Welcome to “Returning from the War Zone: A Guide for Families.” This course is brought to you by the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The support you gave your service member during deployment has been vital to the success of his or her mission. Now that your service member is coming home, your support is more important than ever. You’ll play a key role in helping your family adjust to being back together.

In this course, you’ll learn that every military family faces challenges when the service member comes home. And you’ll see that many families experience similar things.

You will learn how to make the transition home go smoothly by creating realistic expectations for the reunion. You will also learn how to plan for and cope with common concerns.

Finally, you’ll learn when and how to get help for problems.

By the time you finish this course, you’ll know that your family’s reunion experiences are to be expected. You are not alone. If you need it, help is available to you, your family, and your service member.

Deployments are stressful for everyone in the family—service members, partners, children, and parents. It’s probably a relief to know that your service member will soon be home.

But it’s important to know that life after deployment isn’t going to be the same as it was before. That’s not always a bad thing. It’s just reality. It’s something everyone has to deal with.

When it comes to reunions, many families and service members face the same things. If your family is struggling with your service member’s return, remember that you’re not alone.

If you’re still waiting for your service member to return home, you’re probably counting down the days. No doubt that you’re excited. Maybe you’ve even rehearsed the reunion in your head a few times.

But maybe you’re a little nervous too. And that’s okay— actually it’s pretty common. After all, you’ve been apart for a long time, and everyone has changed as a result of the deployment. It’s perfectly natural to feel a little stressed about the reunion and how your life will be affected.

Knowing that you’re probably going to face some challenges is actually the first step toward helping your reunion go well. Thinking about your expectations is a good place to start. Because your expectations and your service member’s expectations for reunion might be different.

What do you think having your service member back home will be like?

And what do you think your service member is expecting? Will those expectations be the same as yours?
Most likely your first expectation is that you will be overjoyed when you first set eyes on your service member. And your service member’s first expectation is probably the same—that he or she will be thrilled at the first sight of you. But that’s probably where the similarities between your expectations will end.

Let’s take a look at what some other family members and service members were expecting from their reunions.

Family member expectations may include:

- Doing all the things you used to do together
- Spending lots of time with family and friends
- Sharing everything about each of your experiences during the deployment
- Handing over chores or child care
- Having your service member back in his/her old role

Service member expectations may include:

- Expecting family life to be the same as before deployment
- Wanting lots of peace and quiet or down time
- Having kids to come running when they first see the service member
- Believing that the family didn’t function as well in his/her absence
- Quickly being back in his/her old role

You can see that family members and service members can have very different expectations for how their reunion will play out. So which version is the right one?

Well, neither version is necessarily right or wrong. The reality is that your service member’s homecoming isn’t likely to unfold exactly as either of you have expected. This doesn’t mean your reunion will be terrible; it just means you should have realistic expectations and be ready for the different perspectives you and your service member will have about the reunion, even if you have been through other deployments in the past.

One way to help form realistic expectations for your reunion is to understand the ways that you, your service member, and your family have changed over the course of the deployment.

Everyone changes during a deployment, whether they were actually the one deployed or not. The changes are related to the deployment but also simply a natural result of time passing.

There are common changes that many service members experience. And family members also change in the same or similar ways. Let’s look at what some of these common changes might be. We’ll start with the service members.

Deployment causes every service member to change, no matter who they are or where they’ve been. Some of these changes have been on purpose, and others are instinctual.

Regardless of whether or not they want to change, service members do change. This can be voluntary, as a way to increase success and survival in their deployment surroundings, or it can be involuntary, related to things that they’ve had to see or do that had a strong impact on them.

For instance, during deployment, your service member may have:
- Formed stronger bonds with fellow service members, which may lead him or her to spend more time than usual with friends instead of family
- Developed a desire for the highly structured environment and routines of 24/7 military life
- Taken on a more aggressive attitude, which is often necessary when deployed in hostile areas
- Had to adapt mentally and emotionally as a result of being injured, having long-term operational stress and fatigue, or seeing and doing things that are difficult for them to integrate into their views of the world or themselves.

These aren’t the only ways service members can change, but they are fairly common. Some of these changes will lessen or disappear over time, and some will be long lasting.

When it comes to dealing with change, you may face some challenges when your service member returns home. For instance, it may take time for him or her to readapt to life back home. You’ll need to be patient and not expect things to be exactly as they were before the deployment. Another possibility is that you may find yourself having to deal with lasting changes in your service member. This means you and your service member will have to accept these changes and find a way to integrate them into your daily lives.

