
- Anticipate and manage triggers. A trigger can be a person, place, thing or situation that reminds your loved one of the trauma. Sometimes a trigger can be obvious, but other times it can be hard to identify and understand. Triggers are not just external; they can also be internal such as feelings and sensations that are tied to their trauma.
- Talk to your loved one about PTSD triggers. What are things in the past that have helped when triggered? What doesn't help? Come up with a plan on how to respond to a trigger and what you can do to help?
- Help your loved one when experiencing a flashback. During a flashback, your loved one is intensely reliving memories of past trauma which can cause them to disconnect from themselves or their surroundings. Remind your loved one that the actual event is over and that they are safe.

Dealing with Anger and Volatility

- People suffering from PTSD live in a constant state of physical and emotional stress which can lead to difficulties managing emotions and impulses. This may manifest as extreme irritability, moodiness or explosions of rage.
- Watch for signs that your loved one is angry, for example, clenching their jaw or fists, talking louder, or getting agitated.
- Try to remain calm during an emotional outburst. This will communicate to your loved one that they are safe and will help prevent the situation from escalating.

- Give the person space. Avoid crowding or grabbing the person. This can make a traumatized person feel threatened.
- Put safety first. If the person gets more upset despite your attempts to calm him or her down, you may need to leave the house. Consider contacting the [988 Lifeline](#) by dialing 988, (press 1 if you are a veteran), to get connected to a trained and confidential crisis counselor. You can also contact the [Veterans Crisis Line](#) to [chat](#) online with someone or have a text conversation by texting 838255. You can also contact the [crisis hotline](#) for your LMHA or LBHA.

Caring for Yourself

Being there for your loved one starts with taking care of and checking in with yourself. Just focusing on your family member's PTSD while ignoring your own needs is a recipe for burnout and may lead to secondary traumatization.

- Take care of your physical needs such as getting enough sleep, daily exercise, making sure to eat, and looking after your own mental health.
- Develop your own support system. Lean on other family members, trusted friends, your own therapist or support group, or your faith community. Talking through your feelings and what you're going through can be very therapeutic.
- Make time for your own life. Don't give up friends, hobbies, or activities that make you happy. It's important to have things in your life that you look forward to.

- Spread the responsibility. Ask other family members and friends for assistance so you can take a break. Seeking out respite services is another option if family or friends aren't available.
- Set boundaries. Be realistic about what you're capable of giving. Know your limits, communicate them to your family members/caregivers and others involved, and stick to them.
- For more supports for caregivers, visit [Turn To](#).

PTSD Resources

Many organizations and websites are dedicated to helping veterans and service members. Here are just a few of the options available for family members or caregivers who want to know how to help someone.

- [Wounded Warrior Project](#): This organization aims to help veterans and service members who experienced a physical or mental injury on or after September 11, 2001. Wounded Warrior Project hosts programs, promotes community, and offers help to former military navigating civilian life.
- [Veterans Crisis Line \(988\)](#): If you are a veteran in crisis, or you have a loved one who is, the Veterans Crisis Line can connect you with caring, qualified responders with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).
- [VA Caregiver Support Program Home](#): The VA Caregiver Support Program (CSP) offers clinical services to caregivers of eligible and covered veterans enrolled in the VA health care system. The program's mission is to promote the health and well-being of family caregivers who care for our Nation's Veterans, through education, resources, support, and services. There is a [CSP Team Locator](#) located at every [VA facility](#).

