



BEHAVIOR CHANGE COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN

Invisible Wounds Myth Buster Series #2



Myth #2: Seeking support/treatment is a weakness

All Airmen are Wingmen, expected to support and provide for each other's safety and well-being. Airmen are also warriors, faithful to a tradition of honor and a legacy of valor. Warriors persevere in the face of adversity, which requires knowing when to ask for help. This is a strength all Airmen strive for but often overlook when it comes to mental health.

Many Airmen may reach a point in their careers when they need to ask for help to maintain their overall fitness, including their mental health. Asking for support when needed can be a turning point in an Airman's life—proactively seeking treatment and prioritizing mental health benefits not only an Airman's well-being and career, but also their ability to be a better Wingman. Taking the steps to enhance one's mental fitness both makes an Airman more resilient, and also reduces any potential risk to their fellow Wingmen. Unfortunately, the misconception that seeking mental health support is a weakness stands in the way for some. The aversion to seeking help often stems from one of two beliefs: 1) An Airman's self-perception of weakness, or 2) An Airman's view that fellow Wingmen will perceive them as weak for seeking support.

Being open and honest about mental health is a strength and is just as important as getting care for a physical injury. An Airman who seeks help demonstrates to other Airmen that it is okay to receive support. It exhibits an Airman's mental and emotional resilience and speaks directly to the four pillars of Comprehensive Airmen Fitness—mental, physical, social, and spiritual.

Be the Best Wingman

Asking for help, seeking support when needed, and focusing on mental health are all actions of a resilient Wingman. Airmen cannot take care of others without taking care of themselves, and Airmen who do not seek help are putting themselves and others at risk. Wingmen are expected to support and prioritize the safety and well-being of each other, and allowing mental health conditions to worsen or go untreated jeopardizes this safety.

Many Airmen have come forward and valiantly sought mental health treatment. Successfully preventing possible harm to themselves and others and paving the way forward for others to confidently seek help too.

"Mental health is taboo only because we make it that way. It's no different than having cancer, a broken leg, or something that we can treat. But because it's mental health, we look at it and we think, well, we can't see it, it can't be real," agrees [Capt. Casey Ross](#), a pilot in the Montana Air National Guard who sought help for invisible wounds after childhood trauma triggered her post-traumatic stress disorder.

Today, more and more Airmen are speaking up to normalize the mental health conversation. They are sharing the support and encouragement they've received from peers and leaders

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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since coming forward with their invisible wounds stories. These Airmen have found strength and camaraderie in talking about mental health and encouraging others to seek treatment. These Airmen share stories that demonstrate how seeking help enhanced their personal and professional lives, rather than harming them:

[Capt. Joseph Siler](#), 492nd Special Operations Support Squadron at Hurlburt AFB, was nervous about returning to work after treatment for his invisible wounds, worrying that fellow Wingmen would see him as broken. To his surprise, they were supportive as he focused on his recovery and transitioned back to work. Receiving treatment allowed Siler to understand his experiences, learn healthy techniques for dealing with PTSD, and to come back as a stronger officer and a more resilient Airman. “Go in, get help, and get back to the fight,” Siler reminds his fellow Airmen.

[Master Sgt. Jessica Clayton](#), Emergency Management Training & Logistics at Ramstein AFB in Germany, who experienced two sets of traumatic incidents, was similarly hesitant to talk to her leadership and fellow Airmen about her symptoms, worried how they might perceive her and the potential impacts on her career. But after opening up, each time, about her invisible wounds she found that they listened and encouraged her to take as much time as needed to seek treatment. Her previous worries were just misconceptions—her Wingmen were supportive and “treatments haven’t impacted my career in any way,” says Clayton.

[Capt. Ross](#) recalls the first time she shared her story with her squadron during the suicide prevention stand-down. “I was worried about their response,” she recalls, but she received a standing ovation. Airmen thanked her for being honest and open. They told her they felt encouraged to share their own mental health personal stories and said she was courageous for doing the same.

[Senior Master Sgt. Phillip Sharpe](#), 88th Inpatient Squadron at Wright-Patterson AFB, is an outspoken advocate for normalizing invisible wounds in the Air Force after it personally impacted him. “None of us are truly strong enough to do everything we do on an island,” he says. “We have to be willing to have conversations. We have to encourage a culture of support for Wingmen to feel comfortable reaching out for help. If our folks are not OK, then how can they execute the mission?”

These are just four stories, but there are so many more out there. It takes enormous strength, resilience, and courage to ask for help when needed. Be the best Airman and Wingman possible—prioritize mental health, speak up, and ask for help. Show fellow Airmen that seeking support is a strength and everyone will be stronger and more resilient for it. After all, even if the decision to seek support is hard to do, do it to keep fellow Wingmen safe.

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*