Navigating Reactions to Stress Related to COVID-19

Resources for Military Sexual Trauma Survivors

Increased stress and anxiety are common and understandable as everyone navigates the current coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic and its broad consequences. Fear of catching the virus and of uncertainty about how the outbreak will affect you socially and economically are difficult enough, but staying braced for a threat over an extended period of time can also take a real toll on your body and mind. This may be particularly challenging for Veterans who have experienced deeply affecting traumas, such as military sexual trauma (MST).

So what can you do to manage this uncertainty and stress? Start with recognizing that it makes sense to feel anxious right now. There’s nothing weak or irrational about these feelings, and accepting that fact is a great step towards handling them.

This handout suggests a variety of other steps you can take to improve your wellbeing at this time.

**General Strategies**

❖ **Pace yourself.** Monitor yourself for fatigue, irritability, poor focus, marked anxiety, or other signs that you may be feeling stressed or overwhelmed. It’s natural to have these feelings right now, but it can also be a sign that you need to slow down, simplify, or take a break. If you run on empty, you can’t care for yourself, your loved ones, or your communities.

❖ **Maintain good health habits.** As stress increases, your health habits often take a hit. Do your best to eat healthy meals, avoid substance use, prioritize exercise, and get some sunlight each day. Strive for 7 or more hours of sleep each night. Less sleep than that can make you tired and less effective in managing stress.

❖ **Maintain structure at home.** If you or your children are working/studying from home, establish consistent work spaces and routines to help with focus and productivity. Plan breaks as well.

❖ **Limit exposure to stressful media.** Notice how news or social media stories are affecting you, and if need be, limit how much you look at them. Also focus on viewing the stories that give you hope or make you feel supported, and avoid the rest.

❖ **Focus on what you can control, and try to let go of what you can’t.** Recognize that some things are simply out of your control right now, like it or not. Focus on what you can do now, today.

❖ **Flexibility is key.** Increased stress and unique stressors make flexibility and adaptability even more important. It’s okay to be uncertain or feel a bit lost. Try to ask for support, evaluate your realistic options, modify your expectations, and move forward.

❖ **Be kind to yourself.** Remind yourself that you are doing as much as you can. Ask yourself what gives you joy and meaning, and increase the amount of time you spend doing those activities.

❖ **Above all, remember which stress management strategies have worked for you in the past as you survived and overcame other challenges.** Draw on those strategies to get through this challenging time. Remind yourself that you are resilient!
Increase Mindful Movement

Exercise is vital for stress reduction and many activities are possible even when physical distancing. Consider walking, biking, running, hiking, exercise videos, or something as simple as throwing a frisbee or ball. It doesn’t have to be extreme activity, either. Activities that help you mindfully reconnect to your body in a safe way may you feel particularly strong and steady right now. For example:

Yoga

❖ Veterans Yoga Project: Mindful Resilience’s Home Practice Library is a collection of mind-body practices to be used to further develop practices related to Breath, Meditation, Mindful Movement, Guided Rest, and Gratitude. Visit www.veteransyogaproject.org.

❖ Kula For Karma: The Yoga for Veterans Video Series at www.kulaforkarma.org/veterans-video-series is a 6-part guided yoga and meditation practice designed specifically for Veterans. These 30-minute videos guide viewers through asana, adaptive yoga, restorative practice, easy flow, power yoga level I & II, and meditation.

❖ Yoga Journal: Yoga Journal offers free online yoga videos at www.yogajournal.com/poses/yoga-for/yoga-for-veterans.

❖ Warriors at Ease: Explore meditation, breathing techniques, iRest Yoga Nidra and more yoga at warriorsatease.org/mind-body-practices.

❖ Comeback Yoga: Free yoga classes for military personnel, their families and supporters to develop resiliency in response to their experiences. Visit www.comebackyoga.org/online-yoga-practice.

Tai Chi

❖ 7 Minute Chi: 7-Minute Chi (www.7minutechi.com) allows you to move and meditate at the same time with simple moves from Tai Chi and Qi Gong that help to decompress and energize with moving meditation.

