

Trauma and serving in the military

Current and previously serving Defence Force personnel are more likely than most to experience a range of potentially traumatic incidents in their lives. These may occur while on deployment on peacekeeping, humanitarian or warlike operations, while on duty in Australia, or during their off-duty time. Traumatic incidents involve experiencing or witnessing an event which threatens someone's life or safety, or that of others around them. They include combat, serious workplace accidents, sexual assault and witnessing death and injury.

Not all serving personnel or veterans who experience problems following a traumatic event will need professional help. In time, most recover with the help of family and friends. However, others some may develop mental health problems which may persist for many years, in some cases. This could be due to several reasons including the severity of the event or having experienced previous mental health problems. The additional stress of military service and multiple deployments can also affect how some members of the military react to potentially traumatic events. Problems may include anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder and risky alcohol and drug use, together with difficulties with relationships, work and daily life. It is important to note that in some cases mental health problems may not appear for several years.

When to get help

Veterans and current serving personnel may benefit from professional help when they:

- Continue to experience distress two weeks after a traumatic event
- Feel highly anxious or distressed
- Their reactions to the traumatic event are interfering with home, work or relationships
- Are thinking of harming themselves or someone else

Some of the signs that a problem may be developing are:

- Being constantly on edge or irritable
- Having difficulty performing tasks at home or at work
- Being unable to respond emotionally to others
- Being unusually busy to avoid emotional issues
- Using alcohol, drugs or gambling to cope
- Having sleeping difficulties or nightmares

Treatment works

Effective treatments for posttraumatic mental health problems are available. Doctors or mental health professionals will use a variety of ways to help people manage or recover from their problems, including:

- Education to help better understand the causes, effects and treatments available
- Encouraging people to choose a healthy diet, exercise, stop smoking and to cut back on caffeine and alcohol
- Psychological treatments which aim to change negative patterns of thinking and behaviour that contribute to mental health problems
- Teaching stress management techniques, such as relaxation and breathing control
- Medication to reduce symptoms and help restore normal sleeping patterns

Resources about the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are available on our website: www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au.

Getting help

When getting treatment for a mental health problem, it is helpful to use services that are in the community, close to family and friends with as little disruption as possible to their daily routines. Talking to a doctor is a good way to start. They can determine if there is a problem and what the best approach might be. Mental health professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers can also help.

Information for the veteran and defence communities

- Call VVCS – Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service on 1800 011 046
- Call the ADF all hours support line on 1800 628 036
- Visit www.dva.gov.au
- Call Department of Veterans' Affairs on 1800 113 304
- Visit the ADF websites:
Defence Health Services <http://www.defence.gov.au/health/DMH/i-dmh.htm>
Defence Community Organisation <http://www.defence.gov.au/dco>
- Contact the Psychology Support Section or Unit in your region

Information for health professionals

- Mental health advice book: for practitioners helping veterans with common mental health problems (available from the Department of Veterans' Affairs)
- VVCS – Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service offers counselling and a range of lifestyle programs. Call 1800 011 046
- PTSD treatment programs for veterans and serving personnel are funded by the Department of Veterans' Affairs in every state and territory, except the Northern Territory. More information is available on our website via the [health professionals](#) link on our home page, www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au.