

Supporting families of veterans

This information sheet is designed to provide you with guidance on how to effectively support the mental health of Veterans families.

Ex-service organisations play a vital role in supporting the mental health of veterans' families, and encouraging them to seek help and maintain social connections.

A veteran's military experience can have a big impact on their life, in particular relationships and family.

Veterans' families can experience a wide range of mental health difficulties, just like the general Australian population. However they may be more at risk of developing a problem due to the impact of the Veteran's mental health on the whole family.

The children of Veterans with a mental health condition are more likely to experience a range of concerns themselves. These can include behavioural problems; issues at school and poor mental health. Partners may also be at risk due to strained relationships and increased responsibility for overall family functioning.

Anger, family violence and substance abuse can also affect partners and children and other family members (as well as the Veteran).

Family Violence

Violence directed towards another person within the same home is referred to as **family violence**. Family violence does not have to include physical or sexual violence. Other behaviours that are considered to be violent are: highly controlling behaviours that stop people being able to access help, strong verbal abuse and restricting someone's movements. An experience of family violence can be a significant, and usually ongoing, trauma. It is possible for someone undergoing family violence to experience aggression, hypervigilance, anxiety, panic, and depression.

Responding Sensitively To Family Violence

How you respond to someone who is impacted by violence can make a big difference to their recovery. It is important that you convey your concerns to a professional, and that you explain to the family member that you need to do so. Always start by explaining the purpose.

Some important things to convey are:

- Some signs observed are concerning.
- They have a right to feel safe in their home.
- They are not responsible for being subject to violence and they can be supported in any choices they make about what to do.
- Give them a chance to speak in private if possible.
- Be prepared to listen, but don't force them to speak if they are not ready.

Some suggested ways of phrasing support are:

- “I’m wondering if you feel safe at home.”
- “I am concerned about you because of the things you’ve told me/I’ve seen today.”
- “I’d like a professional to ask you some questions about how things are at home. Is that OK with you?”

Violence is never acceptable and it results in permanent damage to significant relationships. **1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)** is a national telephone helpline dedicated to family violence support.

Promote social connection

Making and maintaining friendships and support networks is important for families of Veterans with a mental health condition.

Encourage Veterans families to open up to other significant people in their life or their GP about any mental health difficulties they have themselves so that those people can be supportive and help monitor them in times of distress.

Consider the whole family

We know that family is crucial to veteran mental health and it is important to maintain a focus on how the whole family is coping. This means ensuring that the family are connected to a support group, Department of Veterans' Affairs support, Open Arms or other resources **directly** and not just through the veteran.

Check in with all the family about the impacts of the veteran’s or their own mental health difficulties. Offer referrals if needed for family members.

Other supports available:

ADF Support Line 1800 628 036: a confidential 24 hour telephone service for ADF members and their families.

Department of Veterans Affairs 1800 555 254 (8am - 5pm Monday to Friday)

Lifeline Australia: 13 11 14: provides free telephone crisis support services.

Open Arms - Veterans and Families Counselling 1800 011 046: provides 24 hour free counselling and support to Veterans and their families. It is a family-inclusive service and can offer professional support.