- [National Center for PTSD](#): Also part of the VA, the National Center for PTSD provides numerous resources and information for veterans with PTSD, as well as family members and healthcare providers.
- [Texas Veterans + Family Alliance Grant Program](#): Find a local provider that supports a variety of clinical mental health and non-clinical essential support services for veterans, service members, and family members.
- [TVC-Veteran Mental Health Department](#): Explore the different veteran mental health programs and services that TVC offers.
- [TVC-Military Veteran Peer Network](#): Certified Peer Service Coordinators and their peer volunteers are strategically placed within LMHAs and LBHAs across Texas to create a statewide peer-to-peer network for any service member, veteran or family member.
- [PTSD Awareness | Health.mil](#): Find videos and other tools used to raise awareness of PTSD.
- [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder | Health.mil](#): Learn more about PTSD.
- [Cognitive Processing Therapy \(CPT\) for PTSD](#): The best treatments for PTSD are trauma-focused talk therapies. These treatments can help the veteran process or work through their traumatic experience. Read more to learn about CPT and how it can help change negative thoughts.
- [Trauma Reminders: Triggers - PTSD](#): After experiencing a traumatic event, many things might be reminders of that event. Places, people, sounds or smells could “trigger” a memory of the event. Learn what research shows about trauma triggers and how you can help a veteran cope with them.
- [Anger | Health.mil](#): Anger is a feeling that can range from mild irritation to intense annoyance and rage. It may be a

natural response when harm is anticipated or when another person has done something wrong. Learn the differences between anger and aggression and steps in the anger management process.

- [Common Anger Warning Signs \(va.gov\)](#): Learn more about common anger warning signs and how to recognize them to become aware of how to manage your expression of anger.
- [Peer Support Groups - PTSD: National Center for PTSD \(va.gov\)](#): Learn about the benefits of peer support groups and how to find one. Support from others who understand the trauma and PTSD symptoms and how this may help in the recovery process are available.

Depression

Life has its ups and downs. We all go through times when we may feel overwhelmed or stressed. These feelings may arise from multiple deployments, relocations or because of life's everyday demands. Clinical depression, however, can potentially lead to more serious issues such as death or suicide; therefore, it is important to recognize the symptoms of depression and get the support and resources for your loved one and yourself.¹⁸

Some veterans and service members feel like they're in a rut and just can't get out. Everyone feels sad at times, but those feelings typically will pass within a few days. If it's starting to interfere in daily life, it could be a sign of depression. Depressive disorder can affect anyone. It may be marked by feelings of

¹⁸ The common mental health and substance use conditions discussed in this section used information sourced from:

[VA Caregiver Support Program Home Mental Health Home \(va.gov\)](#)
[Conditions - Caregiver Tips - VA Caregiver Support Program](#)
[Veterans' Mental Health Issues | RAND](#)

intense sadness or hopelessness, and some find that they lose interest or pleasure in activities that they used to enjoy.

People with depression can experience feelings of guilt, unworthiness or low self-esteem, and they may start avoiding people. Depression is a common but serious disorder — one that typically requires some treatment to manage. Some common risk factors in the general population include unemployment, financial stress, and personal or parental history of mental health concerns. The military brings additional risk factors such as:

- Uniformed code of military justice actions (legal concerns)
- Rank and promotion complications
- Deployments
- Combat exposure
- Physical fitness concerns
- Permanent changes of station (frequent relocations)
- Command and leadership discord

Did you know: *Between 19% and 44% of service members returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars meet criteria for mental health disorders, such as PTSD, anxiety disorders, or depressive disorders.¹⁹ Fewer than 50% of returning veterans in need receive any mental health treatment.²⁰*

The signs and symptoms of depression may be hard to notice at first. One way to gauge if a veteran or service member might be experiencing depression is to consider if their thoughts, moods,

¹⁹ Kulesza, M., Pedersen, E., Corrigan, P., & Marshall, G. (2015). Help-Seeking Stigma and Mental Health Treatment Seeking Among Young Adult Veterans. *Military behavioral health*, 3(4), 230–239.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21635781.2015.1055866>

²⁰ <https://www.va.gov/albany-health-care/stories/many-veterans-mental-health-issues-go-untreated/>

or behaviors have changed noticeably. Does their mood seem different than “usual” to you or others?

