

## Life After Combat: Coping with Depression



Returning home from combat can be both joyful and challenging. It's common to have mixed emotions during this time. But are sadness, guilt, or despair taking over your life? You might feel alone, as if no one understands what you've been through. Interacting with other people may seem like a huge effort; you'd rather stay home by yourself. Or you're feeling lost, maybe even questioning whether life is worth living. Thoughts and emotions like these can be signs of depression. Depression is a real illness, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. No matter how bad you feel now, treatment can help you find relief.



### What is depression?

Depression is more than having a bad day, or feeling "down" for a little while. It's a mood disorder that involves feeling sad and hopeless for weeks or months at a time. It often starts when you're faced with stressful life changes, such as being deployed or returning home from a combat tour. Big changes like these can be tough to adjust to, and it's normal to feel sad or upset at first. These emotions should decrease as you cope with the stress and get used to the changes. But with depression, sadness and despair don't go away. They become a major part of your life. This makes it hard for you to function. Depression is an illness, just like diabetes or heart disease. And like those illnesses, you can't just "snap out" of depression. Treatment is needed to bring balance back into your life.

### Why me?

Being in combat has put you under a lot of stress. You may be grieving for friends who died, or upset about changes that happened at home while you were away. You may feel guilty or sad about the war. And you may be coping with physical injuries that have caused major changes in your life. Issues like these can lead to depression. Depression can run in families. And it can be made worse by using drugs, alcohol, or certain

medicines. Whatever has happened to you, keep in mind that depression is not your fault. Don't blame yourself. Instead, focus on changing your situation so you can start to feel better.

## How depression affects your mood

If you are depressed, you feel unhappy, down, or sad most of the time. You lose interest in hobbies, activities, and people you used to enjoy. And you likely feel worthless, guilty, or hopeless. You may want to be left alone and withdraw from family and friends. You may also feel irritable with everyone around you. You may have thoughts of hurting or killing yourself.

## How depression affects your body

Depression doesn't only make you feel low. You may also feel bad physically. Depression can:

- Drain your body of energy
- Cause trouble with mental tasks such as remembering, concentrating, or making decisions
- Cause periods of crying
- Make you nervous and jumpy
- Cause problems falling or staying asleep, or lead you to sleep much more than normal
- Change your appetite
- Cause headaches, stomachaches, or other aches and pains

## Treatment for depression

Though millions of people have depression, no one else is just like you. So you and your healthcare provider will need to work together to find the treatment that's best for your needs. Antidepressant medicine and counseling are two common treatments for depression. The best treatment often includes a combination of both.

- **Antidepressants help ease symptoms.** It may take a few weeks for an antidepressant to start to improve your mood. If it doesn't seem to be working, it may need more time. Or you may need to try more than 1 medicine or dosage before finding what works for you. Keep taking your pills every day as prescribed. Make sure your healthcare provider knows how your medicine makes you feel. This way they can make adjustments as needed. Never change your dosage or stop taking your pills without talking with your provider first. When the time comes to stop the medicine, antidepressants need to be stopped slowly to give your body time to adjust.
- **Talk therapy (counseling) can work well in treating depression.** This treatment is a powerful way to better understand your thoughts and feelings. Talking with a trained professional can make problems less overwhelming. It can help you work through issues in your life and your relationships. Therapy for depression is often done one-on-one. It may also be done in a group setting. Talk with your healthcare provider about the options available so you can choose the best one for you.

## Take care of yourself

People with depression often lose the motivation to take care of themselves. This only makes problems worse. During treatment, make a point to:

- **Exercise.** It's a great way to take care of your body. And studies have shown that exercise helps fight depression. If you have an injury or special needs, talk with your healthcare provider about safe ways to exercise.
- **Stay away from drugs and alcohol.** These may ease the pain in the short term. But they'll only make your problems worse in the long run.

- **Get support from your family and friends.** Don't shut out your loved ones. Although it can be very hard, tell family members and friends what they can do to help you. Keeping in contact with friends you served with can also make a big difference.
- **Get relief from stress.** Ask your healthcare provider about relaxation exercises and techniques to help ease stress.
- **Eat right.** A balanced and healthy diet helps keep your body healthy.
- **Put off major decisions.** Depression can cloud your judgment. So wait until you feel better before making major life decisions, such as changing jobs, moving, or getting married or divorced.
- **Stay involved in activities you enjoy.** With depression, you may not feel like going out. You may not have the energy or interest to do things you used to like to do. But being active and involved really helps you beat depression. Instead of sitting at home, make an effort to get out and do something you enjoy.

## You are not alone

Recovering from depression is a process. Don't be discouraged if it takes some time to feel better, and don't isolate yourself. That will only make you feel worse. Instead, make an effort to get out and take part in fun activities. Accept help from people who care about you. And talk openly with people you can trust. Not everyone will be able to relate to what you've been through in combat. But they can listen and give support. Keeping in touch with friends from the military may be especially helpful. For more information and resources, visit the depression section of the Veterans Administration (VA) website at [www.mentalhealth.va.gov/depression/](http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/depression/).

## If you're thinking about hurting yourself

Are you feeling like you can't go on? Remember, this will pass. There are many ways to ease this pain and manage the problems in your life.

If you're thinking about harming yourself or someone else, here are ways to get help:

- Call your healthcare provider, your VA's suicide prevention coordinator, or a friend or family member right away.
- Go to the closest crisis walk-in center or hospital emergency room.
- Try these resources:
  - **Veterans Crisis Line.** Visit [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/veterans/](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/veterans/) or call 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255) and press "1" to be routed to the hotline. Or call or text 988 to be connected to trained crisis counselors.
  - **Crisis Text Line.** This is a free, confidential resource available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Text "HOME" to 741741 and a trained crisis counselor will respond with support and information over text message.

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