

When the service member is not the same – Recognizing combat stress

If your soldier broke his ankle after hard, difficult use, you would recognize it and treat it. Hard, difficult combat stress can injure your soldier's brain, and it is just as critical to recognize and treat it.

What is combat/operational stress?

Combat stress reactions are caused by the extreme stress of combat, especially when an operation is long or particularly strenuous. Just as some people are more likely to have high blood pressure, some people are more likely to suffer from combat stress. Many war heroes who performed admirably in combat returned with combat stress.

- **It's not a sign of weakness.** Strong, seasoned service members have returned from war changed by combat stress. Nearly everyone in a combat situation will be affected in some way.
- **It's the body's response to constant stress.** Your body and brain naturally send out chemicals and hormones to help you react to danger and maintain a high alert state. With repeated or extreme stress, your brain may experience physical changes that prevent those signals from slowing in a calm environment.
- **Like any injury, it may need treatment.** Some combat stress injury may heal with rest and recuperation. The more serious the injury, the more likely it will need treatment to heal. Like any bodily injury, it can be permanently disabling if left untreated and the sooner it receives treatment the better.

What are signs of combat stress?

Combat stress can cause a person to be different physically, mentally, and emotionally. The main signs are changes in behavior. Stressful events can be a trigger. Combat stress can cause a person to:

- **Struggle to sleep.** The brain can't calm down so a person can't fall asleep, stay asleep or get restful sleep.
- **Be irritable or have angry outbursts.** Spouses sometimes say they feel like they are "walking on eggshells" because they never know when the service member will get upset.
- **Have unusual anxiety or panic attacks.** Things that wouldn't normally be upsetting can create heart-pounding episodes.

- **Display signs of depression.** The person may neglect personal hygiene, stop enjoying things she once did, or seem able to get out of bed.
- **Other changes in behavior, personality or thinking.**
- **Reaction may be delayed.** It may not be obvious that a combat stress injury has occurred until the brain has had a chance to calm down and escape the combat environment.

Should I get help?

It's time to get help if combat stress symptoms are interfering with work or the service member's relationships with friends and family. The service member may also be avoiding reminders, or re-experiencing events. You wouldn't let a leg wound fester. Likewise, combat stress is best treated quickly before it gets worse.

Resources:

Military One Source

This free, 24-hour service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. Services include consultation online or by telephone. You can also be referred for up to 6 face-to-face counseling sessions. Your privacy is assured and no one knows you asked for support unless there is a threat of harm to yourself or others. Call 1-800-342-9647 or check the Web site at www.militaryonesource.com.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

Readjustment Counseling Services

1-800-905-4675 (Eastern) and 1-866-496-8838 (Pacific)

Provides free services to combat veterans, even if still on active duty. Also provides some free services to family members of combat veterans. More than 200 clinics in U.S. communities. Many types of counseling are available at community centers from counselors, many who are vets. Go to <http://www.va.gov/rsc> and click on "Find Your Nearest Vet Center."

For more information and additional resources, organizations and Web sites about combat stress, read < "Stress Management: Dealing with Combat and Operational Stress." >