

Wingmen and Leaders Build Resilience

Invisible wounds can affect anyone, including our Airmen. Nearly 1 in 4 active duty service members show signs of a mental health condition.¹ It is our responsibility as leaders to guide our Airmen who may be living with invisible wounds to seek treatment and to champion them throughout the recovery process.

Many Airmen worry their careers will be defined by their invisible wounds if they seek help. As leaders we can help dispel this myth by openly communicating that seeking help for an invisible wound is a sign of strength. **In fact, roughly 94% of Airmen who have received post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment continue to progress in their career.**² Air Force leaders can reduce the stigma around invisible wounds by sharing their own stories and encouraging Airmen to seek help as soon as they notice any signs or symptoms.

Ensuring Positive Brain Health

In addition to seeking treatment from a mental health professional, Airmen can positively impact or enhance their recovery by focusing on sleep hygiene, pain management, and mood maintenance.

Sleep Hygiene

For 100% cognitive functioning, Airmen need at least 7 hours of sleep per night.³ Stress from a traumatic event can lead to a variety of sleep problems. Insufficient sleep can even hinder the effects of clinical treatment for invisible wounds.⁴ But good sleep hygiene can help enhance your Airmen's overall recovery. Healthy sleep habits are important for both physical and mental health and can improve productivity and overall quality of life. Examples of ways to practice good sleep hygiene include:

Maintain a pleasant sleep environment: Create a quiet, comfortable sleeping area. Make your bedroom more conducive to good sleep by keeping your bedroom cool, limiting light exposure (e.g., light from TV screens or lamps), limiting noise (use white noise machines, fans, etc. to drown out disruptive noises), and using comfortable bedding.⁵

Keep a regular, relaxing bedtime routine and sleep schedule: Establish and maintain a sleep schedule with set times for going to bed and waking up. Create a relaxing bedtime routine by avoiding stimulants (such as caffeine), stressful activities (e.g. emotionally upsetting conversations), or energizing activities (e.g., strenuous exercise) within two hours of going to bed.^{5,6}

Talk to a doctor: If sleep problems persist due to pain or injury, feeling anxious at night, or having bad dreams or nightmares, talk to a doctor.

Pain Management

Chronic pain can sometimes result from traumatic events. In fact, approximately 15-35% of patients with chronic pain also have PTSD. Chronic pain may sometimes serve as a reminder of a traumatic event, which can increase severity of invisible wound symptoms.⁷ Example techniques listed below can help Airmen manage chronic pain to increase quality of life and productivity:

Work with a mental health professional: Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a psychotherapeutic intervention that can help patients manage chronic pain.⁸ And, for pain from a traumatic brain injury, working with a professional to reduce general stress and anxiety can be very helpful.⁹

Reduce physical and emotional stress: Breathing and relaxation exercises, like meditation, deep breathing, and mindfulness, can be useful to treat pain and have been found to decrease the body's reaction to stress, helping with anxiety, depression, and other factors affecting mood.¹⁰

Talk to a doctor: If pain persists, talk to a doctor. Medication can be used as an intervention for chronic pain.

Mood Maintenance

Finding something to help boost and improve mood can have a positive impact on your Airmen's recovery.¹¹ Mood can be impacted by sleep hygiene and pain management, so by focusing on these 3 lifestyle changes together, your Airmen is likely to experience an improved recovery experience. Some examples for how to enhance mood include:

Practice self-care: Eating well, getting regular exercise, and maintaining healthy sleep hygiene are some of the most effective ways to improve your mood.

Monitor mood changes: Keep track of any changes in mood. Be careful to avoid activities and situations that trigger negative thoughts and feelings.

Think positive: Remember that your injuries and symptoms will improve over time as you continue to seek help.

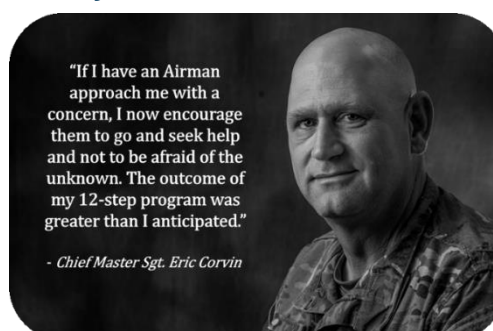
Use positive stress management: Find activities that you enjoy, such as listening to music, visiting with family or friends, exercising or working on a hobby. Make time to do these activities, especially when you feel angry, frustrated, or upset.

Helping Your Fellow Wingmen Through Recovery

It is important for Airmen living with invisible wounds to know that they are not alone. [Sharing personal experiences](#) with invisible wounds aids in the recovery of fellow Airmen and encourages them to seek treatment. Some tactics to [help you successfully support your Airmen during](#) their recovery include:

- Develop authentic relationships with your Airmen
- Assess and foster a culture that supports help-seeking
- Know indicators of Airmen potentially in distress, including signs/symptoms of invisible wounds

Your Airmen depend on you to support them. Speak up and encourage your Airmen to do the same.



- Chief Master Sgt. Eric Corvin

Resources



[Mindfulness Coach](#) is a mobile app created by VA's National Center for PTSD and is designed to help service members, veterans, and others learn how to practice mindfulness.



[Mood Coach](#) is a mobile app created by VA's National Center for PTSD and is designed to help service members, veterans, and others boost their mood through participation in positive activities.



The **Psychological Health Center of Excellence (PHCoE)** strives to improve the lives of service members, veterans, and their families by advancing excellence in psychological health care, readiness, and prevention of psychological health disorders. [Learn more about available resources](#) for service members with invisible wounds.



The [Military Crisis Line](#), text-messaging service, and online chat provide free VA support for all service members, including members of the National Guard and Reserve, and all Veterans, even if they are not registered with VA or enrolled in VA health care.

¹ National Alliance on Mental Illness. Veterans & Active Duty. 2019. <https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Veterans-and-Active-Duty>.

² U.S. Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine. USAF Public Health Report. Vol 3, Issue 1. (2018).

³ U.S. CDC. How much sleep do I need? (2017). https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about_sleep/how_much_sleep.html

⁴ U.S. NIH. Sleep Disturbances, TBI and PTSD: Implications for Treatment and Recovery. (2015). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5153364/>

⁵ National Sleep Foundation. Sleep Hygiene. (2019). <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/sleep-hygiene>

⁶ National Center for PTSD. Sleep and PTSD. (2018). https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/sleep_ptsd.asp

⁷ National Center for PTSD. Chronic Pain and PTSD: A Guide for Patients. (2018). https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/chronic_pain.asp

⁸ National Center for PTSD. The Experience of Chronic Pain and PTSD: A Guide for Health Care Providers. (2018). https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/chronic_pain_guide.asp

⁹ BrainLine. Managing Pain After Brain Injury. (2018). <https://www.brainline.org/article/managing-pain-after-brain-injury>

¹⁰ Johns Hopkins Medicine. Need Stress Relief? Try Mindfulness Meditation. (2019). <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/need-stress-relief-try-mindfulness-meditation>

¹¹ Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center. Changes in behavior, personality or mood. (2018). https://dvbic.dcoe.mil/system/files/resources/dvbic_4779_changes-behavior-personality-mood_factsheet_v1.0_2018-05-08.pdf