❖ Tai Chi Fundamentals - Standing: Tai Chi Fundamentals is a YouTube Experiential and Informative Video that shares the basic moves involved in Tai Chi. The Basic Moves video is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOwfr7Hj9XA and trains posture, balance and coordination.

❖ Tai Chi Fundamentals - Adaptive with Walking/Walker Aid: Similar to the above, this video trains posture, balance and coordination for a participant who uses a medical walker or walking aid. Visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5xER93yC1Y.

❖ Tai Chi with Tricia Yu: Tai Chi with Tricia Yu is a YouTube channel consisting of multiple videos and demonstrations. Visit www.youtube.com/user/TaiChiMindBody.

Engage in Breathing, Relaxation, and Meditation Activities

Mindful breathing is calming and helps concentration. Guided imagery and meditation have been shown to reduce stress, improve sleep, reduce pain, generate confidence, and enhance focus. Learn these techniques and relaxation exercises at:

❖ VA’s Whole Health Library: The VA’s Whole Health program offers a large number of educational materials including audio relaxation exercises. Visit www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/circle-of-health/power-of-the-mind.asp.

❖ Health Journeys Guided Imagery Audio Library: This resource streams a variety of brief, effective meditations by leading practitioners in the mind-body field. View them here.
❖ **Meditation Oasis Podcasts**: The Meditation Oasis® Podcast features guided meditations, instructions for meditation, and music for meditation at [www.meditationoasis.com/podcast](http://www.meditationoasis.com/podcast).

❖ **Military Meditation Coach App/Podcast**: Learn and practice meditation techniques for the military and veteran community through this podcast hosted by experts in the Military Health System, the Defense Health Agency, and the Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control. Available through Apple podcasts [here](http://www.meditationoasis.com/podcast).

### Stay Connected

Emotional support and fun, meaningful connection with others are vital to health and well-being. The more isolated and alone you feel, the more likely it is that your mental health will be negatively affected. This is likely to be even more true right now, and so it’s important to find opportunities to connect even while physical distancing.

❖ **With family and friends**: Call, Facetime, Zoom, Skype, or try Google Hangouts to reduce your isolation. Be creative – have a meal with a friend over Facetime, watch a movie “together”, or exchange photos throughout the day with a loved one to share what each of you are up to.

❖ **With VA**: The VA will continue to be here to support you, with options for telehealth appointments and contact over the phone. If you need help accessing MST-related services, contact your local VA facility and ask to speak with the **MST Coordinator**. A list of contact information for all VA facilities is available at [www.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp](http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp).

❖ **With counselors in the community**: Resources for trauma survivors are also available in the community:
  - **National Sexual Assault Hotline**: This free and confidential support hotline is available 24/7 for sexual assault survivors and their loved ones. Call **1-800-656-4673** (HOPE) or chat online with a counselor at [hotline.rainn.org](http://hotline.rainn.org).
  - **Anti-Violence Project**: This organization offers free, bilingual crisis intervention and support 24/7 for LGBTQ+ survivors of any type of violence. Call **212-714-1141**.
  - **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA’s) Disaster Distress Helpline**: This national hotline is dedicated to providing immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any disaster. Available in multiple languages, 24/7. Call **1-800-985-5990** or text **TalkWithUs to 66746**.

❖ **With others recovering from difficulties with alcohol or substance use**: A large number of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings are available online and by phone.
  - **NA**: Online meetings are available at [www.neveraloneclub.org](http://www.neveraloneclub.org); a list of telephone meetings is available at [www.nabyphone.com](http://www.nabyphone.com) or by calling 559-546-1400, 425-535-9142 or 716-293-9799.
Stay Safe

During stressful times, feelings of isolation and helplessness can increase, and some people struggle with thoughts of suicide or self-harm. Stress can also lead to relationship conflict or increased risk of harm from others. If you are feeling unsafe for whatever reason, please reach out to these resources:

❖ Veterans Crisis Line: The Veterans Crisis Line connects Veterans in crisis and their families and friends with caring, qualified VA responders. You can call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1, send a text to 838255, or chat online at www.veteranscrisisline.net.
❖ National Domestic Violence Hotline: This is a free and confidential national service available 24/7 to assist those experiencing intimate partner violence in connecting with resources and support. Call 1-800-799-7233. If you’re unable to speak safely, you can log onto thehotline.org to chat, or text LOVEIS to 22522.
❖ myPlan: This online tool, which can be accessed from www.myplanapp.org or through phone app stores, can help with safety decisions and resources if you or someone you care about is experiencing abuse in an intimate relationship.
❖ National Sexual Assault Hotline: Call 1-800-656-4673 (HOPE) or visit hotline.rainn.org for assistance finding resources to help after sexual assault.

