

Supporting Airmen with Invisible Wounds

Many of our Airmen live with invisible wounds, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). Sharing their experiences is key to building strong teams. Airmen need to know they are not alone, and that leaders and fellow Airmen are available to support and guide them on their road to recovery. Studies estimate at any time, approximately 10-20 percent of service members who have deployed in post-9/11 conflicts, such as Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, have symptoms that are similar to that of a PTSD diagnosis. An additional percentage may experience other mental health conditions like depression or anxiety.¹ If left untreated, symptoms of invisible wounds, such as mood changes, constant headaches, and irritability, can serve as significant hurdles to a meaningful and productive life. Commanders encourage Airmen to seek help through an open-door policy and establishing an environment of open communication by informing them of [available resources](#).

Myth Busters: The Facts About Invisible Wounds

Seeking care early can help Airmen address mental health conditions in a timely manner, increase their brain performance, and dispel myths surrounding seeking help. Commanders help alleviate these misconceptions by actively engaging with their Airmen, establishing a community of active peer support, and providing them with access to relevant resources. A few of these resources can be reviewed on the right within the blue sidebar panel. Leaders must remind Airmen that you are there to help and provide ongoing support. Below are key points to consider when discussing the importance of seeking help with your fellow Airmen.

SEEKING HELP FROM MENTAL HEALTH WILL IMPROVE OVERALL JOB PERFORMANCE AND ENHANCE QUALITY OF LIFE

Seeking early mental health treatment, at the first sign of symptoms, can enhance job performance and overall quality of life. Commanders, families, and friends should take an active approach to encouraging help-seeking.

THERE ARE FOUR EFFECTIVE TREATMENTS FOR PTSD

Up to 80% of those who seek care show improvement in symptoms with a full course of an evidence-based treatment (EBT). Air Force mental health providers are trained in the four available major EBTs: Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PET), Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Cognitive Rehabilitation Therapy (CRT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).

THOSE WHO SEEK HELP FOR INVISIBLE WOUNDS ARE PROBLEM SOLVERS

Invisible wounds are real and have nothing to do with how strong or how tough someone is. Seeking help is problem solving. Roughly 93% of Airmen who are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are able to return to duty. Having the courage to take the steps necessary to improve your life demonstrates the strength and desire to enhance individual and team performance.

How Commanders Can Help

Leading through crisis is a Commander's responsibility. As leaders, we must strive to better understand barriers to Airmen getting help. Furthermore, we must have the tough conversations, approach Airmen on an individual level, and listen. Crisis often exists on an individual and internal level. Below are examples of potential barriers to care that Airmen with invisible wounds may face that may make these internal crises worse:

- Fear of impact to career
- Worry of being perceived differently by leaders and fellow Airmen
- Hurdles encountered while attempting to access treatment

To ensure commanders foster an environment of support for Airmen experiencing an invisible wound, it is essential that you understand that Airman's experience. To help reduce the potential barriers listed above, commanders should take a proactive role in relationship building with Airmen and have open discussions around invisible wounds on a continual basis. Sharing personal stories or experiences with invisible wounds, as well as engaging Airmen on a personal level regarding available resources and how to access them, are simple steps commanders can take to reduce these potential barriers to care.



The National Intrepid Center of Excellence is a directorate of the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center that helps service members and their families manage their traumatic brain injury (TBI) and psychological health conditions. The **Brain Fitness Center** is a supplemental care option that provides patients with access to computer brain-training programs, heart rate variability biofeedback, and mind-body classes. The tools and resources can be used alongside cognitive rehabilitation for enhanced mental performance.



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The Air Force Invisible Wounds Center is a regional treatment center for post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, associated pain conditions and psychological injuries. Modeled after the best practices of the Intrepid Spirit Centers, it offers a team of 18 specialties under one roof to provide treatment in an individually tailored, holistic, and integrated fashion, using a combination of conventional and complementary therapies.



Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC) is the traumatic brain injury center of excellence for the Defense Health Agency which promotes state-of-the-science care from point-of-injury to reintegration for service members, veterans, and their families to prevent and mitigate consequences of mild to severe TBI.



Make the Connection (MTC) Mental health, or psychological health, encompasses the well-being of mind, body and spirit and contributes to overall health and resilience. Throughout the military community additional stressors place on individuals and families adds to the importance of maintaining awareness of internal and external demands on health and of the many resources available to support psychological health.

¹ Source: George W. Bush Presidential Center. (2019). Combating the Invisible Wounds of War: Creating a Collaborative Tomorrow. Retrieved from: <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/resources-reports/resources/combating-invisible-wounds.htm>