



COPING WITH GRIEF FOR MILITARY & VETERAN FAMILIES

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COURSE PROGRESS

Lesson 1. What is Grief?

Lesson 2. How Grief may Affect the Veteran or Service Member

Lesson 3. How Grief may Affects the Military Family

Lesson 4. Processing Grief & Coping Techniques

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HOW GRIEF MAY AFFECTS THE MILITARY FAMILY



Military families face all the same challenges as non-military families, but because of frequent relocation, deployments, and other factors related to military service, these issues can be more frequent and sometimes exacerbated.

Common additional stressors among military families:

- Needs of the military come before the needs of the family
- Frequent moves
- Separation from friends and family
- Social isolation
- Trauma exposure
- Frequent deployments
- Lack of social support
- Caregiver burden
- Career conflicts
- Family conflicts
- Increased rates of Infidelity
- Financial strain
- Consistently low marital quality
- Disruption to the parent-child relationships
- Children experience trauma from frequent parental deployments

MILITARY SPOUSES

Often military spouses cannot establish careers of their own, having to sacrifice by frequently moving for their spouse's military careers. Some service members are often reassigned to locations where family members are not allowed to relocate with them, separating families for upwards of two years.

Frequent reassignments force spouses to leave behind their extended families, friends, jobs, schools and established emotional support systems within their communities. Surviving spouses may face added challenges because of increased mobility and lack of access to consistent community and health care services after a service member's death, as well as separation from supportive family members.



MILITARY SPOUSES



During deployment, a soldier's spouse becomes, for all intents and purposes, a single parent, managing a household by themselves, being the sole caregiver for children, handling the finances, all while experiencing anticipatory grief, never knowing if their service member may be injured or killed.

For parents, the stressors related to deployments often impact their ability to parent, leading to their children have a higher likelihood of experiencing behavioral and academic problems.

The additional stressors to the spouse of having to parent alone, maintaining the household on their own, and fearing for the life of their deployed loved one negatively impacts their ability to parent effectively. The same is true for surviving spouses after the loss of their service member.

MILITARY SPOUSES

When a family member has deployed, there is an increase in reported incidences of child maltreatment, including higher rates of physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect.

When the service member returns from deployment, they may still be detached, leaving all the family decisions to the spouse. The spouse is taught to either adapt or become vigilant to their services members' mental health symptoms and often experience secondary PTSD as their service members caregiver.

The risk to children becomes amplified if both of their parents are suffering from PTSD, particularly if undiagnosed, unacknowledged, and untreated.



MILITARY CAREGIVERS



When a wounded service member returns from combat, often spouses, parents, children, and relatives take on the responsibilities of the veteran's caregiver.

Caregivers perform a wide variety of roles and functions, such as assisting with the normal activities of daily life- such as bathing, dressing, and eating, serving as mental health counselors, case managers advocating for new and better treatment, and even serving as the family's legal and financial representative.

They also take on the role of helping them relearn basic skills, taking them to medical appointments, managing their finances, and caring for their children.

Taken together, these responsibilities can amount to more than a full-time job.

MILITARY CAREGIVERS



Military caregivers may also experience challenges within their families. Some caregivers, particularly spouses, no longer have the same relationship with their loved ones.

Military caregivers with children reported facing additional challenges related to not having sufficient time or energy to devote to parenting.

However, the personal impact of providing this care is enormous. Veteran Caregivers often experience:

- Loss of income
- Loss of intimate relationships
- Social isolation
- Health deterioration
- Mental and Emotional distress

COMMON GRIEF SYMPTOMS IN MILITARY SPOUSES

Grief is personal. Everyone responds differently to loss. Some people show grief in a way that can be seen and felt by people around them. Others do not. It's important not to assume that something is wrong if you or someone you know doesn't outwardly mourn. It simply means the loss is being handled in a different way. We can feel all, none or some of these things. There is no right or wrong way to feel following a loss. Some people seek help immediately by showing their emotions and talking to people, others prefer to deal with things slowly, quietly or by themselves.

