



National Alliance on Mental Illness

**nami** | **Maine**

# Guide to Supporting Your Veteran

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### **Introduction to Supporting Veterans**

The majority of veterans will transition home from active duty or deployment into the civilian population with relative ease. For most, there are typical adjustment periods in which the transition may cause periods of discomfort as the change occurs. However, for roughly 25% of veterans, symptoms can impact the ability to complete daily tasks, the ability to engage in relationships, and the ability to perform work functions.

In recent years, of these 25%, the statistics regarding veterans dying of suicide have increased to an estimated 20.6 veterans each day. The most recent statistics for the State of Maine report that 49 veterans died of suicide in 2017. Only 30% of the veterans who died of suicide were connected with the Veterans Administration (VA); however, 47% reported to their significant other that they were struggling, and 43% reported to their friends and co-workers that they were having a difficult time.

The intention of this booklet is to provide information to help veterans, their families, and friends understand signs that someone may be struggling, normal responses to abnormal situations, and resources available to support them.

There has been much attention and focus on discussions about Post Traumatic Stress Injury (PTSI) in regards to veterans. The initial focus following the Civil War was treatment for “Soldier’s Heart” recognizing the physical symptoms that stress can cause in a veteran’s body. Over time, knowledge has been gained and has increased awareness of the impact that combat and military service has on not only physical wellbeing, but also on emotional wellbeing.

There are normal adaptive responses veterans acquire through their basic military training to develop skills which make service members ready for battle. This includes teaching to maintain a high level of awareness of surroundings, ability to tolerate high levels of emotional stress in the face of adversity, close attention to detail, routine and structure, among others.

As this foundation is built, changes in personality can be observed, and can cause conflict, although individuals typically return to themselves with minimal lasting impacts. This is often apparent upon return home from deployments or transitioning out of the military culture.

## **Post-Traumatic Stress Injury (PTSI)**

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It is estimated that a 25% of returning veterans meet criteria for a diagnosis of PTSI. Another 25% initially have traits of PTSI as a normal component of their transition from deployment.

### **Symptoms Include:**

- Feeling on edge and difficulty relaxing
- Always alert and checking the environment around them
- Nightmares and other sleep disturbances
- Memories or thoughts popping into their head at odd times
- Anger or irritability
- Avoidance of places or situations
- Having more negative thoughts or feelings than before
- Guilt

### **How this may look:**

- Difficulties going to public places or crowds
  - Restaurants, grocery stores, and movie theaters
  - School plays or sporting events
- Restless sleeping, up multiple times during the night, or vivid dreams
- Difficulty sitting still and completing a task for an extended period of time
- Driving faster or more risk taking/driving slower and avoiding certain routes
- Struggles with co-workers/peers who are not completing tasks per procedures or in timely fashion

## **Depression**

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Depression can be a common experience for veterans or individuals who have served. This can occur in episodes, or be more constant. Depression often presents with many physical symptoms.

### **Symptoms Include:**

- Sleeping too much or struggling to sleep
- Struggling with lack of energy or motivation
- Joint and muscle aches and pains
- Appetite changes
- Changes in sex drive
- Difficulties with memory
- Confusion
- Difficulties with decision making

If your loved one expresses thoughts about death, suicide, and/or hopelessness and helplessness, please contact crisis services immediately.

### **CRISIS RESOURCES**

**National Suicide Helpline**

**1-800-273-8255**

**Press 1 for Veterans Lines**

**Maine Statewide Crisis Line**

**1-888-568-1112**

## Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

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The Department of Defense has estimated that the number of TBI combat related casualties has increased by approximately 10% from Vietnam to Post 9-11. It is estimated that roughly 19% of Post 9-11 veterans have experienced a TBI related to their service.

A TBI occurs when there is a disruption in the functioning of the brain due to a head injury, close proximity to blasts or even a jolt. Because of increased knowledge and awareness, veterans have a higher rate of susceptibility to TBI due to combat experiences, training exercises, and utilization of certain field artillery weapons.

The majority of TBI symptoms will resolve within a few days/weeks, however some injuries taking longer to resolve. Cumulative or multiple head injuries, blasts or jolts also increases the risk of longer lasting impacts.

### Symptoms Include:

- Headaches
- Nausea
- Sleep disturbances
- Balance issues
- Fatigue
- Ear ringing
- Concentration and attention difficulties
- Memory problems
- Slowing in thought process
- Difficulties with word retrieval
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Mood swings

## Decisions Regarding Treatment

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A Veteran's ability to receive services from the VA and Vet Centers is dependent upon what is on the member's DD 214. This document is a summary of their service and is given to the veterans upon discharge, regardless of service component, and is a vital piece of identification for veterans. For support in obtaining a DD-214 please contact The Maine Bureau of Veteran's Services at: (207) 430-6035.