For some people, these symptoms may not be new. It might seem as if they have always felt down and blue. If you are a family member or caregiver of a service member or veteran knowing some signs of depression can help. Signs may include:

- Persistent sadness or anxiety – may include feelings of irritability, panic or restlessness and episodes of crying or tearfulness.
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, or helplessness – may include feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt.
- Not wanting to leave the house – may include withdrawing from friends and family.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in life – may include a loss of interest in activities that were once pleasurable.
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns – may include difficulty falling or staying asleep or sleeping too much. It can also cause sudden weight loss or gain.
- Decreased energy – may include a lack of motivation.
- Difficulty concentrating – may include memory loss and difficulty making decisions.
- Persistent physical symptoms – may include headaches, digestive disorders, or back pain.
- Alcohol or substance use – may include a significant increase in the amount of alcohol you consume on a regular basis.
- Thoughts of death or suicide – contact a health care professional immediately if there are thoughts or talk of suicide.

As a care giver or family member you may be the first to notice that a veteran or service member is having a tough time.

Support them when they are ready to talk. It can be helpful for them to share what they're experiencing, and you may be able to provide them with support and help them find treatment.

One tool that is confidential and anonymous is a [self-assessment](#) to help your veteran or service member find out if their feelings and behaviors may be related to depression. This short list of questions won't be able to tell them for sure whether they have depression, but it may indicate whether it's a good idea to seek a professional for further assessment.

Caregiver Tips

Living with a person who has depression can be very difficult and stressful for family members and friends. The support and involvement of family and friends can be crucial in helping someone who is depressed. Here are some suggestions for living with a person who has depression that may make things easier for you and more beneficial for the depressed person:

- Recognize that depression is often expressed as hostility, rejection, and irritability.
- Adopt an interaction style that puts the depressed person in charge. For example, instead of suggesting, "Let's go to the movies tonight," try this: "I'd like to see a movie tonight. Which one of these do you want to see with me?"
- Encourage the depressed person to seek professional help. Accompany and support your loved one but make it clear that it is their responsibility to get better.
- Remember that treatment is very effective and your loved one will improve with treatment within a few months.

- Support opportunities for the depressed person to be rewarded, such as visiting friends or going out for activities. Don't force these, though.
- Make sure you notice and praise any significant improvement. Be genuine.
- Leave time for yourself and your own needs. Allow yourself to have time when you need a break. It will help both of you.
- Consider family or marital therapy: these forms of therapy may be beneficial in bringing together all those affected by depression and helping them learn effective ways to cope together.
- Consider turning to support groups, either for the depressed person, or for you as their family member.

Depression Resources

Many organizations and websites are dedicated to helping veterans or service members access resources for coping with depression.

If a veteran or service member is having thoughts of suicide, thinking that others would be better off without them, believing that there is no other way out of their problems, the following resources can help.

- To reach the [Veterans Crisis Line](#), dial 988 then press 1, use the [online chat service](#), or send a text message to 838255. The Veterans Crisis Line offers free, confidential support, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.
- The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) offers information, support, and education specifically for veterans, service members and their families. To learn more, visit [NAMI Homefront](#). In the NAMI nationally recognized [NAMI Family-to-Family](#) program, NAMI

Homefront addresses the unique needs of family, caregivers and friends of those who have served or are currently serving our country.

- For VA services, find out how to access depression health services through the VA [Depression treatment for Veterans](#).
- To Learn more about depression, treatment options, self-help tools, and additional resources to help in recovery, go to [Make the connection-Depression](#).
- To find out more about depressive disorders, visit: [Depression | Health.mil](#).

Anxiety

It is natural to worry and feel anxious about things, such as giving a presentation, a growing to-do list, and relationships. Anxiety can help us confront stresses in our lives, and for many people the feeling is motivating and doesn't last long. But when persistent worries start affecting day-to-day activities, such as work, sleep or relationships, there may be something more happening. ²¹

Combat veterans and service members report feeling tense and uneasy after coming home from a deployment. They may have trouble letting their guard down or feel anxious and on edge, especially at night or in crowds. One type of anxiety disorder common with veterans and service members is panic disorders, where they have recurrent, unexpected episodes of intense fear or discomfort, leading to panic attacks. Those with panic disorders worry about having panic attacks and will often do

²¹ The common mental health and substance use conditions discussed in this section used information sourced from:

[VA Caregiver Support Program Home Mental Health Home \(va.gov\)](#)
[Conditions - Caregiver Tips - VA Caregiver Support Program Veterans' Mental Health Issues | RAND](#)

things to prevent them. They might include avoiding situations, such as driving in populated areas or swerving abruptly around debris in the road because of the fear of reliving an improvised explosive device attack.