As a military spouse, symptoms of grief may be expressed differently depending on severity of loss, but some common reactions to grief include:



Physical:

- stomachaches
- headaches
- chest pain
- insomnia
- fatigue
- dizziness
- trembling
- panic attacks

Emotional:

- shock
- disbelief
- numbness
- anxiety
- confusion
- frustration
- depression
- guilt
- loneliness
- anger
- Detachment

Behavioral:

- Crying spells
- pacing
- staring
- forgetting things
- loss of interest
- poor focus
- too much
- or too little sleep
- isolating
- obsessing over the loss
- worrying about one's own health

Spiritual:

- anger at God or higher power
- losing faith
- finding faith
- becoming more thoughtful or philosophical

MILITARY CHILDREN



Military children often experience the same losses as their parents, including the loss of their social support and community connections when they are forced to change schools every two to three years.

Children of veterans with mental health issues displayed symptoms of mental health issues themselves, developing unhealthy and abnormal coping strategies in response to the symptoms displayed by their parents, and were affected developmentally on a long-term basis with lower grades, more absences, lower teacher observation ratings, and lower standardized test scores

MILITARY CHILDREN

Children often take on the traumatic stress of their parents, developing unhealthy coping mechanisms. Younger children experience higher internalizing and externalizing symptoms of anxiety, usually in reactions to the anxiety and depression symptoms of their caregivers.

Adolescents experience increased home responsibilities and more reported thoughts of suicide, lower quality of life, depression, and a higher risk for substance abuse than that of adolescents in civilian and non-deployed military families.



MILITARY CHILDREN



Children can become very distressed when a parent is in a high-risk job, particularly when there is media coverage about the danger of the position.

If there is a crisis that your loved one is involved in, it may be best to limit media exposure. Be aware of how your words and your fears may influence your child. Children listen carefully to adult conversation, even when it appears they are distracted by play.

COMMON GRIEF SYMPTOMS MILITARY CHILDREN



Normative and Anticipatory Grief

- May become upset when their routines change.
- May get worried or fussy when apart from their usual caregivers and may be clingy and want extra attention.
- May express fears, sadness, and confusion by having nightmares or tantrums, being withdrawn, or regressing to earlier behaviors.
- May ask lots of questions about how the person died and about what death means.
- May display distress and sadness in ways that are not always clear, like being irritable and easily angered.
- May avoid spending time with others.
- May have physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches).
- May have trouble sleeping.
- May have problems at school.
- May have no reaction at all.
- May dream of events related to the death or war.
- May want to call home during the school day.
- May reject old friends and seek new friends who have experienced a similar loss. May have similar grief reactions to those of school-age children when at home, with friends, and at school.
- May withdraw, become sad, or lose interest in activities.
- May act out, have trouble in school, or engage in risky behavior.
- May feel guilt and shame related to the death.
- May worry about the future.
- May hide their true feelings.

COMMON GRIEF SYMPTOMS MILITARY CHILDREN



Complicated or Traumatic Grief

- May repetitively engage in play about the death or the person who died.
- May have problems getting back on schedule or meeting developmental milestones.
- May have difficulty being comforted.
- May repeatedly talk or play about the death.
- May have nightmares about the death.
- May become withdrawn, hide feelings (especially guilt), avoid talking about the person or about places and/or things related to the death.
- May avoid reminders of the person (may avoid watching TV news or refuse to attend the funeral or visit the cemetery).
- May become jumpy, extra-alert, or nervous.
- May have difficulty concentrating on homework or class work, or may suffer decline in grades.
- May worry excessively about their health, their parents' health, or the health and safety of other people.
- May act out and become "class clown" or "bully."
- May have similar traumatic grief reactions to those of school-age children when at home, with friends, and at school.
- May avoid interpersonal and social situations such as dating.
- May use drugs or alcohol to deal with negative feelings related to the death.
- May talk of wanting to harm themselves and express thoughts of revenge or worries about the future.
- May have low self-esteem because they feel that their family is now "different" or because they feel different from their peers.

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