



Ask the Doc: What Are Ways To Protect My Mental Health?

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Editor's note: This article deals with mental health issues and resources that may help.

If you or someone you know is having a mental health crisis, call 988 for the [Military and Veteran Crisis Line](#) and press "1", or text 838255, or [chat with a live counselor](#). Para Español, apretar "2". Civilians can also call 988 to reach the [National Suicide and Crisis Line](#).

Dear Doc,

I'm feeling pretty low and very stressed out. A good friend recently died by suicide, and no one saw it coming. I've been thinking about him a lot. On top of that, I feel guilty for uprooting my young family when we recently PCS'ed across the country. Also, I'm anxious about how I'm fitting in at my new assignment, and the world news both weighs me down and makes me angry. It's like I'm stuck in a deep, dark hole. How can I feel better?

Feeling hopeless,

U.S. Air Force Airman I.M. Blue

Airman Blue,

It sounds like you are overwhelmed and recognize the negative impact on your mental health. These turbulent days affect each of us differently. Moving your family is a



Our mental health expert, U.S. Public Health Service Capt. Meghan Corso, chief of behavioral health clinical operations at the Defense Health Agency, answers a "Dear Doc" question on ways to protect your mental health.

huge life stressor by itself, not to mention all the other changes. How we respond to major changes and uncertainty about the future is important.

I've found an expert who describes several coping strategies that you may find helpful. These strategies can boost your readiness to take on a new assignment, and help you rebound from your dark moods and hopelessness. U.S. Public Health Service Capt. Meghan Corso holds a doctorate in psychology and is chief of behavioral health clinical operations at the Defense Health Agency. Here's what she suggested.

First, it's important to keep telling yourself you're not alone, and things won't always be this bad. Whatever you're going through, it's important to remember you will get to the other side. Be patient.

Change takes time.

However, if you feel you're about to reach a crisis point, call 988 for the [Military and Veteran Crisis Line](#) and press "1," or text 838255, or [chat with a live counselor](#). (Para Español, apretar "2.")

Second, suicide's impact ripples, touching many people. [Postvention strategies](#) may help get you in touch with your feelings about your friend as well as the pain you are going through. Another helpful resource is the nonprofit Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. Its "10 Things We Know to be True: Surviving Suicide Loss" offers good perspective.

As for tips on defending your mental health, I have collected a number of techniques and practices. These can be grouped into three buckets I call "Protect, Seek, and Optimize."

Protect

Practice just a few of these habits a day to build and maintain a strong psychological foundation and help protect against stress and negative, depressing thoughts.

- Exercise not only improves your physical health, but it also is a good way to get "feel good" hormones such as serotonin flooding your brain. This may help reduce the cumulative impacts of stress to your brain and body.
- Balanced nutrition from your diet directly affects the growth and repair of brain cells and fuels your ability to cope with physical and emotional stressors.
- Quality sleep is healing and restorative. It enhances your cognitive and physical health and your ability to manage stress. Here are some [tips for better quality sleep](#).
- Relaxation and meditation practices such as yoga and controlled breathing on a daily basis help promote a state of relaxation, enhance your sense of well-being,

and can enhance physical and mental health for stress management.

- Setting goals helps to reduce stress hormones such as cortisol and increases a sense of control and accomplishment.
- Break your big goal down into chunks so they are realistic and obtainable. Start small. Success at the beginning can fuel further success. A small goal could be something such as, “I'm going to connect with my family by having family meals once a week.”
- Positive perspective provides hope and helps us to keep moving forward. Try to reframe one or two things from your day with a positive approach. You can also make a choice to be positive for the day. It may not actually happen all the time but keep making this choice; it may become habit.
- Social connections help to reduce stress, increase your sense of well-being and positive experiences. Reach out to a friend, catch up with former colleagues, or join a sports league.

Seek Help Early

Mental health resources can be used to manage and improve everyday life, and they don't always involve a therapist or treatments. Seeking care early can help address mental health challenges before they worsen and prevent a crisis. These resources include:

- [Chaplains](#), peer-to-peer counseling, [substance misuse programs](#), and many other non-clinical and clinical programs are available across the Military Health System. The [Mental Health Hub](#) on health.mil has a complete list of resources for immediate assistance or to make appointments.
- [Military OneSource](#) is a 24/7 gateway to trusted information for service members and their families that provides resources and confidential help. Call 800-342-9667. Military OneSource also has a searchable database of [local morale, welfare, and recreation resources](#).
- The [Real Warriors Campaign](#) is a public health effort to decrease stigma attached to mental health, increase psychological health literacy, and open doors to get care for service members, veterans, and their families. The campaign was expanded in 2023 with a collaboration between the DHA's [Psychological Health Center of Excellence](#) and the [Department of Defense Suicide Prevention Office](#). The campaign also provides free mental health resources including online articles, print materials, and videos.

Optimize

- Practice mindfulness daily. By trying to stay in the moment, you may improve your ability to pay attention and concentrate and help reduce the accumulation

of stress hormones in your body.

- Keep a journal. By expressing your thoughts and creativity (think doodling) on paper or a computer may help you organize and process potential negative experiences and create mental distance from harmful or intrusive thoughts and actions.
- Set aside a time each day to journal about what you are feeling and hope to achieve. Writing it all down and then physically putting the day's entry aside can help you to push the negative thoughts away.
- Be aware of your thoughts and practice alternatives to negative thinking, which includes repetitive thinking about things you have no control over, jumping to conclusions, and discounting positive experiences.
- Practice gratitude and identify the positive aspects to be found in a negative situation, such as it being the opportunity to learn more about yourself, learn something new, or help someone else.
- Find daily meaning and value in yourself and what you do. Identify high-value and long-term goals and hopes you can strive toward, which gives you a sense of the larger world. This process alone may enhance your cognitive performance, overall happiness, and improve your physical health.
- Engage in activities or hobbies that are positive. These can reward you daily and keep you engaged in your environment in a way that potentially changes how you feel. Naturally rewarding activities such as giving back to the community, being physically active, or connecting with others can help to combat stress and improve your mood.

Airman Blue,

I hope Capt. Corso's suggestions resonate with you, and help you feel better about yourself. Please don't give up. If you reach out and don't feel you are being heard, keep trying through all the channels and ranks or have a trusted advocate help. If these different strategies are not working, and you are still feeling stressed, please call your [military hospital or clinic](#) behavioral health facility. They can assist you in connecting to care or services. You are surrounded by people who care about you. Even though it can be a struggle, remember, mental health is health. As always, stay safe out there.