You might not think you or your family have changed because you were not the one who was deployed. But just as it likely did for your service member, deployment likely forced you to change, too, to handle your new situation.

To see ways that family members may have changed during the deployment, click on the family members listed on the screen.

Of all the family members, spouses may have to make the most changes during a deployment. First of all, they have to take on many, if not all, of the tasks their husbands or wives did while at home. While these added responsibilities can increase the spouse’s stress level, they can also lead to a sense of great accomplishment and pride.

Deployment can be especially difficult for children because they aren’t as equipped—emotionally or mentally—as adults to deal with a long-term separation.

The most obvious change will be that the children will have gotten older and may have even physically grown. Even a period as short as a few months can mean a big change in a child, especially the younger ones.

Some children might have been so young during the deployment that the child doesn’t even remember his or her parent when he or she returns. Other children, especially teenagers, will have developed more independence, and won’t need or want as much interaction with either parent.

Finally, no matter what the child’s age, they’ve all learned to rely on the parent who remained at home for all their needs.

Parents of service members often have to take on some of their son’s or daughter’s responsibilities while he or she is deployed. Parents may find themselves slipping back into the role they had when their son or daughter was just a child and needed them to take care of all his or her needs.

When the service member returns, the parent may have a hard time turning those responsibilities back over.
Again, just as with your service member, some of the changes within your family may be long lasting, and some may disappear or revert over time.

Although these changes can make reunion more difficult than you would like, you have to be careful not to automatically view them all as negative. By working together as a family and facing the changes head-on, you can help each other adapt to permanent changes, embrace the positive changes, and move forward after deployment. Overcoming challenges can also make some families feel even closer.

Before we move on, let’s spend a minute thinking about how and why change is especially difficult after a deployment.

Obviously everyone changes over time, and under normal circumstances the changes seem gradual, almost unnoticeable. But when you’ve been separated by a deployment, changes can seem unsettling and disruptive.

There are some very logical reasons for why it can be difficult to accept these changes. First of all, you haven’t had the benefit of seeing the changes happen over time or been given the chance to adjust to them little by little, as you normally would when the family is all together. Second, because you were apart when the changes occurred, you probably don’t have a clear understanding of why these changes were necessary. The same goes for how your service member might view changes in your family and at home.

But you shouldn’t view change as bad just because it feels unfamiliar. Again, recognizing that both families and service members change as a result of deployment can help make the transition back to a unified family a bit smoother.

With that we’ll close out on reunion issues and move on to stress reactions that are common after deployment.

Stress reactions are a normal part of readjusting for both service members and family members. After all, deployment was stressful for all involved.

Even though each person’s experiences are going to be unique, there are some stress reactions that are common to many service members and family members.

Familiarizing yourself with these stress reactions will help prepare you for potential reintegration issues within your family after deployment.

Long deployments away from home are difficult for all service members, especially if they’ve spent time in a combat zone or have witnessed traumatic events.

The reactions can be physical, behavioral, or emotional, and each service member will experience them in different ways. Some may be more anxious, irritable, or even aggressive. Others might be more withdrawn or have trouble with normal tasks at home, work, or school. Still others may experience flashbacks so real that they think they’re still in a combat zone.

Then again, many service members have only mild reactions after deployment, so you shouldn’t let this topic alarm you. Regardless, in the long run it’s better to know about these potential reactions than to be caught off guard once your service member returns home.
To review the different stress reactions that service members might experience, click on the categories on the left side of the screen.

Common physical reactions are:
- Trouble sleeping or being overly tired
- Upset stomach or trouble eating
- Headaches and sweating when thinking of the war
- Rapid heartbeat or breathing
- Existing health problems get worse

Common behavioral reactions are:
- Trouble concentrating
- Being jumpy or easily startled
- Being on guard, always alert
- Excessive drinking, smoking, or drug use
- Avoiding people or places related to the war
- Lack of exercise, poor diet or health care
- Work or school problems

Common emotional reactions are:
- Bad dreams, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts
- Nervousness, helplessness, or fear
- Feelings of sadness, rejection, or abandonment
- Feelings of guilt or shame
- Shock, numbness, or inability to feel
- Feeling hopeless about the future
- Anger
- Agitation, irritation, annoyance
- Loss of intimacy or feeling withdrawn and disconnected

On the other hand, many families and service members report positive reactions as well, such as:
- Increased maturity
- More appreciation for family and family time
- Less focus on “what is not important” and
- More focus on quality time and activities with those they love
- A greater dedication and belief in their job and mission, and
- More sense of confidence and pride in themselves and their family.

