

ORGANIZATION NEWS

Information/Education Page

Treating Military Spouses* in the Private Sector: Education Page and Resources for Health Care Providers



Background and significance

More than 50% of active duty service members are married, for a total of almost 700,000 military spouses.¹ Domestic partners are undercounted by the Department of Defense but are just as critical as a support system for their service member so they are included under the umbrella term of spouse. Most of the military spouses are women and younger than 40 years.¹ Although about 10% of spouses are also service members, the remaining 90% are civilians who are referred to as dependent (as are their children) in the Department of Defense. However, not all military spouses or partners are dependents in the Department of Defense benefits system.

Veterans are ordinary people with extraordinary jobs. A critical contributor to successfully navigating deployments and trauma is the resilience of the service member's social support, which includes the military spouse.²⁻⁴ Family health and well-being is thus an integral element of warrior care and remains the obligation of both the military and civilian health care systems.

Unique to post-9/11 deployments is the reliance on Reservists and National Guard. Although active duty families are likely to receive emotional and social support from being geographically grouped together, National Guard and Reserve members and their families continue to live in their home or civilian communities that may not fully appreciate military stressors.

Unique needs of military spouses and partners

Military spouses participate in variable life experiences because of their partners' work and face many unique challenges. Military orders and deployments affect the entire family unit and require military spouses to repeatedly access resilience throughout the cycles of military life. Military spouses face expected stressors that include the following⁵⁻⁹:

- Frequent moves (usually every 2-3y)
- Temporary separations from their service member spouse
- Isolation
- Economic disadvantages
- Disruption of education and occupational opportunities

Military spouses also play an important role in service members' decisions about remaining in the military at the end of a service term.

With every move, the military spouse must reestablish the home, work, school, and support systems. A recent survey of active duty and veteran spouses identified financial concerns and employment to be significant sources of stress.¹⁰ If the military spouse is in a profession that requires state licensure (eg, teaching, health care, or real estate), this process can take months and becomes expensive even with the current licensure portability supports. Spousal work is often dependent on access to affordable and reliable child care (most of the military children are younger than 18y) and is often challenging to find after a relocation.¹¹

* The term spouse includes all married and unmarried partners unless referring to statistics about marital status.

In addition, 56% of spouses report being underemployed, with frequent relocation being a perceived contributor. Underemployment accounts for about a 25% loss in expected income regardless of education or experience.^{11,12} Military spouses have an unemployment rate that is 4-5 times the national average.^{11,13}

Caring for military spouses requires additional assessment of current roles and supports at variable time points in the military life cycle. Providers should be aware of the following:

- Access to child care may limit a military spouse's participation in health care or follow-up.
- Their medical records may be incomplete or scattered.

Despite these challenges, several factors have been found to mitigate these stressors, all of which have all been identified as contributors to coping and resilience among military spouses:^{12,14,15}

- Education
- Work
- Communication
- Social supports
- Access to care

Military spouses learn to be flexible and acclimatize to new environments. They often demonstrate great strength and adaptability in response to difficult situations.

Call to action

Although civilian health care providers are not expected to have expertise in the complexities of military life, they should be willing and able to access reliable published care resources and make referrals as needed to optimize patient care.

Therefore, we call on all health care providers to do the following:

- Identify military spouses in your health care setting.
- Learn about the military culture and effect of military service on the military spouse.

- Recognize the physical, psychological, and behavioral health risk factors and comorbidities associated with spouse military service.
- Identify referral agencies and resources available to support military spouses in the civilian sector.
- Recognize that although military families face many challenges, including frequent moves and deployments, they also develop resilience and many adaptive assets.

Why is it important to identify individuals who have served in the military and their family members?

If civilian providers do not ask if their patient or client has a family member who is a service member or veteran, important information may be missed. Military culture includes an organized set of attitudes and beliefs designed to optimize survival in combat situations. These values are commonly embraced by the entire family; many of these survival values become barriers to community reintegration and can preclude military veterans and their families from disclosing important information with their civilian health care providers.

A best practice is simply asking, "Do you have a spouse or partner who has ever served in the military?"

How can you identify a military spouse in your practice?

Often, the only way a provider will learn of their patient's military connection is by discovering their TRICARE insurance coverage. However, although the active duty military spouse will typically have TRICARE insurance, the spouses of Reserve and National Guard service members and unmarried partners may not have such insurance coverage.

Asking all patients, "Do you have a spouse or partner who has ever served in the military?" would facilitate routine identification and screening for health concerns and stressors associated with the spouse or partner's military service.

This first question is crucial because disclosing family needs and injuries is difficult. Rapid establishment of trust, rapport, and credibility

between the provider and a military spouse is essential.

How to be a military spouse advocate?

Historically, unique health care needs and risk factors of military spouses have not been recognized in civilian health care settings. A few things you can do to manage those effects and mitigate risk factors include the following:

- Educate yourself about the unique health risks and health care issues of military spouses as well as how military service can affect their families.
- Ask the question: “Do you have a spouse or partner who has ever served in the military?”
- Carefully listen to the answer. You may be the first health care professional with whom the military spouse has shared this information.
- Include information about physical, psychological, and behavioral health issues in your history and physical examination.
- Document what the military spouse tells you. These records may be used to request referrals or resources for the military spouse.
- Identify local referral agencies and options on military installations as well as in the community.
- Support your military spouse patients by acknowledging their service as a military family member. Acknowledging the unique aspects of military life and providing a safe, patient-centered environment allow them to discuss the effect of military service on their physical and psychological health.
- Provide well-targeted referrals when needed.

Resources for health care providers

Military spouse resources

- Blue Star Families: www.bluestarfam.org/resources/deployments/deployment-resources/
- Military.com: <http://www.military.com/spouse/military-life/military-resources/family-support-services.html>
- Military One Source: www.militaryonesource.mil

- National Military Family Association: www.militaryfamily.org
- The Elizabeth Dole Foundation: <https://www.elizabethdolefoundation.org/>
- The Biden Foundation: <https://bidenfoundation.org/about/>
- Military Network Radio: <https://militarynetworkradio.com>
- Military Spouse Employment Partnership: <https://msepjobs.militaryonesource.mil/msep/home>
- DoD Safe Helpline: 877 995 5247
- The Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center: <https://dvbic.dcoe.mil/>

Connecting military families with Veterans Affairs health care resources for their veteran

- For emergencies, use the Veterans Crisis Line: <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/> and 1-800-273-TALK (8255) option 1; text 838255.
- Use the resource locator to find the contact information for Veteran Affairs (VA) locations in your community: <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/GetHelp/ResourceLocator.aspx>.
- To help a veteran apply for VA health benefits: https://www.va.gov/HEALTHBENEFITS/apply/application_process.asp.
- VA Benefits Assistance Service: 1-800-827-1000.

Additional resources

- Training resources on military culture: <http://deploymentpsych.org/military-culture>
- Support for caregivers: <https://veterancaregiver.com>

Authorship

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