

Trauma and serving in the military

Traumatic events involve situations that are either life-threatening or have the potential for serious injury. Military personnel often experience several traumatic events during the course of their careers. This is of course, over and above their risk of exposure to traumatic events that affect the general population.

While most serving or ex-serving personnel will not experience lasting difficulties as the result of their military experience, some do. The cumulative strain of experiencing many different traumatic events can make mental health problems like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) more likely. Depending on the conflict served, around 5 to 12 per cent of serving and ex-serving members will be affected by PTSD in any given year.

The increased arousal symptoms of PTSD (e.g., being constantly alert and on the lookout for danger) can be helpful and even life-saving while on deployment, and veterans might not always realise that their high level of arousal has become a problem until they are back home. Some signs to watch out for include:

- trouble getting along with colleagues, family, or friends (e.g., being unable to respond emotionally to others)
- angry or violent outbursts
- increased alcohol or drug use
- more physical complaints than usual
- poor performance at work.

Getting help

If you or someone else is concerned about how you're coping after a traumatic event, it might be worth talking to a doctor or mental health professional about starting treatment. Effective treatments for PTSD are available and include counselling, medication, or a combination of both. These treatments can work even if your traumatic experience was a long time ago, or if you have been through a lot of different traumatic events. It is generally best to start with counselling rather than use medication as the first and only solution to the problem.

For more information

- Download a copy of *Recovery after Trauma – A Guide for People with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* from www.phoenixaustralia.org.
- Visit www.at-ease.dva.gov.au for veteran-specific information and advice.
- Call the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service on 1800 011 046.