Service members can have traumatic growth experiences that bring them closer to their core values, or their connection with their spirituality. This is often why many wounded service members want to return to deployment – to continue to serve their country and work in concert with their fellow service members. It is important to know that both positive and negative reactions can co-exist for service members.

The important thing to keep in mind is that each service member will respond to stress differently. They experience reactions to different degrees and in different combinations. If your service member is experiencing any of the common physical, behavioral, or emotional reactions listed on the previous slides, it’s not an automatic indicator that he or she has a more intense and enduring problem, such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, which requires treatment.
With adequate time most service members will successfully readjust to being back at home and being part of your family.

In the final section of the training, you’ll learn how to identify when negative reactions become severe enough to require outside help.

Next we’ll look at some of the stress your family might experience after deployment.

Stress reactions to deployment aren’t limited to service members—family members can have them too. Spouses, children, and parents can also face their own set of common reactions to deployment and their service member’s return.

To review the different stress reactions your family might experience, click on the family members listed on the screen.

Knowing that your service member has seen or gone through a traumatic experience, it’s only natural to worry about his or her physical and emotional well being. This is especially true if the service member returns from deployment with an injury or other health problem.

After deployment it’s also normal for spouses to feel anxious about being emotionally and physically intimate again. You’ve been separated for so long, you basically have to get to know each other all over again. In connection with this loss of intimacy, both service members and partners may have trust issues or be concerned that each other was not faithful during the long absence.

Finally, your separation during deployment may lead to feelings of anger or resentment over the fact that you had to deal with every single home or family issue alone. And as a result, because you know your husband or wife wasn’t just taking an extended vacation, you might also feel guilty about feeling angry.

Children of all ages will have trouble adjusting to having their deployed parent back home. Many will feel as though their parent abandoned them. They may not want to reconnect for fear that the parent will leave again. On the other hand, some young children may develop separation anxiety, thinking if they let their mother or father out of sight, he or she might not return.

Very young children may be shy or fearful around their mother or father because they don’t remember their parent very well, if at all.

Many kids, especially older ones and teenagers, will act out by rebelling or resisting their parent’s authority. After so much time away, these children may feel as though their mother or father is interfering with their lives rather than just trying to be a parent again.

Parents always worry about their children’s well being, but it can be even more difficult when their child is a service member who has just returned from a long deployment. This is especially true if the service member has returned with an injury or other health problem.

Parents of service members may feel frustrated or neglected if they don’t get to spend much time with their son or daughter, particularly when he or she has a family of his or her own. And if they’ve been handling some of their son’s or daughter’s responsibilities during deployment, they may also feel unwanted once their child no longer needs them to handle their affairs.
Finally, if they’ve been caring for their grandchildren they may feel lonely once the kids move back home with their parent.

Remember, not everyone will experience all, or even any, of these stress reactions. But it’s still good to know about them so you are prepared in case you or anyone in your family does have them. And with time, many families are able to get past stress reactions they experience.

In the next section, you’ll learn what you can do to help deal with some of the issues we just discussed before they have a chance to get worse.

You’re probably very excited about your service member’s return after such a long absence and anxious for things to finally return to normal. As we talked about in the previous section, things won’t be exactly the same as they once were.

However, with some planning and time, you and your family can help establish new routines and roles that work for you in your home life.

In this section, we’re going to talk about what you and your family can do to help make it a smooth transition. This includes the day of the reunion, and even the first week after he or she returns. We’ll then go over some healthy coping strategies you, your service member, and your entire family can use. These strategies can make the return to family life as smooth and stress-free as possible.

Despite your best intentions, you may be too exhausted, busy, or anxious to prepare the way you’d like to for the reunion. Here are some steps you can take to help keep your expectations reasonable and make the reunion day more relaxing.

First off, communicate with your service member. Find out the details of the return plan, including flight arrival time, transportation to and from the reunion, and hotel reservations if you’re going to be traveling to pick up your service member.

Next, make a backup plan just in case the schedule changes or there is a family emergency. If you can’t make it, how will the service member get home? Does he/she have phone numbers of people to call at different times of day and night?

