

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** (www.veteransyogaproject.org) is a collection of mind-body practices to further develop practices related to Breath, Meditation, Mindful Movement, Guided Rest, and Gratitude.
- ❖ **Yoga For Veterans** (<http://www.kulaforkarma.org/veterans-video-series>) is a guided yoga and meditation practice for Veterans that includes asana, adaptive yoga, restorative practice, easy flow, power yoga level I & II, and meditation.
- ❖ **Yoga Journal** (www.yogajournal.com/poses/yoga-for/yoga-for-veterans) has free yoga videos for Veterans.
- ❖ **Warriors at Ease** (www.warriorsatease.org/mind-body-practices) will help you explore meditation, breathing techniques, iRest Yoga Nidra and more yoga.
- ❖ **Comeback Yoga** (www.comebackyoga.org/online-yoga-practice) has free yoga classes for military personnel, their families and supporters to develop resiliency.

Tai 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** (www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOwfr7Hj9XA) is a Tai Chi basic moves video that helps you train posture, balance and coordination.
- ❖ **Tai Chi Fundamentals - Adaptive with Walking/Walker Aid** (www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5xER93yC1Y) is a video that trains posture, balance and coordination for people who use a medical walker or walking aid.
- ❖ **Tai Chi with Tricia Yu** (www.youtube.com/user/TaiChiMindBody) is a YouTube channel with many other Tai Chi videos and demonstrations.

Try 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. For example:

- ❖ **VA's Whole Health Library** (www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/circle-of-health/power-of-the-mind.asp) offers many educational materials and relaxation exercises.
- ❖ **Health Journeys Guided Imagery Audio Library** (www.healthjourneys.com/partneraccess/index/display/token/00_nsrcONaPPPo2qdk8IpDpyc6s86k9FnriuQkwdqFI6FIKIfhAFUAGxEVUEehkUS1t4MypCQzTX9Qi6JE8rNpUsGM67wnig3lc8yeSkTsBdTbW52A012hQDMMGXmDYN3lqQRMbP5786IQcfM7y8Gg==) has a variety of brief, effective meditations by leading practitioners in the mind-body field.

- ❖ **The Meditation Oasis® Podcast** (www.meditationoasis.com/podcast) features guided meditations, instructions for meditation, and music for meditation.
- ❖ **Military Meditation Coach Podcast** (podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/military-meditation-coach-podcast/id1313813296) is hosted by experts in the Military Health System, the Defense Health Agency, and the Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control and will help you learn and practice meditation techniques for the military and Veteran community.

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** (www.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp) and ask to speak with the **MST Coordinator**.
- ❖ **With counselors in the community:** Resources for trauma survivors are also available in the community:
 - **National Sexual Assault Hotline** (hotline.rainn.org/online) is a 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.
 - **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 available in multiple languages, 24/7, provides immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any disaster. Call **1-800-985-5990** or text **TalkWithUs to 66746**.
- ❖ **With others recovering from difficulties with alcohol or substance use:** Many Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings are still available to you.
 - **NA:** NA meetings are available online and by phone. Visit **Narcotics Anonymous** (<http://www.na.org/meetingsearch>) or **NA by Phone** (www.nabyphone.com) for offerings.
 - **AA:** AA meetings are available online and by phone. Visit **Alcoholics Anonymous** (aa.org) or **AA Meeting Online** (www.aameetingonline.com) for offerings.

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** (www.veteranscrisisline.net) 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.
- ❖ **National Domestic Violence Hotline** (www.thehotline.org) is a free and confidential 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 the website to chat, or text **LOVEIS** to **22522**.
- ❖ **myPlan** (www.myplanapp.org) is a safety and coping resource that can be accessed online or through a phone app. It helps with safety decisions and resources if you or someone you care about is experiencing abuse in an intimate relationship.
- ❖ **National Sexual Assault Hotline** (hotline.rainn.org/online) assists with finding support and resources to help after sexual assault. Call **1-800-656-4673 (HOPE)** or visit the website.

Use Apps to Increase Coping Skills

VA has developed many mobile apps to assist Veterans with coping and recovery. Several of the apps listed below and more are available at the VA App Store at mobile.va.gov/appstore/all, or in the **App Store** (www.apple.com/ios/app-store) or **Google Play** (play.google.com/store/apps).

- ❖ **Mindfulness Coach** provides tools and exercises to practice paying attention to the present moment without passing judgment on it or your feelings.
- ❖ **PTSD Coach** helps you learn about and cope with symptoms that can occur following trauma. It has education about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and tools to help manage the stresses of daily life, including relaxation skills and positive self-talk to anger management and other self-help strategies.
- ❖ **Moving Forward** has 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** 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 switchgears between military life and home.
- ❖ **Virtual Hope Box** has 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.
- ❖ **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** 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.

Try 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
- ❖ *The Courage to Heal Workbook: A Guide for Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis
- ❖ *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
- ❖ *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

Visit Additional Healing Resources

VA Websites

- ❖ **VA's MST website:** www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp
- ❖ **National Center for PTSD COVID-19 Resources for Managing Stress:** www.ptsd.va.gov/covid/index.asp
- ❖ **Make the Connection:** www.maketheconnection.net/conditions/military-sexual-trauma
- ❖ **AboutFace PTSD Education:** www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/AboutFace
- ❖ **Resources for managing insomnia, anger, parenting, and more:** www.veterantraining.va.gov
- ❖ **Other VA COVID-19 resources:** www.va.gov/coronavirus

Non-VA Websites

- ❖ **RAINN** (for sexual assault survivors): www.rainn.org
- ❖ **1in6** (for male survivors): 1in6.org
- ❖ **MaleSurvivor** (for male survivors): www.malesurvivor.org
- ❖ **Centers for Disease Control & Prevention Coronavirus information:** www.cdc.gov/coronavirus
- ❖ **World Health Organization (WHO) Mental Health Considerations During COVID-19 Outbreak:** www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf



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

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