Having an anxiety disorder can affect emotions, thoughts or behavior, like feeling restless, becoming easily distracted, feeling like your mind goes blank, fearing that something bad is going to happen, and many other symptoms. But it can also affect your physical actions, such as, having a racing heart, sweating or cold clammy hands, trembling, twitching, or shaking, and many other symptoms.

Caregiver Tips

Feelings of anxiety and panic can interfere with daily activities and can be difficult to control. They may be out of proportion to the actual danger and can cause you to avoid places or situations. While most people with anxiety disorders need counseling or medications to get anxiety under control, lifestyle changes and coping strategies also can make a difference. If you are a family member or caregiver of a service member or veteran who shows signs of anxiety here is what you can do to help:

- Encourage routine physical. Exercise is a powerful stress reducer. It can improve a person's mood and help them stay healthy.
- Encourage decreased use of nicotine, caffeinated beverages, and alcohol which can worsen anxiety.
- Encourage stress management and relaxation techniques, such as meditation and yoga which can ease anxiety.
- Encourage them to make sleep a priority.

Anxiety Resources

Many organizations and websites are dedicated to helping veterans and service members. Here are just a few of the options available for family members or caregivers who want to know how to help someone.

- [Anxiety Disorders-NAMI](#): Find out from NAMI how to recognize symptoms of anxiety, different types of anxiety disorders, the causes, and treatment options. Be sure to click on the [Support](#) tab to find recommendations for families about how to support your loved one. Additionally NAMI has a section for [Family-Members-and-Caregivers](#) about taking care of yourself as you help support your loved one.
- [Anxiety-VA](#): Explore [VA treatment options](#) for anxiety. After you've learned more about anxiety and treatment options, [take the next step](#) and explore the resources and connected care options to get your veteran services through the VA.
- [Whole Health Home \(va.gov\)](#): Learn how the VA approaches supporting veterans' health and well-being. This series highlights whole health resources—such as video sessions for yoga or meditation—that you can do at home.
- [Anxiety | Health.mil](#): Gain a better understanding of what anxiety disorders are, ways to manage anxiety, and maintain mission readiness. Occasional anxiety is common. However, if your anxiety interferes with daily activities or is affecting your relationships, check in with your health care provider. Managing your anxiety helps keep you mission ready.

Substance Use

Substance use include dependencies on alcohol, illicit, and prescription drugs. Substance use has substantial consequences on service members' and veterans' mental and physical health, work performance, housing status, and social functioning. In service members and veterans, substance use commonly co-occurs with and complicates other health conditions or issues. ²²

Some service members and veterans use drugs to deal with problems in their daily lives and use illegal, prescription, or over-the-counter drugs for recreation, relaxation, or help coping with daily life. They may have started using drugs for fun or to be social but can't seem to stop. They may feel that drugs help reduce the stress in their life or help them forget a problem or painful memories from their time in the military.

Know the Signs and Symptoms of Substance Use

If you are a family member or caregiver of a service member or veteran who shows signs and symptoms of substance use here is what you can do to help.

Signs of Substance Use

- Increased use of the drug (if the drug is prescribed, any amount greater than prescribed)
- Using the drug regularly, either daily or even several times a day
- Not being able to stop taking the drug
- Spending money on the drug, even if they can't afford it

²² The common mental health and substance use conditions discussed in this section used information sourced from:

[VA Caregiver Support Program Home Mental Health Home \(va.gov\)](#)
[Conditions - Caregiver Tips - VA Caregiver Support Program Veterans' Mental Health Issues | RAND](#)

- Feeling like they need the drug to deal with everyday problems
- Focusing large amounts of their time and energy on getting and using the drug

Symptoms of Substance Use

- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- Neglect of personal hygiene and appearance
- Mood swings
- Downward spiral in general attitude or not caring about the future
- Anger and irritability
- Mistreatment of others
- Sneaky behavior, lying, or stealing
- Deteriorating relationships with family, friends, or co-workers
- Problems at work or school
- Legal or money problems
- Loss of interest in activities which they used to enjoy
- Reluctance to introduce new friends to family members and old friends