Next, plan something special for the service member once you’re all home safe and sound. This can be a quiet family dinner, a small welcome home party, or even a welcome home banner hung on the door. Find out from the service member what their preferences are for a homecoming reception before planning a big event. Remember that your service member has been through an exhausting and stressful experience. So, try not to overwhelm him or her with too much activity on the day he or she returns home. Also, try not to get too upset if the service member doesn’t recognize all of the small details you went through to plan the special event.

Most importantly, remain flexible. Don’t stress or panic if things don’t go exactly as planned. You’ve been waiting for this moment for a very long time, and it’s understandable that you want things to be perfect. However, you can’t control a delayed flight, your child’s reaction, or even your or your partner’s reaction at the reunion. Be ready to be understanding and forgiving if things don’t go exactly as planned.

So, your service member is safely back home, but that doesn’t mean that he or she and your family don’t need more time to settle back into life at home.
Husbands and wives often report feeling like strangers to each other in the first hours and days of return, and they often have different expectations about how they’ll spend those first few days.

Both spouses may have trouble with expectations about how quickly the returning service members will take on household tasks. Some service members may want to be included in family decisions right away, while others may get involved again more gradually, allowing their spouses to make decisions for them for the first few days. The spouse at home may be eager or reluctant to give up some of those decision making roles.

In addition, children may be still be warming back up to the returned service member, so things might be a little tense.

Here’s what you can do in the first few weeks to help your family readjust to the service member’s return.

First off, make time for your family. Hold off visits to other relatives and friends for the first few days. Give yourselves some time to get to know each other again and to also give the service member some down time. Don’t be afraid to talk with your partner about your experience of the return, and ask them about their reintegration experience. Communication is critical to a smooth transition.

Spend time talking with each other. You’ve been through different experiences during the deployment and have changed in some ways as a result. Talking can help you get to know each other again. And by talking, you can rebuild family routines that include the service member. You may have to approach this indirectly, by arranging activities that foster conversation, like walking together, working on a project together, or playing a game, versus watching movies or television.

Explain to the service member how the family has changed while he or she was away. Show him or her how you’re dealing with your children’s discipline and who has been responsible for which chores. Don’t expect the service member to jump in and start taking care of household chores and tasks just as before. Give it time, talk about what needs to be done, and let your service member take on household tasks at a pace that’s comfortable for you both.

If you have children, expect them to test the rules now that their returned parent is home. Talk with the service member to explain any new rules you’ve set so that you can be a united front.

To help children of all ages make the adjustment of a service member returning from deployment, you can also:
- Provide them with extra attention, care and physical closeness.
- Understand that they may be angry and perhaps rightly so.
- Foster discussion. Let kids know they can talk about how they feel. Accept how they feel and don’t tell them they should not feel that way.
- Tell kids their feelings are understandable and expectable. Be prepared to tell them many times.
- Maintain routines and plan for upcoming events.

Talking about these things in the first weeks can help your family begin to establish new roles and routines that work for you.
It may take a while for your family’s new roles and routines to gel. In the next few minutes, we’re going to talk about some healthy coping strategies you can use during this time. These include reconnecting, sharing and renegotiating roles, and taking care of yourself.

We’re also going to talk about some things to avoid as you’re trying to help your family readjust.

It’s important to take time out to reconnect with the returned service member when he or she has returned.

Make sure that he or she has the opportunity to spend one-on-one downtime with each family member and significant friend.

Urge your service member to interact with others, and also to spend time alone as he or she needs. Some time with war zone comrades is good but balance with family is needed.

Experiment with different ways of communicating. Your service member has been used to operating in the military “need-to-know” mode. He or she may need to re-learn the importance of sharing information. Don’t be afraid to ask about the war or how your service member is doing. Know that he or she may not want to talk about it at first.

Finally, express confidence that you will be able to work things out, and make a happy home for yourselves again.

Be prepared for changing household roles as well as new personality traits. You’ve been taking care of mostly everything during the deployment. You may be hesitant to give up some of your duties when the service member returns.

Talk about what skills each of you now has and which responsibilities you’d both prefer. These may have changed.

Compromise if necessary. Both of you should feel that your needs are understood and respected.

In the midst of all of the changes and your efforts to reconnect your family, don’t forget to take time out for yourself. If you’ve adopted an exercise routine, taken up a hobby, or joined a book club, don’t give it up now that the service member is home.

You may also try meditation or breathing exercises to help you relax, reflect, and recharge during the exciting and stressful readjustment period.

Be sure to get enough sleep.

