



# BEHAVIOR CHANGE COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN

## Invisible Wounds Myth Buster Series #1



### Myth #1: Seeking mental health treatment will negatively impact my security clearance

Being an Airman means living life by the three Air Force Core Values: **integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do.** Airmen are used to making tough decisions to live by these values. Yet, when it comes to making one of the most important decisions to stay mission-ready—asking for help and seeking support or treatment for mental health when it is needed—many Airmen hold back. They have the misconception that seeking support or treatment for mental health could cost them their security clearance and, as a result, their ability to do their job.

In reality, seeking treatment early helps avoid negative impacts on an Airman's ability to gain and/or maintain their security clearance.

Mental health treatment in and of itself is **not** a reason to revoke or deny a security clearance<sup>i</sup>. In fact, current U.S. government policies encourage Airmen to seek help throughout their careers and receive support and treatment for mental health conditions, including invisible wounds. In 2016, the Questionnaire for National Security Positions (SF-86) was updated to further support mental health treatment and reduce negative assumptions associated with it. Most notable is the change to Question 21, which now asks respondents to provide information on psychological and emotional health, including questions about mental health counseling or services received. In addition to the change in wording, the form also clearly states that anyone who **voluntarily** (i.e., not court mandated or ordered by an administrative agency) sought mental health treatment should answer "No" to Section 21 on Psychological and Emotional Health.<sup>ii</sup>

If an Airman answers "Yes" for other reasons, it is still unlikely for their clearance eligibility to be denied or revoked solely for answering "Yes". According to a 2013 National Intelligence briefing, only .002 percent of people who answered "Yes" to question 21 had an "adverse action" applied to their case, demonstrating that this causes a negative career impact in very few Airmen.<sup>iii</sup>

Furthermore, answering Question 21 truthfully actually benefits an Airman's clearance application. Regardless of a "Yes" or "No" to Question 21, the SF-86 form clearly states that **proactively** seeking or receiving mental health care for personal wellness and recovery may actually **help** in obtaining or maintaining a clearance<sup>i</sup>. Each response is reviewed to determine whether a person is deemed fit to handle classified information. This assessment is based on many factors, including being viewed as responsible, truthful, and trustworthy. Answering "No" when it should be a "Yes" could negatively impact the assessment of an Airman's trustworthiness and ability to handle classified information in the protection of national security.

There are real-world examples of positive outcomes, including those of Capt. David and the 480th Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) Wing.

An invisible wound is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); traumatic brain injury (TBI); or other cognitive, emotional, or behavioral conditions associated with trauma experienced by an individual.



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[Capt. David](#), 432nd Wing at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, proactively sought mental health treatment for PTSD. David was initially hesitant to seek help, worried a Mental Health Clinic appointment would cause him to lose his clearance. He first went to the Human Performance Team at Creech AFB and spoke with the chaplain and an operational psychologist. Ultimately, he found himself at the Mental Health Clinic, which was best suited to provide treatment for his PTSD. David received needed treatment, retained his clearance, and maintained mission effectiveness.<sup>iv</sup>

The [480<sup>th</sup> ISR Wing](#) takes mental fitness very seriously. To alleviate the stress these Airmen face, the Air Force deployed a small group of medical, psychological, and spiritual professionals that make up the Airmen Resiliency Team (ART). ART members are embedded with Wing operators at every level, building trust with the Airmen and helping to reduce negative perceptions about mental health and the treatment process. Lt. Col. (Dr.) Cameron Thurman, the 480th ISR Wing surgeon notes that, “Airmen, especially those with special clearances, are afraid they will harm their career or lose their security clearance if they seek mental health treatment. The ART is there to allay those concerns, and I think that’s something you do best by being an embedded provider, sharing their lives on a day-to-day basis.”<sup>v</sup>

Seeking treatment for mental health or an invisible wound concern can be frightening, but it doesn’t need to be. Many Airmen have come forward to share their stories highlighting positive experiences with the care they received and continued progression in their careers after treatment. A diagnosis is not career-ending, especially with early intervention. Taking care of mental (and physical) health is an Airman’s priority, and making the right decision even when it is difficult and no one is looking, is the right thing to do. Being a trustworthy and responsible Airman means keeping everyone safe, starting with themselves. If an Airman needs support for a mental health condition, seek support early and keep their leadership involved throughout their diagnosis, treatment, and overall recovery process for the best possible recovery and minimal impacts on their career and security clearance.

**Editor Note:** *Invisible wounds are as real and severe as physical wounds. If left untreated invisible wounds can have negative impacts on an Airman’s personal and professional life. It’s important for Airmen to recognize signs and symptoms of invisible wounds in themselves and in their peers, to ensure a mentally strong, resilient, and lethal Total Force. To learn about invisible wounds and available resources visit [www.ReadyAirmen.com](http://www.ReadyAirmen.com)*

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf\\_fill/sf86-non508.pdf](https://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/sf86-non508.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1858948/dod-officials-urge-troops-to-seek-mental-health-help-without-fear/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.schriever.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1970906/security-clearance-understanding-question-21/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.airforcemedicine.af.mil/News/Display/Article/861601/mental-health-to-go-or-not-to-go/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.airforcemedicine.af.mil/News/Display/Article/1192570/airmen-resiliency-team-provides-480th-isr-wing-with-medical-psychological-and-s/>