Caregiver Tips

When a family member is struggling with substance use, a caregiver's support can be key to getting them the treatment they need. Starting the conversation is the first step to getting help. Here are some caregiver's tips on how to start that conversation:

- Consider a private setting with limited distractions, such as at home or on a walk. Express your concern and tell them that you're there to help. Create a judgement-free and loving environment to foster conversation and openness. What to say: "I've been worried about you. Can we talk? If not, who are you comfortable talking to?"

- Ask how they are feeling and describe the reasons for your concern. Discuss your family history of mental illness or drug and alcohol use, if relevant. It may help your loved one feel less alone. What to say: "I see you're going through something. How can I best support you?"
- Listen openly, actively, and without judgement. What to say: "I care about you, and I am here to listen. Do you want to talk about what's been going on?"
- Provide reassurance that substance use is treatable, and recovery is possible. Help them locate and connect to treatment services. Be patient as you help your loved one locate resources. What to say: "I've noticed you haven't seemed like yourself lately. How can I help?"
- Recognize that accepting help or making the decision to seek treatment doesn't happen overnight. Continue reaching out with offers to listen and help.

Substance Use Resources

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution for helping a service member or veteran who has a substance use issue, family support is often vital. The following are helpful resources:

- The VA has set up a program called Coaching to Care. To see how Coaching to Care can assist you in helping your family member receive assistance visit: [Coaching into Care | When a Veteran you know needs help - MIRECC](#)
- [Substance Use and Addiction](#) is a website to learn how to identify the warning signs of substance use and where to get help.
- [Make the Connection](#) has video testimonials of several veterans who share their story with alcohol use and their road to recovery.

- [A Guide to Addiction and Recovery for Veterans](#) is a resource that helps veterans and loved ones understand trauma, substance use, and pathways to recovery.
- [Alcohol Misuse | Health.mil](#) is a resource for helping service members understand how alcohol misuse can impact mission readiness and productivity, as well as service members' physical and mental health.
- [Turn To Check-In For Yourself](#) is a resource designed to help you understand what may be affecting your mood. It is not intended to diagnose or treat a problem. Once you've completed the check-in, you'll receive information about resources, services, and tools to help get you on the path to feeling better—and living a fuller, healthier life.

When someone you care about is struggling, you may not know what to say or do, but your presence and support can make all the difference. If you're worried about a loved one, this check-in will help you understand what may be affecting their mental health and/or substance use. You'll receive valuable resources, services, and tools to help connect your loved one to the care they need to feel better. Additional resources and discussion guides are available online, visit [TurnToSupportsTX.org](#) for more information.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is an injury that affects how the brain works. It may be caused by a bump, blow or jolt to the head, or a penetrating injury to the head. Depending on the severity of the injury, those who sustain a TBI may face health problems that can last a few days or the rest of their lives. For example, a person with a mild TBI or concussion may experience short-term symptoms and feel better within a couple of weeks or

months. While a person with a moderate or severe TBI, may have long-term or life-long effects from the injury.²³

More than 450,000 service members were diagnosed with a TBI from 2000 to 2021. Studies suggest that service members and veterans who have sustained a TBI may, have ongoing symptoms and experience co-occurring health conditions, such as PTSD and depression.

There are some common physical and thinking changes that can occur with TBI depending on the type and severity of the injury. Some symptoms may be present immediately, while others may appear later. The service member or veteran's symptoms and course of recovery may differ from others with a similar type of injury. Physical, thinking, and emotional changes can happen after a TBI.

Physical changes may include: problems with vision, weakness and coordination, as well as headaches, dizziness, fatigue, pain, and sleep disturbances.

Thinking changes may include: memory and learning problems, decreased concentration, problems with judgment, and slower thinking.

Emotional issues may include: irritability, problems managing anger or frustration, depression, anxiety, adjustment difficulties, and problems with social functioning.