You may need to be flexible to fit these activities into the new family schedule, but do your best to find a way.

While you may have some stressful days, weeks, or even months, it’s important to deal with your stress in a healthy manner. If you drink alcohol, try to do so only in moderation—it’s important not to use alcohol as a way to sleep, as it can interfere with deeper sleep cycles, or as a way of avoiding experiences or reactions that may need to be faced to be resolved. Using alcohol for these reasons tends to lead to more problems in the long run.
You’ve learned many things you CAN do to help ease the transition. There are also a few things you should try to avoid.

First, try not to pressure your service member to talk about his or her deployment, especially if he or she has seen or experienced violent action. War is often a difficult experience with many innocent victims, and deployment experiences may be hard to talk about. In time, the service member may want to talk about some of these things if others are willing to listen patiently and not judge. If your service member is not ready to talk about his or her experiences during deployment, don’t push it. They may never feel comfortable talking with you about their experiences. Rather then pushing them to do so, offer alternative strategies, such as talking with peers, or relieving deployment stress in other ways besides talking about it.

However, if your service member WANTS to talk, don’t stop him or her from doing so. As you listen, try not to make statements that may be perceived as judgmental, such as “what you had to do was awful,” or “you shouldn’t have had to do that.”

No one likes to be told what they should or shouldn’t have done, so try to avoid this in discussions with your service member. Instead offer assistance, an open ear, and suggestions.

Try not to use clichés or easy answers when your service member is talking about his or her war experiences. For example, try not to say things like, “war is hell,” or “now that you’re back, you can put it behind you.” Instead, let them know that you feel for what they went through, you love them, and you’re there for them whenever they need anything.

As you’re talking to your service member, don’t give advice without listening thoroughly.

And finally, don’t rush things. It takes time to get reacquainted and comfortable with one another again.

Remember that reintegration takes time and patience. Usually with enough time and enough patience your service member and the rest of the family will successfully reconnect and move forward with your lives. However, keep an eye out for problems that last for months, that show no signs of fading, or maybe show signs of getting worse. These kinds of things can negatively affect relationships, work, and overall well being if not addressed and treated.

In the next section, we’re going to talk about when to ask for help and how and where to get it.

Sometimes, service members and their families are reluctant to ask for help when things get tough at home. Service members may still have a battle mindset that makes them feel they should just “tough it out”. Family members may feel they have to “suffer in silence.” Neither one of these is the answer. Help is readily available for you, your service member, and your family.

In this final section of the presentation, we will give you guidance on when to seek help and where to get it.

Let’s start by talking about when to seek help for your service member.

You should consider getting help if he or she is having significant distress in the following areas:
First, is your service member having significant trouble with family and social relationships? Are there frequent and intense conflicts or poor communication? Is he or she unable to meet responsibilities?

What about work, school, or community issues? Are there frequent absences or conflicts? Is he or she performing poorly or unable to meet deadlines? If so, seek out help for your service member.

Finally, does your service member have frequent or severe depressed or angry moods? Is he or she often reminded of war zone experiences? Is he/she regularly hyperalert or on guard?

Is there even a remote possibility that he or she is going to hurt someone or him or herself?

If your service member’s reactions are causing significant distress or interfering with normal functioning, he or she may benefit from seeking help.

Admitting there is a problem, however, can be tough. Your loved one may think they should cope on their own or might be embarrassed to talk to someone about it. Emotional or psychological problems are not a sign of weakness. Injuries, including psychological ones, affect the strong and the brave just like everyone else. Remind your service member that finding solutions to problems is a sign of strength and getting assistance from others is sometimes the only way to solve something.

If the problems you or your service member are experiencing don’t decrease over a few months, or if they continue to cause significant problems in your service member’s daily life, it may be time to seek assistance from someone who has been through similar experiences, or treatment from a professional.

If this is the case:
- Openly discuss your concerns in a spirit of understanding with no blame.
- Help your service member to explore support and treatment options. Explain that good treatments exist and that early treatment can prevent problems from worsening.
- If necessary, also seek help for yourself or other family members.

Sometimes just starting the conversation can be the hardest part. Here are some tips for starting a conversation with your service member about getting help:
- Tell your service member you are interested in hearing about his or her experiences and feelings.
- Help your service member put feelings into words. Ask, "Are you feeling angry? Sad? Worried?" Don't argue or interrupt. Repeat what you hear to make sure you understand, and ask questions if you need to know more.
- Tell your service member how you feel about them. They may not realize how much you care.
- Encourage your service member to reach out to other veterans who can relate to their experiences and reactions, and remind them that good treatments are available for PTSD reactions.
- Ask how you can help, and keep asking at regular intervals.