Use Apps to Increase Coping Skills

VA has developed many mobile apps to assist Veterans with coping and recovery. All of the apps listed below and more are available at the VA App Store at mobile.va.gov/appstore/all.

❖ Virtual Hope Box (VHB) contains tools to help with coping, relaxation, distraction, and positive thinking. Tools include guided imagery, controlled breathing, muscle relaxation, coping cards, and distraction games such as sudoku or word searches.
❖ Mindfulness Coach App provides tools and exercises to help practice mindfulness, which means paying purposeful attention to the present moment without passing judgment on it or your feelings.
❖ Breathe2Relax is a portable stress management tool. Breathing exercises have been documented to decrease the body’s ‘fight-or-flight’ (stress) response and help with mood stabilization, anger control, and anxiety management.
❖ Tactical Breather App can be used to gain control over physiological and psychological responses to stress. Through repetitive practice and training, you can learn to gain control of your heart rate, emotions, concentration, and other responses in your body during stressful situations.
❖ PTSD Coach helps you learn about and cope with posttraumatic stress symptoms that can occur following trauma. This app provides education about PTSD and tools that can help manage the stresses of daily life with PTSD. Tools range from relaxation skills and positive self-talk to anger management and other common self-help strategies.
❖ Moving Forward App provides on-the-go tools and teaches problem solving skills to help you overcome obstacles and deal with stress. It is especially helpful in managing challenges such as returning to civilian life, balancing school and family life, financial difficulties, relationship problems, difficult career decisions, and coping with physical injuries.
❖ Parenting2Go App helps Veterans and Servicemembers reconnect with their children and provides convenient tools to strengthen parenting skills. Parents can find quick parenting advice, relaxation tools to use when frustrated or stressed, tools for positive communication, and strategies to switch gears between military life and home.
Engage in Self-Study

Self-study can help you understand symptoms and reactions better and learn new coping strategies. This can help you feel more in control, something that may be particularly valuable right now when so many things are more beyond your control than usual. Consider the following books:

❖ *Coping with Trauma: Hope through Understanding* by Jon Allen
❖ *Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology and How to Heal* by Donna Jackson Nakazawa
❖ *Finding Life Beyond Trauma* by Victoria Follette and Jacqueline Pistorello
❖ *I Can’t Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors* by Aphrodite Matsakis
❖ *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk
❖ *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* by Kristin Neff
❖ *Joining Forces – Empowering Male Survivors to Thrive* by Howard Fradkin
❖ *Victims No Longer: The Classic Guide for Men Recovering from Sexual Child Abuse* by Mike Lew
❖ *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse* by Wendy Maltz
❖ *You Can Help: A Guide for Family and Friends of Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Assault* by Rebecca Street
❖ *Coping with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Guide for Families* by Cheryl Roberts

Explore Additional Healing Resources

VA Websites

❖ VA’s MST website: [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp)
❖ Make the Connection: [www.maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma](http://www.maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma)
❖ AboutFace PTSD Education: [www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/AboutFace/info/about-us.html](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/AboutFace/info/about-us.html)
❖ Web-based resources for insomnia, anger, parenting, and more: [www.veterantraining.va.gov](http://www.veterantraining.va.gov)
❖ For COVID-19 specific resources: [www.va.gov/coronavirus](http://www.va.gov/coronavirus)

Non-VA Websites

❖ RAINN (for sexual assault survivors): [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)
❖ 1in6 (for male survivors): [1in6.org](http://1in6.org)
❖ MaleSurvivor (for male survivors): [www.malesurvivor.org](http://www.malesurvivor.org)
❖ Centers for Disease Control & Prevention Coronavirus information: [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus)

Note: Some resources are listed on this handout as options for your consideration, but are not necessarily endorsed by VA.

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