Caregiver Tips

Family caregivers play an important role in recovery. In fact, many people who work with people with a TBI believe that

²³ The common mental health and substance use conditions discussed in this section used information sourced from:

[VA Caregiver Support Program Home Mental Health Home \(va.gov\) Conditions - Caregiver Tips - VA Caregiver Support Program Veterans' Mental Health Issues | RAND](#)

having a family caregiver is one of the most important aids to recovery. You can offer support, encouragement, and guidance to your injured family member, and help ensure the treatment plan established by the medical professionals caring for your loved one is followed. If you are a family member or caregiver of a service member or veteran who shows symptoms of TBI the following are things, you can do to help:

- It is often difficult for someone with a TBI to multitask, so give one instruction at a time. Try using lists and memory notebooks. A calendar is also a helpful tool to organize daily tasks.
- Be sensitive to the issue of fatigue. If your family member seems tired or overwhelmed, suggest they take a break.
- Establish a routine in which your family member pre-plans activities for the day. Scheduling the most important activities for the morning is a good idea, because energy levels tend to decline over the course of the day. Remember that your loved one will have good days and bad days, both emotionally and physically. This is a normal part of recovery.
- Know what resources are available and reach out to friends, family, and professionals. The VA can help you learn about available resources at www.caregiver.va.gov.
- Attend visits to the medical provider with your family member and provide detailed information about the service member's or veteran's progress and challenges. Ask questions and take notes.
- Be supportive and patient, but also remember to take care of yourself. If you find yourself completely overwhelmed, take a moment and call someone — a friend, a family member, or the VA's Caregiver Support Line (1-855-260-3274). Support groups may also be available in your community or at your local VA.

- Visit your doctor regularly and get plenty of rest so you can stay strong. Remember, you are doing the best you can, and you are making a difference in your loved one's life.

TBI Resources

Many organizations and websites are dedicated to helping service members and veterans. Here are just a few of the options available for family members or caregivers who want to know how to help someone.

- Find more information at www.caregiver.va.gov, including contact information for the VA Caregiver Support Coordinator nearest you. You can also call the VA's Caregiver Support Line toll-free at 1-855-260-3274. The Caregiver Support Line is open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. – 11 p.m. ET, and Saturday, 10:30 a.m. – 6 p.m. ET.
- [TBI Patient and Family Resources | Health.mil](#): This resource includes fact sheets, booklets and guides for service members, veterans, family members, and caregivers which can help build an understanding of common challenges experienced after sustaining a traumatic brain injury and navigating care.

Caregiving for Older Veterans

When a loved one experiences age-related mental health issues²⁴, the caregiver may feel the natural desire to monitor and control their loved one's behavior. This can lead to tension with caregivers prioritizing safety and convention while the loved ones are prioritizing self-sufficiency and autonomy. It can be challenging for the caregiver to manage their goals of respecting a loved one's autonomy and ensuring their moral well-being and safety. These concepts along with changes in roles, work demand, the decline of out-of-home social participation, and limited resources may cause additional stress, conflict, and conflicting emotions. Caregivers can encounter feelings such as patience and affection, but also physical and emotional overload.

Caregiving for Older Veterans Resources

- [VA Caregiver Assistance Program](#): The VA recognizes the important role of family caregivers in supporting the health and wellness of veterans. Find out if you may be eligible and how to apply for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers.
- [Elderly Veteran Resources](#): The VA will provide benefits and services that address a variety of issues including the changing health risks veterans face, as well as financial challenges through VA benefits and health services.
- [Texas State Veterans Homes](#): Texas State Veterans Homes provide affordable, long-term nursing care for qualified veterans, spouses, and Gold Star parents.

²⁴ The most common age-related mental health issues are depression, dementia, and anxiety.

Military Sexual Trauma

Military sexual trauma (MST)²⁵ refers to sexual assault or sexual harassment experienced during military service. MST includes any sexual activity during military service in which a service member is involved against their will or when they were unable to say no.

It's important to know that MST can occur on or off base, during war or peacetime, and while a service member is on or off duty. The identity or characteristics of the perpetrator, whether you were on or off duty at the time, and whether you were on or off base at the time do not matter.