Let’s talk more about PTSD. PTSD is a treatable condition that is diagnosed by a health-care provider. PTSD can occur after a person has been through a traumatic event.

But how do you know if your service member may have PTSD? Let’s go over some of the symptoms.
Reexperiencing
Everyone with PTSD reexperiences the traumatic event in some ways. These memories can come back at any time. They may feel the same fear, shock, and/or horror they did when the event took place. Sometimes there’s a trigger: a sound, sight, or smell that causes them to relive the event.

Avoidance and Numbing
People with PTSD often go to great lengths to avoid things that might remind them of the traumatic event, such as crowded places (like shopping malls), situations where there are too many choices, or certain types of geography (like hot, dry places). They also may shut themselves off emotionally in order to protect themselves from feeling pain and fear.

Hypervigilance or Increased Arousal
Those suffering from PTSD may operate on high-alert at all times. They often have very short fuses, and startle easily.

It’s normal to worry about whether or not your service member has PTSD, but just how likely is it? What are the factors that contribute to PTSD?

Some of the Most Common Are:
- How severe the trauma was
- If the person got injured
- The intensity of the reaction to the trauma
- Whether someone close to the person died or was injured
- How much the person’s life was in danger
- How much the person felt they could not control things
- How much help and support the person got following the event

If you are wondering if your service member has symptoms of concern, you can complete a brief PTSD screening questionnaire by clicking the “Screening questions” link on this slide.

Again, PTSD is treatable. Treatment often involves several steps:

First, a professional will evaluate the symptoms with a full interview.

Next, it is common for education to be given about PTSD and other conditions, including symptoms and how they can affect people.

Finally, a treatment approach is selected that best fits the person’s needs, which could include therapy, medication, or a combination of both

Today, there are good treatments available for PTSD. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) appears to be the most effective type. There are different types of cognitive behavioral therapies such as cognitive therapy and exposure therapy.

In cognitive therapy, your therapist helps you understand and change how you think about your trauma and its aftermath. Your goal is to understand how certain thoughts about your trauma cause you stress and to change those thoughts so they are more accurate and less distressing.
In exposure therapy your goal is to have less fear of your memories. By talking about your trauma repeatedly, you'll learn to get control of your thoughts and feelings about the trauma. Over time, you'll have less reaction to your memories, and you'll feel less overwhelmed.

PTSD also affects family members. Family members of a person with PTSD may experience the following:

- **Sympathy**
  You may feel sorry for your loved one’s suffering. This may help your service member know that you sympathize with him or her. However, be careful that you are not treating him or her like a permanently disabled person.

- **Negative Feelings**
  It may be hard to feel good about your service member if you believe he or she no longer has the traits you loved. The best way to avoid this is to educate yourself about PTSD. Even if your loved one refuses treatment, you can benefit from support. We’ll talk about where to find support a little later on.

- **Avoidance**
  You may be avoiding the same things as your service member in order to reduce their reactions. Or, you may be afraid of his or her reaction to your doing things without them. One possible solution is to slowly start to take part in a few different activities. At first, you can let your service member stay home if he or she wishes, but in the long run you should negotiate a plan so that you can do things together. Seek professional help if your service member continues to avoid many activities, or if he/she frequently prevents your going out.

- **Depression**
  This is common among family members when PTSD in a family member causes feelings of pain or loss. When PTSD lasts for a long time, you may begin to lose hope that your family will ever “get back to normal.” If your usual coping strategies and supports don’t bring relief over time, seeking treatment is recommended. Many of the same treatment strategies that help with PTSD are also effective for depression.

- **Anger and guilt**
  If you feel responsible for your service member’s happiness, you might feel guilty when you can’t make a difference. You could also be angry if they can’t keep a job or drink too much, or because they are angry or irritable. You and your loved one can get past this anger and guilt by understanding that the feelings are no one’s fault.

- **Health problems**
  Consistently feeling anger, worry and/or depression over a long period of time can have a negative impact on health. Additionally, unhealthy habits such as drinking, smoking, and not exercising can get worse when trying to cope with PTSD symptoms in a family member.

