

Physical Distancing + Social Connection: The Department of Defense Tips on Staying Safe and Connected

As we all strive to support our nation's efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, the Department of Defense (DoD) maintains its commitment to supporting our most valuable resource – our people. The personal health and well-being of our Service members, civilian employees, and families is paramount. Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations; and, certainly, an infectious disease outbreak that requires social distancing, quarantine, or isolation is bound to generate stress. Many across our nation – and around the world – are feeling stress, uncertainty, anxiety, disconnectedness, financial insecurity, as well as potentially feeling a sense of hopelessness. For some, such experiences can be associated with an increased risk for suicide. Finding healthy ways to cope with stress during this time will help us to remain strong. The following are some tips and resources both within and outside the DoD to help cope with stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

We encourage you to take these steps to support your own and others' personal health and well-being.

Social connectedness and caring connections are critical right now.

Limiting in-person contact with others is the best way to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Social distancing – also called *physical distancing* – means keeping physical space between yourself and other people who are not inside your home. As a result of physical distancing requirements, you may be feeling isolated or less connected, or notice this in others. Social distancing requires only a physical space between individuals. There are still many ways to look out for each other, build cohesion, and stay connected virtually. Social connectedness and a sense of belonging improve physical, mental, and emotional well-being – now more than ever, it is vital to stay socially connected while physical distancing.

Being connected takes many forms –

- Stay connected to others. Whether through phone calls, virtual meetups, texts, or sending and posting messages via social media platforms – talk about your experiences and feelings with friends and loved ones if you find it helpful. Share words of support, listen without judgement; and, if needed, connect with resources and help.
- Stay connected with yourself. Make it a priority to eat healthy, exercise regularly, and to get plenty of sleep. Use practical ways to cope and to relax. Relax your body often by doing things that work for you – deep breathing, stretching, meditating, or engaging in other activities you enjoy. Pace yourself between stressful activities, and do something fun after a hard task.
- Stay informed. Stay up-to-date on what is happening, while limiting your media exposure. Avoid watching or listening to news reports 24/7 since this tends to increase anxiety and worry.
- Get help. Numerous support resources are available including your Chaplain, behavioral health provider, supervisor, peers or family members, Military OneSource, Veterans Crisis Line/Military Crisis Line, or other trusted resource.

Help is available.

Even if you have never accessed such support services before, take advantage of resources available to you. Health care support systems like telehealth services – especially for accessing behavioral health services – can provide preventative tools, resources, treatments, and supports.

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- If you, or someone you know, are experiencing an emotional crisis or thoughts of suicide, please connect 24/7 with free, confidential services. For those experiencing a suicidal crisis, call the Veteran Crisis Line/Military Crisis Line or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. For emotional support related to COVID-19, call the Disaster Distress Helpline.
- If you are concerned about your financial stability during the pandemic, there are several financial readiness resources available to help. Free, confidential financial counseling is available for Service members and their families from accredited financial counselors via Military OneSource's 24/7 call center. Civilian employees have access to similar support through their agencies' Employee Assistance Programs.
- Support is available to all members, including the Reserve Component, through numerous resources including Chaplains, Family Programs, and Behavioral Health resources.
 - National Guard members in Title 32 status can access multiple programs and support services. Psychological health teams are available regardless of your activation status in every state, territory, and the District of Columbia that can complete assessments, referrals, and case management.
 - Military OneSource is available to all Service members (including National Guard members whether or not Federally activated) and their families throughout their career and up to one year following separation/retirement from the military.

How we share information matters.

Reliable information can keep you safe and physically, emotionally, and mentally healthy during and after a public health crisis like the current COVID-19 pandemic. Look for and share only credible sources of information on COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides up-to-date information via their website (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html) and social media channels. The DoD also maintains a website (www.defense.gov/explore/spotlight/coronavirus) specifically designed to share the latest information about the COVID-19 response.

When communicating with family, friends, and other members of the community, avoid speculating about the potential impact COVID-19 may have. Share the importance of staying connected with the people in your life, and that help is still available for those in crisis, as well as for those who simply need some additional support.

Members of the media are strongly encouraged to incorporate best practices for reporting on suicide (www.reportingonsuicide.org) and educate readers on helping resources.

Resources:

- **Military OneSource** is available 24/7/365 to help with handling stress and challenges related to COVID-19, as well as to provide non-medical counseling or peer support services. It is available to eligible Service members, including National Guard and Reserve members, and family members. You may call 800-342-9647 or connect through live chat (www.militaryonesource.mil). A dedicated section (www.militaryonesource.mil/coronavirus) provides resources, updates, and information about the impacts of COVID-19 on the military community. New offerings include non-medical counseling video sessions for children and youth.

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- **inTransition** is a free, confidential program that offers specialized coaching and assistance for active-duty Service members, National Guard members, reservists, veterans, and retirees who need access to a new mental health provider or wish to initiate mental health care for the first time. inTransition services are available to ALL military members regardless of length of service or discharge status. Call 800-424-7877. Outside the United States (international toll-free number): 800-424-4685. Outside the United States (collect): 314-387-4700. All calls are confidential and free.
- Agency-specific **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** provides a variety of support services to civilian employees and their dependents. Topics of assistance include mental health, financial and/or legal matters, alcohol or drug abuse, work-related stressors, marriage/family and caregiving issues, illnesses, accidents, and relationships. For your agency's EAP information, please contact your Human Resources team. The DoD EAP provides resources, information, and confidential help and can be reached 24/7 at 800-222-0364 (TTY: 888-262-7848). Telehealth services are now available during the COVID-19 pandemic allowing for providers to conduct telehealth video and/or phone sessions for all routine EAP services (e.g., via Skype, FaceTime, and other platforms).
- **Disaster Distress Helpline**, 800-985-5990, is a 24/7 national hotline dedicated to providing immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster. This toll-free, multilingual, and confidential crisis support service is available to all residents in the United States and its territories. Stress, anxiety, and other depression-like symptoms are common reactions after a disaster. Call 800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** recognizes the challenges posed by the current COVID-19 situation and is providing guidance and resources to assist individuals, providers, communities, and states across the country.
 - Social Distancing Tips: www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/tips-social-distancing-quarantine-isolation-031620.pdf
 - Virtual Recovery Resources: www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/virtual-recovery-resources.pdf
- **Veterans Crisis Line/Military Crisis Line (VCL/MCL)** is a free, confidential resource that provides Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) support for all Service members, including members of the National Guard and Reserve, all veterans, and their families, even if they are not registered with VA or enrolled in VA health care. VCL/MCL responders are specially trained and experienced in helping Service members and veterans of all ages and circumstances. If you, or someone you know, is in a crisis, please contact the VCL/MCL at:
 - Phone: 800-273-8255, press 1
 - Chat: www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat
 - Web: www.veteranscrisisline.net
 - Calling from Overseas: In Europe, call 00800-1273-8255 or DSN 118. In Korea, call 0808-555-118 or DSN 118. In Afghanistan, call 001-800-273-8255 or DSN 111.
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**, 800-273-8255, provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention, and crisis resources for all Americans and their loved ones, as well as best practices for professionals.

Note: Any reference to or listing of non-governmental organizations does not constitute endorsement by the United States Department of Defense.