MST in service member and veterans populations may differ from sexual trauma in the civilian world. Some differences include:

- Having had to continue to live and work with the perpetrator(s), and even rely on them for essential things like food, health care, or “watching your back.”
- Worrying about damaging the bonds in your unit if you speak out about what happened.
- Living far away from your family, friends, or other sources of support.
- Worrying about being seen as weak or vulnerable, or believing that others will not respect you or even blame you if you told anyone.
- Thinking that if others found out, it would hurt your career or your chances for promotion.

²⁵ [Military Sexual Trauma: Effects & Veteran Resources - Mental Health \(va.gov\)](https://www.va.gov/health-topics/cs/sexual-trauma)

MST can negatively affect a person's mental and physical health, even many years later. For example, the person may experience:

- Disturbing memories or nightmares
- Feelings of unsafety
- Feelings of depression or numbness
- Alcohol or other drug use to cope with or escape negative feelings
- Feeling isolated from other people
- Difficulties managing anger
- Irritability, or other strong emotions
- Self-doubt, self-blame, or decreased self-esteem
- Issues with sleep and physical health problems

Did you know?: Veterans can receive compensation for injuries or disabilities related to MST.

The VA has MST outreach coordinators at their nearest regional office that can explain more. Veterans can get help applying for disability compensation by:

- *Reading this fact sheet to learn about disability compensation for conditions related to MST. [Read the MST fact sheet \(PDF\)](#).*
- *Talking to an MST outreach coordinator at the nearest VA regional office. They can ask to talk to a female or male coordinator. [Find an MST outreach coordinator near you](#).*

Caregiver Tips

If you as a caregiver notice increased stress or anxiety related to MST in your loved one, here are some caregiver tips on coping strategies that may help:

- Remind them it is okay to feel upset. Their reactions are normal, and it does not mean there is something wrong with them or they've had a setback in their healing.
- Encourage them to do what works for them. Try safe, healthy things that have helped them cope during difficult times in the past. Know that they may need to try more than one thing, and it may take more energy or effort than usual.
- Have them pace themselves. If you notice fatigue, irritability, poor focus, more anxiety, or other signs they may be feeling stressed or overwhelmed, have them try to slow down, simplify or take a break.
- Connect with their communities. Connect with supportive people in their life and community. Even if they do not tell others about their own experiences, it can still help to connect with them. Some people may also choose to engage in local advocacy efforts or provide support to others with similar experiences.
- Limit exposure to media. Notice how the news or social media posts are affecting them, and if need be, limit how much they look at them. Have them focus on reading stories that give them hope or make them feel supported or less alone.
- Seek to inspire. Recalling past successes can be an effective way of reminding them of their strength. It may also help to view inspiring quotes or stories about others who have experienced similar difficulties, like those available on the [Make the Connection](#) website.

- Let them know that they are not alone. They are not alone in what they have been through or in healing. The VA is here to help. Visit [Take the Next Step](#) to learn how to connect with a [VHA MST Coordinator](#) and access MST-related services at your local VA healthcare facility.

MST Resources

Many organizations and websites are dedicated to helping veterans and service members. Here are just a few of the options available for family members or caregivers who want to know how to help someone who has experienced MST:

- [Military sexual trauma-VA](#): Learn how what VA services are available, such as contacting an MST Coordinator, outpatient services, mental health services, outpatient counseling, and inpatient programs.
- [Effects of Veteran Military Sexual Trauma and Suicide Prevention](#): Learn more about MST and suicide prevention resources. Targeted toward individuals who are dealing with the effects of MST.
- [Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention | Health.mil](#): The Military Health System and Defense Health Agency support the efforts of a call to action for individuals at all levels of the department to use their personal strength to bolster prevention, increase reporting, and promote advocacy for a safer Department of Defense Community. They are also in a unique position of providing critical care to those who experience MST.