Or it’s possible your family may find positive benefits and new strength through the process of uncovering and treating the disorder…

PTSD is not the only health problem service members may experience after a stressful deployment. Other stress reactions are a normal part of readjusting for both service members and family members. After all, deployment was stressful for all involved.
Even though each person’s experiences are going to be unique, there are some stress reactions that are common to many service members and family members. Let’s look at some of the other treatable mental health problems now.

Familiarizing yourself with these stress reactions will help prepare you for potential reintegration issues within your family after deployment.

We all experience sadness or feel down from time to time. That’s a normal part of being human. Depression is different. It lasts longer and is more serious than normal sadness or grief.

Common symptoms include:
- Feeling down or sad more days than not
- Losing interest in hobbies or activities that used to be enjoyable or fun
- Being excessively low in energy and/or overly tired
- Feeling that things are never going to get better.

If you are wondering if you or your service member have symptoms of concern, you can complete a brief depression screening questionnaire by clicking the “Screening questions” link on this slide.

War experiences and combat stress reactions, especially personal loss, can lead a depressed person to think about hurting or killing themselves. If you think your family member may be feeling suicidal, you should directly ask them. You will NOT be putting the idea in their head. If you know anyone who has a plan to hurt him- or herself you should call 911 or 1-800-273-TALK(8255) immediately.

For more information, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK(8255) or visit their website at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

Some service members exhibit violent and abusive behaviors after return from a deployment. Abuse can take the form of threats, swearing, criticism, throwing things, conflict, pushing, grabbing, and hitting.

Here are a few warning signs that may lead to domestic violence:
- Controlling behaviors or jealousy
- Blaming others for problems or conflict
- Radical mood changes
- Verbal abuse such as using words to humiliate, manipulate or confuse
- Self-destructive or overly risky actions
- Heated arguments

It’s common for service members to “self-medicate.” They drink or abuse drugs to numb difficult thoughts, feelings, and memories related to their war zone experiences. While alcohol or drugs may seem to offer a quick solution, they actually lead to more problems. Sometimes, it can be difficult to know if your service member’s drinking is actually a problem.

Warning signs of an alcohol problem include:
- Frequent excessive drinking
- Having thoughts that he or she should cut down
- Feeling guilty or bad about drinking
- Others becoming annoyed or criticizing how much the person drinks
- Drinking without thinking (with dinner, after work, after dinner)
- Drinking in the morning to calm nerves
- Problems with work, family, school, or other regular activities caused by drinking

If you are wondering if you or your service member have symptoms of concern, you can complete a brief substance abuse screening questionnaire by clicking the “Screening questions” link on this slide.

Explosions that produce dangerous blast waves of high pressure can rattle a person’s brain inside the skull. This can cause Mild Traumatic Brain Injury, or mTBI. MTBI is more commonly called a concussion. Helmets cannot protect against this type of impact. In fact, 60 to 80 percent of service members who have some form of blast injuries may have mTBI.

Symptoms associated with mTBI can parallel those of PTSD, such as:
- Insomnia
- Impaired memory
- Poor concentration
- Depression
- Anxiety
  - Irritability
  - Impatience or impulsiveness

Symptoms that are specific to mTBI are:
- Headaches
- Dizziness, Nausea, and Vomiting
- Fatigue
- Noise/light intolerance
  - Blurred vision

Most service members with mild TBI do not need special care and the symptoms typically go away on their own over time. After a year, approximately 10% will have on-going problems.

Referral for care should be made when a service member:
- Has dizziness, headaches, and nausea
- Is obviously not thinking clearly
- Has severe and enduring arousal
- Complains of not being able to feel pleasure
- Says that they are depressed
- Behaves in an intensely detached manner
- Can’t do their job
- Has suicidal or homicidal wishes or intent

Asking for help with emotional or psychological problems may not be easy for you or your service member. Your service member might think they should cope on their own or that others can’t help. They may believe that the problems will go away on their own. They may be embarrassed to talk about it.

Emotional or psychological problems are NOT a sign of weakness. Injuries, including psychological injuries, affect the strong and the brave just like everyone else. But the stigma of mental health issues can be a huge barrier for people who need help.
Getting assistance from others is sometimes the ONLY way to solve something. Remind your service member that finding the solution to his or her problem is a sign of strength.

Knowing when and where to get help is part of regular military training. Let’s talk more about where to get it.

There are numerous places where you and your service member can go to get help. These include:

- VA Services
- Other federal, state, and community resources
- Family support programs

Let’s talk more about each one.

