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Coping with War-Related Stress: Information for Military Families and Communities

As the conflict in the Gulf intensifies, all Americans will experience varying amounts of grief and fear. Nobody is unaffected by war. In military families, however, there is the added fear for the safety of loved ones who may be or already have been deployed, as well as the potential challenges of coping as a single parent.

You or someone you know may already be experiencing some of the following signs of the emotional impact of this stress, or these symptoms may arise over the coming weeks and months:

- Difficulty completing tasks
- Trouble concentrating
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Apathy and emotional numbing
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless
- Extreme hunger/lack of appetite
- Difficulty making decisions
- Crying for ñno apparent reasonö
- Headaches or stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Excessive drinking or drug use
- Feeling withdrawn

Some people will try to get back into the routine of life as soon as possible to regain a sense of control, but others will have difficulty focusing for some time. Both reactions are common responses to crisis. The intensity of your feelings will decrease as time passes and you focus attention on day-to-day activities. Because everybody experiences stress differently, don't compare your ñprogressö with others around you or judge other people's reactions and emotions. While many people survive major life stressors without developing significant psychological problems, others may need assistance.

Here are some tips for coping during these difficult times:

- **Talk About It:** By talking with others, particularly other military spouses, you will relieve stress and realize that other people share your feelings. Support groups exist at most military installations. If there's one available to you, join; if not, consider starting one. If you feel overwhelmed, ask for help. It's not a sign of weakness. Talk with a trusted relative, friend, family services staffer, minister or rabbi. Military chaplains can be helpful, as most receive training in pastoral counseling and crisis. Don't let yourself become isolated.
- **Take Care of Your Physical Health:** Get plenty of rest and exercise, avoid excessive drinking and drugs, and eat properly. Avoid foods that are high in fats and calories.
- **Limit your exposure to the news media:** Especially avoid around-the-clock television news coverage and the Internet. The images, rumors and speculation can be very damaging to your sense of well-being.
- **Engage in activities that you find relaxing and soothing:** Plant flowers, attend a concert, visit an art gallery, or take a long bath. Be kind to yourself.
- **Do something positive:** Get involved in activities that encourage togetherness and reassurance. Contact community volunteer organizations to see how you can help. Give blood, prepare ñcare packagesö for service men and women or write letters to people in the military. Support a friend or neighbor who is having a difficult time.

- **Seek Treatment:** If you have strong feelings that won't go away or you are troubled for more than four to six weeks, you may want to seek professional help. People who have had previous mental health problems and who have survived past trauma may also want to check in with a mental health care professional. Nearly every military installation has a Family Service Center, Family Support Center or Army Community Service Center (depending on the branch of service) where you can access information, referral, counseling, and crisis intervention services. In addition, all military families, including those of National Guard and Reserve members who are activated for more than 30 days, are eligible for medical and mental health care either at a Military Medical Treatment Facility or at a civilian facility through the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS).

Resources for Additional Information and Support

Contact your local mental health association, www.mhatc.org, or the National Mental Health Association for information on mental health, mental illness, treatment options, and local treatment services. You can contact NMHA at 1-800-969-NMHA (toll-free) or at its website, www.nmha.org.

Tricare, the administrator of health and mental health services for the armed services, provides information about mental health benefits programs for the military at their website, www.tricare.osd.mil.

The Army Family Assistance Hotline is 1-800-833-6622, and the Army Reservist Hotline is 1-800-318-5298. The Coast Guard Reserve Website is www.uscg.mil/hq/reserve/reshmpg.html. The number for Marine Corps Community Service Centers West of the Mississippi is 1-800-253-1624; and, East of the Mississippi, the number is 1-800-336-4663.

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs operates a website (www.va.gov) that contains information on and applications for compensation, health, burial, and other benefits.

The National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs that focuses on research and education on post-traumatic stress. It operates a website at www.ncptsd.org.

The Vietnam Veterans of America website has a section on post-traumatic stress that includes suggestions for veterans or their survivors seeking VA benefits. Information on how to apply for benefits, how the VA establishes levels of disability, what to do if an appeal is lost, medical services, etc., can be accessed at www.vva.org/benefits/ptsd.htm.

The Anxiety Disorders Association of America offers information on all anxiety disorders, as well as a referral network of professional therapists and self-help groups. Call 240-485-1001, or visit www.adaa.org.

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies has research and clinical information about PTSD and can be accessed at www.istss.org.

Sidran is a charitable organization that collects, produces and publishes information on traumatic stress. The website is www.sidran.org.

The College of Human Ecology at Kansas State University has information for families dealing with the impact of deployment at www.humec.k-state.edu/news/2003/militarymain.html.

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Inc. (TAPS) assists people who have lost family members in the Armed Forces. TAPS provides a survivor peer support network, grief counseling referrals, and crisis information and can be reached at 1-800-959-TAPS (8277) or www.taps.org.

Other websites for military families include: www.lifelines2000.org; www.militarycity.com (this includes access to www.armytimes.com, www.navytimes.com, www.airforcetimes.com, and www.marinecorpstimes.com); www.afsv.af.mil/FMP; and www.sgtmoms.com.

The National Mental Health Association has several resources available to help you and others cope with tragic events, loss and other topics. To obtain this information, go to www.nmha.org/reassurance/anniversary/index.cfm or call our toll-free line 800-969-NMHA (6642).