Texas Army National Guard, Air National Guard, and the State Guard

Duty. Honor. Texas. Texas Serving Texas

The Texas Military Department (TMD)²⁶ is composed of the three branches of the military in the state of Texas. These branches are the Texas Army National Guard, the Texas Air National Guard, and the Texas State Guard. All three branches are administered by the Governor-appointed state Adjutant General. When not tasked with deployment to a foreign area or activated for a state mission, service members participate in their civilian life gathering once a month as a military unit to conduct military duties.

Texas National and State Guard service members experience unique circumstances in response to their service to the United States and Texas. When deployed, they are exposed to the same experiences as active-duty military components. Those who have or are deployed can encounter unique stressors that impact their wellbeing, so it is important for family members and caregivers to remain aware and sensitive to the experiences of the service members including employing the education and tips described in this document. It is also important for family members and caregivers to practice their own self-care.

TMD Resources

TMD, the Texas National Guard and the Texas State Guard provide several support resources. Some are available only to service members and others are also available to family and caregivers. Even for those resources only available to service members, it may be useful for family and caregivers to be aware

²⁶ <https://tmd.texas.gov/>

of the resources for discussion with their service members. The following are a few key resources:

- [Veterans Crisis Line \(988\)](#): If you are a service member or veteran in crisis, or you have a loved one who is, the Veterans Crisis Line can connect you with caring, qualified responders with VA.
- [Office of the State Surgeon Behavioral Health Program](#) (service members only): The overall mission of the Behavioral Health Program is to support the military readiness of the Texas Army National Guard by caring for the behavioral health needs of service members. The emotional needs of the service members are balanced with the expectations of military regulation to find an outcome that supports behavioral health recovery, and whenever possible, an ability for the service member to return to duty. If you have a question or concern regarding a service member's behavioral health needs related to military service, you may contact the service member's commander who will engage the Behavioral Health Program as needed. A service member may also contact the Behavioral Health team directly.
- [Texas Air Guard Psychological Health Program](#) (service member only): The Psychological Health Program provides a wide array of support to service members and commanders:
 - Mental health assessment
 - Solution-focused counseling
 - Case management
 - Consultation with command and leadership

In addition, there are trainings and briefings for service members on such topics as stress or anger management and resilience. Each wing has a Director of Psychological Health that can be reached through a service member's command.

- [The TMD Counseling Program](#) (service members Only): The TMD Counseling Program provides free individual counseling and treatment to service members currently serving in the Texas National or State Guard. Services can be provided in-person or through telehealth. A service member may request couples or family counseling and if appropriate to service member's treatment goals, short-term counseling can be arranged. Service members may request counseling and/or receive short-term, non-crisis 24/7 support at 512-782-5069.
- [TMD Family Support Services](#) (service members, family members and care givers): The TMD Family Support Services Branch is the umbrella organization for programs that provide a continuum of care and support services to service members and families during deployment and sustainment operations. It is the intent of Family Support Services to prepare and empower TMD service members and families to be resilient as future mission requirements will necessitate.

Through the various programs within Family Support Services and Community Partnerships, TMD is prepared to execute resilience, prevention, family readiness, and reintegration activities to enhance the capabilities and resilience of service members and families. The State Family Program provides information, resources, and referral assistance in eight essential service areas, plus unit volunteer support:

- Crisis Intervention
- ID cards and Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System
- Financial
- Legal
- TRICARE

- Community Resources & Family Outreach
- Emergency Family Assistance Center
- Exceptional Family Member Program

Additional information on available support can be found at [Texas Military Department Family Support Services](#). For assistance, call 800-252-8032.

- Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (service member Only): The Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office assists Texas National Guard service members that have endured Military Sexual Trauma. In addition to providing support and referrals, staff can assist a service member if they would like to file a report. The office is available to service members at 512-565-4410.

For more information, visit the [Texas Military Department](#).

Conclusion

Caregivers supporting a service member or veteran with mental health challenges requires patience, understanding, and access to appropriate resources. Caregivers play a vital role in the well-being and recovery of service members and veterans, offering emotional, physical, and psychological support. By staying informed, seeking help when needed, and fostering a supportive environment, caregivers can make a profound difference in not only the lives of service members and veterans but also their family members, as they navigate the complexities of mental health recovery.