VA Services include:

**The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

The VA is the largest healthcare system in the U.S. There are facilities located in every state. Service members are urged to complete VA Form 10-10EZ to sign up, even if they think they’ll never use these services.

For information about healthcare, call 877-222-VETS (8387)

For information about benefits, call 800-827-1000.

You may also visit VA’s website at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).

There are also VA medical centers that provide services for soldiers and airmen, including the Guard and Reserves. Veterans can receive free services for military-related problems for the first five years following deployment, and co-pay based on eligibility after that.

Each medical center has:

- An OEF/OIF program manager to help all recent returnees
- Health and mental health services, including mental health practitioners trained in state of the art cognitive behavioral treatments for PTSD
- Women veterans program manager
- Social work services

The VA also has many community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) in addition to their medical centers.

Vet centers assist veterans and their family in making a successful postwar adjustment. They offer:

- Readjustment counseling (including PTSD treatment)
- Counseling for marriage and family issues, bereavement, and alcohol and drug issues
- Job services and help obtaining benefits and services at the VA and community agencies

There are no co-payments or charges for Vet Center services, and services are completely confidential.
Visit their website at [www.va.gov/rcs](http://www.va.gov/rcs) or call 800-905-4675.

Another useful resource is Military OneSource, which helps military members, veterans, and families deal with life issues around the clock, seven days a week. Service members and family members can call in and speak to a master’s level consultant who can answer many questions related to readjustment issues, no matter how big or small.

The toll free number to call if you are in the United States is 1-800-342-9647.

If you’re outside of the United States dial your country access code and then 1-800-342-9647. Be sure to dial all 11 numbers. This is also toll-free.

The international toll-free number is 1-800-464-8107.

Visit the website at [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com).

Veterans Service Organizations or VSOs can help you receive social support from fellow veterans, complete necessary paperwork, and navigate the VA system. They include organizations such as the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Veterans (AMVETS), Disabled American Veterans (DAV), and more.

You can visit the Directory of VSOs by clicking the link on screen.

All states have a variety of programs and resources for veterans and their families. Most states have an information and referral line such as dialing 2-1-1. Visit 211.org to see what your state offers.

You can also call your local:
- Agency or Department of Health and Human Services
- State’s Office of Veteran’s Affairs
- Veteran representatives in the legislative offices
- Employer Support of the Guard and Reserves (ESGR)
- Veterans Transition Assistance Representative

There are numerous family support programs available to help you.

**Family Assistance Centers** are located at armories across states. They were created by the Army National Guard but they exist to assist all military members and families, no matter what branch. To find the location nearest you, visit [www.guardfamily.org](http://www.guardfamily.org).

Other family support programs include:

**Army Community Services (ACS).** Visit their website at [www.armymwr.com](http://www.armymwr.com)

**US Air Force Service Agency.** Their website can be found at [www.afsv.af.mil](http://www.afsv.af.mil)

**LIFElines,** which can be found at [www.lifelines.navy.mil/lifelines](http://www.lifelines.navy.mil/lifelines)

**Air Force Reserve Family Readiness.**
You can call 800-223-1784, ext. 7-1243 from 7 am to 5 pm EST.
After duty hours, call ext. 7-7-0089

**Marine Corps Reserve Community Services**, or MCCS can be found at [www.usmc-mecs.org](http://www.usmc-mecs.org)

**Vietnam Veterans Wives (VVW)** which can be found at [www.vietnamveteranwives.com](http://www.vietnamveteranwives.com).
Membership is open to all family members and significant others of anyone that served in the military during any period.

And finally, **Family Readiness Groups**, or FRGs, are groups of volunteers prepared to help the families of deployed Army troops with communication. Your FRG should contact your family, but if it doesn’t, you can locate them through your service member’s unit.

Understanding what to expect when a loved one returns from a war zone is important. It is common and very expectable for service members and families to have readjustment challenges. Learning about these challenges, as well as the spectrum of combat stress reactions and more long lasting problems, such as PTSD, is a step toward recognizing when help is needed. Most combat-related reactions are not permanent. In many cases, they will go away on their own. With early proper treatment, problems that impact your family and relationships can be minimized. When problems do continue, effective treatments are available.

Remember, combat stress reactions are like any other physical injury from war. There is a range of how serious these invisible injuries are, just like there is a range of how serious physical injuries are. If problems do persist, treatment may help everyone lead a happier, more well-adjusted life.

Above all, remember that you are not alone.

For more information about stress-related disorders and resources for veterans and their families, see [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov).