

# Strategies for Family Members to Help Service Members with Combat / Operational Stress



**Stay informed:** Become familiar with the stress continuum model and the impact of combat stress injury and illness.

**Stay aware:** Monitor and track changes; know where you are in terms of impact (how have you all have changed) as well as what you are observing and experiencing in the service member. This is an unfolding process that will change, so monitoring over time is essential.

**Promote help-seeking:** Reduce stigma / familial barriers to care. There are many different barriers to asking for help (e.g., shame, pride, transportation, access) and mental health problems are inherently stigmatizing for all. Gain accurate knowledge about what care and treatment entails for service members, and learn ways that you can promote care. Setting limits and being clear that care is necessary is a critical step. This might have to come in the form of a family meeting like an “intervention,” where tough love is applied.

**Be assertive:** Set limits, establish rules, make needs clear, use straight talk. This is a tricky area for families because old roles and functions in a family, even if not helpful now, have helped keep the family together and operational. If a family member breaks these patterns and rules of relating and functioning, the ripple affect is disturbing even in the best case. Family members need to get clear on what they need and express these needs directly. Rules should be established based on appropriate needs. Limits need to be set so that the service member can know what is OK and what is not OK. This often requires help from caregivers over time.

**Stay connected:** Grow and maintain extra-family supports and support systems. Family members in particular need to stay connected with extra-family relationships that bring them good feelings and self-worth. Kids should be encouraged to go out and have fun.

**Strive for balance:** Seeking balance is critical for the health and well-being of family members, and balance is needed if family members are going to play a part in helping their service member. If you sacrifice too much of yourself and don't take care of yourself, you may end up not being useful and doing harm. If you deny, ignore, and press on without trying to address the needs of the returned service member, everyone will be harmed. Balancing needs and wants is critical.

**Make self-care a priority:** Without self-care there is no other-care, so for spouses, for example, self –care needs to be a priority. A close second is children's needs. A good metaphor is the instruction for oxygen use on Airplanes in the event of depressurization: Secure your own mask first (you can't be helpful if you can't breathe), then service member needs, extra-family relationships (and family members), and last, obligations and demands of military culture and military life. Family members may be implicitly asked to sacrifice themselves in service of the mission and the service. Family members may feel that their needs are insignificant, given the sacrifices of their service member and others like him or her. This needs to be challenged. If you don't take care of yourself, you may burn out and be ineffective in all aspects. Assess your needs; even generate new ideas about taking care of your needs and asserting these needs to those around you in a non-destructive or hurtful, but also non-passive, manner. You need to maintain a balance by making sure you are doing things that bring you pleasure and good feelings about yourself. If this happens, you will be far better prepared and capable of enduring the adversities and hardships that arise from living with someone with PTSD.

**Stay positive:** Families in distress and pain as a result of the suffering and disengagement of their redeployed service member need to remind themselves of the resources and strengths they have that they can call on to help restore their family, and they need to know that it will take time to generate new ways of relating and new rules about how to function (accommodation) to grow and transform newly resilient family processes.

**Encourage service member help-seeking:** Family members should not and cannot bear all the care-burden. One of the most important things that family members can do to help their service members is to know when help is needed (e.g., anytime there is physical aggression, severe withdrawal and lack of communication, when substance abuse is getting out of hand, when sleep is severely limited, when the service member is not attending to self-care and hygiene). You can also help to reduce any barriers to care-seeking and support care-seeking fully.

