



Survival Guide for Military Spouses

Stress and Military Families: Don't let stress make you sick

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Stress is a part of life for everyone, and military family members especially can benefit from knowing more about how it affects you and how to cope with it.

What is stress?

Any challenge – or anything that seems like a challenge or problem – can cause stress, whether it is physical or emotional. Breaking an arm is a stress on your body, and so is worrying about your kids or your spouse. For military families, the stress of deployment can mean the stress of being mom and dad to the kids, worrying about the safety of a family member stationed in a dangerous place, worrying about paying the bills, and the stress of wondering where we put the Power of Attorney when there is a pay problem!

Our bodies react to stress in the same way our long-ago ancestors did – fight or flight. Hormones in our body such as adrenaline and cortisol flood our systems, increasing our energy, heart rate, and blood pressure to pump more blood to muscles. That's great when you need to lift something heavy off a child (fight) or run like crazy to get away from something (flight), but it can be harmful when the stress lasts for a long time – such as a deployment lasting 6 months or more.

As the weeks and months go by, these hormones can weaken our immune systems, and if we can't fight a virus or bacteria, that can mean a cold or flu that just never seems to go away. It can even make flu shots less effective. Stress can get to you in the gut too, making us more prone to conditions such as ulcers or irritable bowel syndrome. We become more likely to get high blood pressure, heart disease, or a

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stroke. Even wounds will heal more slowly. For example, a study found that women in a stressful family situation took an average of nine days longer to heal from a small surgical wound, compared to other women with the same kind of wound. So taking care of ourselves is crucial to our families as well.

And of course, stress can cause headaches-- lasting from 30 minutes to days at a time. Lack of sleep or not eating properly makes stress headaches even more likely, especially for women.

Coping with Stress

Research backs up what we have all seen in our lives: men and women tend to cope with stress differently. The support of friends helps women cope with stress more than it helps men, enhancing their immune systems and making women more resistant to disease. It can even help us fight very serious diseases, such as cancer. And, the support provided by women has been found to be more effective at lowering blood pressure for either men or women, compared to the support provided by men.

Despite these advantages for women, many women have trouble coping with stress. Women are much more likely to become depressed as a reaction to stress, compared to men.

What can we do about it? We can't avoid it, but understanding the physical aspects of stress can help us cope with the emotional ones. We can't get the military to adapt to us, but we can adapt, adjust, do a "work around." There are simple things we can do to reduce the effect that stress has on us, both short-term and long-term. And remember, if you don't ask for help when you need it, you won't be healthy enough to take care of yourself or others.

What to do? **This is what works:**

Exercise!

Exercise can give you a "runner's high" thanks to the hormones called endorphins. You'll feel better after exercising and it boosts your immune system all day long. Ideally, you would exercise 5 times/week for at least 30 min. We know that's hard to do. Try to find a friend to go for a walk or exercise break, or swap with someone to babysit the kids. Or get on the exercyle while watching TV instead of using it for a clothes rack.

Eat right!

A balanced diet helps your immune system. Getting buzzed on coffee, tea, chocolate, or caffeinated soft drinks (colas or Mountain Dew) makes your body feel more stressed. Instead of cereal or sandwiches for dinner, try getting a few deployment spouses together – everybody cooks one night a week. The company will distract you, the support will sustain you, and the balanced diet will make you healthier.

Sleep.

Adults and kids do best if they get 8-9 hours of sleep each night. We can live on less, but getting that much sleep will make you feel better, make you more productive, and reduce your stress. If you aren't getting enough sleep, your stress level goes up, then you can't sleep— it's a vicious cycle.

Express yourself.

Talking to friends, family members, a support group, the FRG, or an online community, can be a great stress reliever. Bottling it all up isn't healthy. If writing helps you feel better, try a journal, a diary, or a blog.

Turn Worry to Action!

Sure, that's easier said than done, but try not to obsess about the "normal" worry every military family member has, and worry less about the other uncontrollable things in life that are not as important. Focus on what you can do, and then do it.

Ask for help!

We can't do it all ourselves. Before you get overwhelmed, ask for help from friends, family, the FRG, the chaplain, a support group, or a professional. Military OneSource has online and telephone counselors and it's a free service – give it a try! You aren't alone – thousands of others feel the same way.



Worrying is part of being a parent, but try to cut down on things that you can't control.