

Veterans and Mental Health

When the Letdown Doesn't Let Up

After the initial celebration is over, most returning service men and women experience some sort of an emotional letdown. This is part of the transition back to everyday life. It simply means you're no longer operating in high gear and that things are beginning to settle down. Or, it can mean that your homecoming was not everything you'd hoped it would be. Occasionally, the letdown can become a more serious problem that requires professional assistance.

Here are some signs that mean it's time to get help:

- Long bouts of depression. If you feel down for longer than two weeks or so, you may be clinically depressed. With clinical depression, people often feel hopeless, lack interest in day-to-day activities or loved ones, and experience changes in eating and sleeping habits. There may even be thoughts of death or suicide.
- Frequent bouts of anxiety or panic. Feeling afraid, even when there's a reason, is a normal reaction after experiencing extremely stressful events. But, when you still feel this way several weeks after the event, you may have something called an anxiety disorder.
- Flashbacks and frequent nightmares. Traumatic events, such as combat, often trigger nightmares and vivid, sudden memories called flashbacks. If they persist for several weeks or months, you may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It can make you feel indifferent, avoid people and responsibilities, become "jumpy," or have panic attacks.
- Frequent alcohol and drug abuse. When people are in pain, they sometimes try to "self-medicate" with alcohol and drugs. This almost always results in even worse trouble.
- Domestic violence/abuse. When troubled by your feelings or experiences, you may feel like lashing out at your family members.
- Previous mental health problems or past trauma. You may experience the symptoms of your disorder or see new ones emerge.

If you are experiencing any of these, you should seek help. With professional help and support you can overcome these problems. Everyone needs help from time to time in dealing with the stresses of life. It's also best to act on these problems as early as possible. You have many options to choose from: support groups, anger management classes, your faith leader, a service chaplain, a family services counselor or mental health professional. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.

Nearly every military installation has a family service center, family support center or Army community service center where you can access information, referral, counseling, and crisis intervention services. In addition, all military families, including National Guard members and Reservists who are activated for more than 30 days, are eligible for medical and mental health care either at a military medical treatment facility or at a civilian facility through TRICARE, the administrator of health services for the armed services. TRICARE provides information about mental health benefits programs for the military on their Web site, www.tricare.osd.mil. Or

contact them at 888-363-2273. Also, Military OneSource provides 24-hour access to information and help. Contact them at 800-342-9647 or www.militaryonesource.com.

If at any time you or a family member feel suicidal, you may call the national **Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at **1-800-273-TALK**, and **Press 1 for veterans**. You may also call the **Westmoreland County Crisis Hotline** at **1-800-836-6010**.