There are many barriers to seeking treatment and support that prevent veterans from asking for help. It is important to discuss with your veteran reasons why they may not want to seek treatment.

Once a veteran decides to seek treatment, it is essential to discuss all treatment options available to them. Some veterans are eligible for VA services, while others may seek treatment in their communities.

It is imperative for your veteran to understand all their treatment options and feel supported in their decision making. This includes review of both formal and informal resources available, treatment history, and the team that is working with your veteran.

### Questions to ask in deciding the best treatment options:

- What are the symptoms you are most concerned about and what do you think they indicate?
- Are you willing to take medication(s)? Are you willing to talk to someone regularly?
- How often are you willing to meet with someone?
- Where are you willing to go for support (the VA, a private practice, etc.)?
- How far are you willing to drive for support?
- Would creating a safety plan be beneficial?

## Treatment providers include:

- *Psychiatrists* – Physicians who assess, diagnose, and prescribe medication(s). They work with other treatment providers to assess the best medication(s) to stabilize and decrease impact of symptoms. Sessions typically occur monthly.
- *Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners* – Able to assess, diagnose, and prescribe medication(s). They also work with the treatment team to best develop a treatment plan and plan of action. Meetings usually occur monthly or bi-weekly depending on the needs of the veteran.
- *Social Workers* – Obtain a social history of information, include both the veteran's and family's assistance in developing the diagnosis, treatment, and connection to resources. Social workers are able to provide on-going, evidence based therapy interventions. They are able to provide both individual and family treatment work and make referrals for other resources and services as needed. Meetings are usually more frequent at the start of services (weekly), then decrease over time as symptoms start to decrease and treatment is not needed as frequently.
- *Case Managers* – Coordinate care and treatment for veterans in need of additional supports. They are able to assist with meetings, advocate when there are concerns with treatment or medication(s), and ensure there is coordination if there are multiple providers.
- *Clinical Psychologists* – Complete diagnostic testing, individual and group sessions for veterans, and planning the care and treatment of your veteran.

## Treatment Types:

When there are safety concerns, crisis services should be contacted immediately. This includes thoughts of death/dying, hopelessness, thoughts of revenge or hurting someone else, expressing delusional thoughts or experiencing hallucinations, or using substances and wanting to stop—particularly alcohol or benzodiazepines as withdrawing from these can be lethal.



- *Inpatient Hospitalization* – This is typically a brief stay (3-5 days) to provide stabilization of symptoms and to decrease the risk of safety concerns. Upon discharge, your veteran will be connected to community resources for on-going treatment.
- *Intensive Outpatient Treatment* – This typically involves treatment multiple times a week for either a full day or half day. This includes meeting in groups, individual sessions with either a psychologist or a social worker, and meetings with medication providers.
- *Individual Therapy Sessions* – This involves sessions in which clinicians use various forms of talk therapy to process through events that have caused your veteran distress and ways to cope with the situation. This includes evidence based treatments such as: Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT).
- *Family or Couples Therapy* – Sessions provide the ability for family members and significant others to process the impact that mental health challenges have had on everyone involved, ways to support each other, and cope with situations and changes in the family dynamics.
- *Group Sessions* – Sessions are structured and facilitated by a social worker or a psychologist. The sessions provide your veteran a treatment environment with others who have been through similar experiences and are facing similar struggles.

Vet Centers are located across the state and provide free counseling services for combat veterans and survivors of military sexual trauma. For a complete listing of Vet Centers and more information please visit:

[www.maine.va.gov/visitors/VetCenters.asp](http://www.maine.va.gov/visitors/VetCenters.asp)

## Mental Health Struggles can Impact an Entire Family

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Living with someone struggling with managing their mental health can be difficult. Unlike many other illnesses that have physical symptoms that are observed and understood by others, mental health struggles often impacts an individual's behavior and can appear to change their personality. Once strong and organized individuals with good senses of humor may suddenly appear unmotivated, irritable, and disorganized. The changes may be perceived as changes in character, but are in fact changes in their wellbeing.



Attempts to reach out and express concern or discuss the changes may result in push back from the veteran, even accusations towards the people who care about them the most. It can be normal to feel some resentment towards the behaviors of a loved one struggling with their mental health. Guilt can also be a common feeling of loved ones supporting a veteran struggling with their mental health. It is important in those moments to remember that mental illness is

a no-fault disorder. It is also important to remember that taking care of yourself will be as important as caring for others.

Taking care of yourself is necessary. Without caring for yourself, you are not able to care for others. Please see the next page for a list of caregiver resources.

