

Mental Health First Aid: Military Members, Veterans, and their Families

While military service often fosters resilience in individuals and families, some service members may experience mental health or substance use challenges. Thirty percent of active duty and reserve military personnel deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan have a mental health condition requiring treatment – approximately 730,000 men and women, with many experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression. Sadly, less than 50 percent of returning veterans in need receive any mental health treatment. The Veterans Administration reports that approximately 20 veterans die by suicide every day.

Mental Health First Aid is a valuable resource that can make a difference in the lives of the more than 22 million veterans, their families and the communities they live in.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID?

Mental Health First Aid USA is a live training program — like regular First Aid or CPR — designed to give people the skills to help someone who is developing a mental health or substance use problem or experiencing a mental health or substance use crisis. The course uses role-playing and simulations to demonstrate how to recognize and respond to the warning signs of specific illnesses.

Mental Health First Aid teaches participants a five-step action plan, ALGEE, to support someone developing signs and symptoms of a mental illness or in an emotional crisis:

- Assess for risk of suicide or harm
- Listen nonjudgmentally
- Give reassurance and information
- Encourage appropriate professional help
- Encourage self-help and other support strategies

Since 2008, more than 1 million people have been trained in Mental Health First Aid through a network of more than 12,000 certified instructors.

Those trained include family members of persons with mental health challenges, healthcare professionals, first responders, law enforcement officials, public service employees, school and college staff, clergy and caring citizens.

WHY MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID?

Mental Health First Aid helps people realize that mental illnesses are real, common and treatable, and that it's okay to seek help. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of this program to improve knowledge of mental disorders and substance use, remove fear and misunderstanding, and enable those trained to offer concrete assistance.

The program is listed in SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidenced Based Programs and Practices. Mental Health First Aid is a low-cost, high-impact program that generates tremendous community awareness and support.

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID FOR VETERANS

Family members and personnel working with military and families are often not aware of how to engage veterans with mental illnesses and addictions. In addition to the impact of military service on the veteran, each has a circle of family (significant other, children, parents, siblings, etc.) and friends who are also impacted by their military service.

Mental Health First Aid for Veterans, launched in April 2014, focuses on the unique experiences and needs of the military, veteran and family population.



Individuals trained in Mental Health First Aid can help to:

- Break down the stigma associated with mental illness like anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and substance use disorders
- Reach out to those who suffer in silence, reluctant to seek help
- Let veterans know that support is available in their community
- Provide community resource information
- Make mental healthcare and treatment accessible to thousands in need

Key components of Mental Health First Aid for Veterans include:



- A discussion of military culture and its relevance to the topic of mental health
- A discussion of the specific risk factors faced by many service members and their families such as trauma, both mental and physical, stress, separation, etc.
- Applying the ALGEE action plan in a number of scenarios designed specifically for service members, their families and those that support them
- A review of common mental health resources for service members, their families and those who support them

Mental Health First Aid USA has partnered with the **Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America** to provide scholarships for individuals within their network of veterans, members of the military and family members to be trained as instructors of Mental Health First Aid for Veterans. In addition, Mental Health First Aid courses have been provided to organizations that serve the military, veterans, and their families, including:

- Army One Source, *National webinar*
- Veterans Affairs and Veteran's Restoration Quarters in Buncombe County and the Asheville Buncombe Community Mission, *North Carolina*
- Delaware County Veteran Affairs, *Iowa*
- Ft. Leonard Wood, *Missouri*
- Army National Guard and Air National Guard, *Orange County, California*
- The University of Texas Pan American (UTPA), *Texas*
- Wounded Warriors, *Texas*
- California Army Guard & Reserve and US Air Force personnel at Beale Air Force Base, *California*
- Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, *Minnesota*
- Family Life Chaplains Training Center at Fort Hood, *Texas*
- Spokane VA Medical Center, *Washington*
- Salt Lake City VA, *Utah*
- Veterans Administration, *Albuquerque, New Mexico*
- Charlotte Hall Veterans Home, *Maryland*
- Hutchinson & Kansas City National Guard Armory, *Kansas*
- California State University Veterans Group, *Pomona, California*
- Veteran's Affairs Hospital, *Phoenix, AZ*
- The National Veterans Center, *Washington, DC*

The service members, veterans, and their families who have taken the course have a positive response to the training:

*"The information is **fantastically succinct**; I really like the military addition."*

*"[Military-Veteran Mental Health First Aid] is definitely a class that I would recommend to anyone in a situation to respond to military members crisis. **I feel better equipped** to assist in mental health incidents since attending."*

For more information, visit <http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/cs/veterans-military/>

The National Council for Behavioral Health was instrumental in bringing Mental Health First Aid to the U.S. in 2008.

