For Caregivers: Supporting Veterans During the COVID-19 Pandemic

These are stressful times for everyone, but support from caregivers, family and friends can be crucial in fostering resilience in Veterans with pre-existing health conditions who are affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Here are some ways you can help using the 7 C’s of Stress First Aid:

**Check in**

Check in regularly. Ask what would be supportive. Pay attention to signs of significant stress, such as loss of control of emotions, decreases in ability to function, more isolating behaviors, and increased drinking or use of substances.

“When he’s tired, he sometimes can’t find words to express what he is feeling, so I will give specific options, like, are you feeling tense/numb/worried? I also watch his body language. When he is overly anxious, his legs bounce. If I suggest changing something about what is happening at that moment, he will agree.”

**Coordinate**

Coordinate with others if you need additional assistance. Get the opinion of other family member or friends. Find resources that might be helpful if you have concerns and feel you are not able to provide them enough support. Find creative ways to get them support, such as reaching out to an old friend, family member, supportive mentor or coworker, or a professional. Consider talking with mental health providers for initiation, reinstatement or increased contact via phone, online or telehealth services, if needed, either for them or for yourself.

**Resources (Click to View):**
- VA Caregiver Support
- National Center for PTSD
- Hidden Heroes
- PsychArmor’s Stress First Aid Course Series
**Cover**

Provide cover by paying attention to or asking about how the situation has affected sense of safety. Anticipate or ask about their preferences for improving sense of safety. Then make plans to reduce their concerns. Do your best to be well-informed about information that can help you both stay safe. Keep track of helpful resources. Read or talk with others who have been through similar situations about their safety strategies.

“I learned ways to reduce her concerns, so we could avoid anxiety. We also talked about potential things that might happen, and how we would cover our needs. If she felt that her safety was compromised, I sat with her and did my best to be empathic and a calming presence. Trying to tell her she shouldn't worry can make it worse. Sometimes you just have to close your mouth and let there be silence.”

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**Calm**

Calm them or support them to calm themselves. Remind them keep calming activities in their schedule, even if it means switching to ones that take less time. Give them help with calming themselves down (e.g., problem-solving, exercise, giving them a massage, or supporting them in breathing or calming exercises). Give them opportunities to talk or vent about what concerns them and help them see how their self-talk is increasing their anxiety or agitation. Help them change their focus to what they can appreciate, take refuge in, or control.

“I try to listen and find ways to help her reduce tension. Sometimes I remind her to use her preferred coping skills. Sometimes she may not want me to offer suggestions, she may just need to vent. I've learned to ask her if she wants this to be a venting conversation or a problem-solving conversation.”

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**Connect**

Connect them with social support, which can also mean help with practical matters or tasks. Ask them what kind of support helps them the most. If they want to talk with you about any of their feelings or experiences, be nonjudgmental and understanding. Encourage them to socialize with those who understand what they are experiencing. Create activities or opportunities that promote connection.

“He used to be an avid golfer, but he hasn’t been able to do that lately and it’s made him depressed. I have been trying to remind him that just because he can’t play a full round of golf doesn’t mean that he and I can’t do similar things like hitting some balls into a net.”
**Competence**

Foster their competence, or capacity to endure through life’s challenges and adversities. Support actions that remind them of their existing strengths, help them feel more in control, or focus on small steps / one step at a time. Encourage them to keep on doing what they need to do, to not look too far ahead, and to pace themselves. Help them to cope with their stress in healthy ways. Remind them to find small things they can do to get through each day. Support them to do whatever they can to help keep themselves strong and healthy.

"When he is fatigued and frustrated by work but still wants to contribute at home I give him something to do like brushing the dog to give him something calming that also contributes to our task list. I tell him it’s okay to be frustrated that he can’t do more at home but to remember he’s part of something bigger. It’s okay to take a break or change your pace. Let’s not worry about home tasks as much now. Today we will not worry about that. Let’s adjust our expectations and just do what we can."

**Confidence**

Build their confidence, self-esteem, hope, optimism, or faith. It is often only in conversations with empathic friends and family that one can restore hope and confidence. Try to find ways for them to talk. If they are stuck in unhelpful thoughts or beliefs, help them gain a more helpful perspective on how they are viewing themselves or others. Remind them to focus on what is going well, what they’re grateful for, how they’re getting stronger, or how they can be inspired by what they see around them. Help them see what meaning their experiences hold for them or highlight their strengths and core values. If losses happen, find ways to make meaning and honor the loss. Help them express their feelings and help them to honor or make sense of the loss in whatever way is possible. If relevant, support any ways that church/religion/faith/prayer could help them.

“I try to build his confidence up. When he feels guilt, I remind him who he is. I try to be as calm, non-judgmental, loving, and supportive as possible. There is not a lot you can do if you’re bogged down.”

“I break things down into small steps so she can see her accomplishments and not get overwhelmed. We look at it and talk about it. I remind her that she can accomplish things by taking small steps, and that it’s okay to have feelings, but not to let them stop or control her for long. Most of the time that works.”