## Caregiver Resources

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**Embrace a Vet** - Provides many different groups, supports, and retreats for families supporting veterans. For more information please visit: [www.embraceavet.org](http://www.embraceavet.org)

**VA Caregiver Support Line** - Staffed with licensed providers to assist with connection to VA services, Caregiver Support Coordinators, or to just listen if that is what you need. They also provide monthly education groups. Contact at: 1-855-260-3274

**NAMI Homefront** - A free educational program provided online. It includes six sessions focusing on self-care, supporting your veteran with compassion, information on the latest research, understanding treatments and evidence-based therapies, navigating challenges and impacts of mental health conditions on the entire family, as well as crisis management, problem solving, and effective communication. For more information please visit: [www.namimaine.org/homefront](http://www.namimaine.org/homefront)



## Helpful Tips for Supporting Yourself and Your Family

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- Avoid placing blame and guilt. These are natural reactions and responses; however, they can lead to increased conflict.
- Do not take comments made during crisis situations personally. Make sure you find safe spaces and supports to process your reactions and responses.
- Utilize the caregiver supports listed, other supports you have in your life, and family or couples treatment when available. Remember that on airplanes you are always instructed to put your own air mask on first!
- Continue your own outside interests; there is more to life than mental illness. Schedule time for yourself and maintain your own mental health.
- Remember that other family members are also impacted and most likely having similar experiences. Keep communication open with all members of the family. This may include holding family meetings, starting family chats, so that open discussion is developed and fostered.
- Learn all you can about the impact mental health challenges can have on veterans and the community as a whole. The Family to Family Education and Homefront Programs are two family education programs offered by NAMI Maine.
- Do not be afraid or ashamed of talking about the impact mental health has had on your family. Removing the stigma around mental illness helps remove a huge burden on your veteran and family.
- Consider joining NAMI, a local, state, and national organization. You need the support of others who understand what you are going through. NAMI offers support groups, education courses, training, and advocacy.

## How to Focus on Recovery

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- See your veteran as an individual first, not as their illness, behaviors, or symptoms
- Recognize mental health conditions are the same as physical health conditions
- Recognize there may be environmental triggers and work with your veteran to identify and minimize exposure to them
- Seek out and support good coping skills
- Find strength in sharing your experience
- Reject stigma in yourself and in others
- Don't judge or compare anyone else's pain as less or more than your own
- Forgive yourself and reject feelings of guilt
- Embrace humor as healthy
- Accept that you cannot take away all the problems
- Expect a better future is possible in a realistic way
- Never give up hope!

Be open and honest with the recovery team. Build a unit of people who are as mission focused as your veteran. The mission is to provide positive support, encouragement, and guidance. This includes family, friends, co-workers, clergy, and any professional providers that you and your veteran trust.



## Alternative Ways for Veterans to Cope

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Not all treatment occurs in office buildings. It is important to provide your veteran with alternative options as well. This can include many community organizations that are able to provide healthy activities and connections for your veterans.

Connecting to other veterans can have huge benefits! **Veteran Mentors of Maine** provide many opportunities for veterans who are struggling to connect and speak candidly with others who have shared experiences. **American Legion Halls** and **VFWs** can also provide support to veterans who need a place to connect with others with shared experiences.


The research on the positive impacts of being outside and in nature have been shown many times. There are multiple veteran based organizations that allow for veterans to experience recreational outdoor activities. This includes hunting and fishing guide services, ATV or hiking clubs, free State Park passes. Please see the **Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services** website for their 147-page Maine Veterans' Benefits and Resource Guide: [www.maine.gov/veterans](http://www.maine.gov/veterans)

Service dogs have been used in many capacities over the years. There are many organizations that provide animals and training, as well as group activities for veterans. Please see **Embrace a Vet** and the **Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services** for a listing of resources available.



For more resources and full list of available options, please visit the **NAMI Maine** website or the **Bureau of Veterans' Services**.

It is important to understand that healing occurs in many settings and there is not a “one size fits all” answer. Some of the more beneficial steps that can be taken happen in some unconventional settings.



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## What is a Veteran?

*A veteran is a person who fell in love with their country — for better, or worse- for richer, for poorer — in sickness and in health.*

*A veteran is a person who is willing to lay down their life for the Statue of Liberty so that her poor, her huddled masses, her homeless, her tempest tossed may breathe free and may enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

*A veteran is a person who does what they must — in spite of personal consequences- in spite of obstacles and dangers and pressures — for that is the basis of all human morality.*

*A veteran is one who gets a lump in their throat when they see our beloved flag. One who will fight to protect our beautiful flag from those who will dishonor it.*

*A veteran is one who pays their taxes, willingly; serves their country honorably; and cherishes their freedom passionately.*

*A veteran is one well deserving of our appreciation, our love, and our prayers 365 days a year.*

— Anonymous