

# LIVING WELL IN THE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMUNITY

## COMMON COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO CONSIDER

- If everyone adopts "pitfalls" as coping mechanisms, how can they be unhealthy? After all it is "how we live."
- Pitfalls are the special operations family "stress inoculation." If you can take the lifestyle, this is how you do it.
- I/we are strong enough to take it.

*Everything is okay until it's not okay. How did we get here?*

*"But one day she realized he hadn't laughed for years. Their life, she said, 'was all about the mission.'"*\*

## HOW DO YOU THRIVE WHEN THERE IS ALWAYS ANOTHER MOUNTAIN?



It is not about climbing a mountain.  
It is learning to live amid the adventure.

## FLIP THE STRATEGY

### COMMON PITFALLS



Skip or avoid family dinner



Cease family celebrations

Skip vacation

Pessimism for service

Lack of family routine

Few family traditions



Avoid conversation



Limited awareness of invisible wounds

### HEALTHY CHECKPOINTS



Prioritize shared mealtime



Celebrate

Connect with people

Pride in your legacy

Build routines & norms

Practice traditions



Engage meaningful conversation



Manage stress & invisible wounds

**...from common but unsustainable coping mechanisms to healthy checkpoints.**

# IS IT ME OR IS IT TIME FOR A HARD CONVERSATION?

Signs of stress are not always obvious. **Our response to stressors forms habits that impact our lives in different ways.** Stress symptoms may distract you from noticing changes you need to make in your life. The bolded symptoms are often associated with Intimate Partner Violence.

Take a moment to reflect on the 6 ways stress can impact your life. Are you experiencing any of these? Are they happening because of a change you need to make or a discussion that should happen?

Physical	Relational	Behavioral
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Back pain</li> <li>• Indigestion</li> <li>• Ringing in ears</li> <li>• Dizziness</li> <li>• Muscle tension/pain</li> <li>• Tight neck and/or shoulders</li> <li>• Tiredness or sleep challenges</li> <li>• Stomach aches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Intolerance</b></li> <li>• <b>Nagging</b></li> <li>• <b>Restement</b></li> <li>• Low sex drive</li> <li>• <b>Distrust</b></li> <li>• Social isolation or avoidance</li> <li>• <b>Using people</b></li> <li>• Less connection with friends</li> <li>• <b>Clam-up or lash-out</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lose sense of humor</li> <li>• Worry</li> <li>• Rumination</li> <li>• Memory loss</li> <li>• Indecision</li> <li>• Struggle to think clearly</li> <li>• Distracted thoughts</li> <li>• Lack or loss of creativity</li> <li>• Forgetfulness</li> </ul>
Emotional	Cognitive	Spiritual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overwhelmed by pressure</li> <li>• Anxious or nervous</li> <li>• <b>Angry and Irritable</b></li> <li>• <b>Edgy - powder keg</b></li> <li>• Bored and finding no meaning</li> <li>• Loneliness</li> <li>• Feel unable to change situation</li> <li>• General unhappiness</li> <li>• <b>Sadness or depression</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Bossiness</b></li> <li>• Grinding teeth</li> <li>• <b>High alcohol consumption</b></li> <li>• Compulsive eating or gum chewing</li> <li>• <b>Critical attitude</b></li> <li>• Inability to get tasks done</li> <li>• Excess smoking</li> <li>• Crying</li> <li>• Less movement/exercise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of meaning</li> <li>• Feeling empty</li> <li>• Loss of direction</li> <li>• Cynicism</li> <li>• Unforgiving</li> <li>• Apathy</li> <li>• Doubt</li> <li>• Searching for magic</li> <li>• Need to prove self</li> <li>• Need to be a Martyr</li> </ul>

References:

The Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital. 2021.  
 Mayo Clinic. Healthy Lifestyle: Stress Management. March 24, 2021.

# RECOGNIZING POSSIBLE CHALLENGES & RISK



<p><b>RISK FACTORS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trauma/PTSD</li> <li>• Addiction</li> <li>• Mood disorders</li> <li>• Attention/cognitive deficits (including TBI, RBE)</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Impulsivity</li> <li>• Childhood trauma, especially parental rejection</li> <li>• Rigid gender roles/psychological inflexibility</li> </ul>	<p><b>NAVIGATING THE TERRAIN</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• -----</li> <li>• -----</li> <li>• -----</li> <li>• -----</li> </ul>
<p><b>SPECIAL OPS RELATED RISK FACTORS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Back-to-back deployments, Op-tempo</li> <li>• Blast exposure/TBI</li> <li>• Stigma/stereotypes about special operations</li> <li>• Deployment cycle (especially reintegration)</li> <li>• Stress of separation, jealousy/infidelity</li> <li>• Difficulty adapting to new roles</li> <li>• Isolation and dependence (frequent PCSs, lack of social support)</li> <li>• Negative career events, eg not making rank, being removed from a team, etc</li> </ul>	<p><b>NAVIGATING SPECIAL OPS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• -----</li> <li>• -----</li> <li>• -----</li> <li>• -----</li> </ul>
<p><b>WORK TO DO TO HEAL</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat: Addiction, PTSD, TBI</li> <li>• Substance Use worsens family violence and makes treatment less effective</li> <li>• Couples/sex therapy</li> <li>• Family therapy</li> <li>• Anger management</li> <li>• Communication skills</li> <li>• Motivational enhancement strategies</li> <li>• Mindfulness practices</li> <li>• Skills building, for cognitive deficits</li> </ul>	<p><b>GOALS IN THERAPY - THE WORK TO DO</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional decoding             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Accurately reading emotions in facial expression, body language, tone of voice</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Perspective taking</li> <li>• Emotional empathy</li> <li>• Cognitive flexibility</li> <li>• Sobriety</li> <li>• Anger management</li> <li>• Emotion regulation/distress tolerance</li> <li>• Perpetrators' pre-existing addiction, TBI or trauma reduce effectiveness of therapy</li> </ul>

# HOW TO RESPOND TO TROUBLE AT HOME

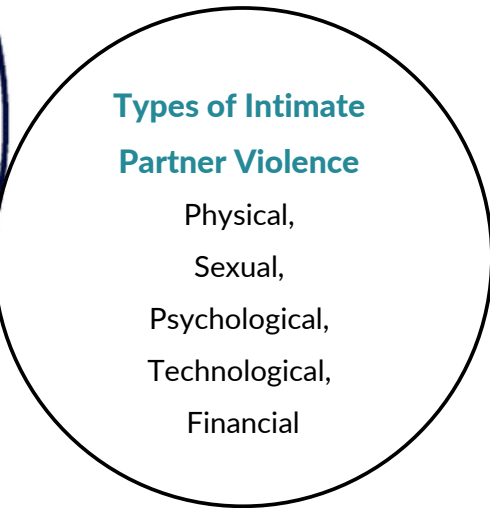
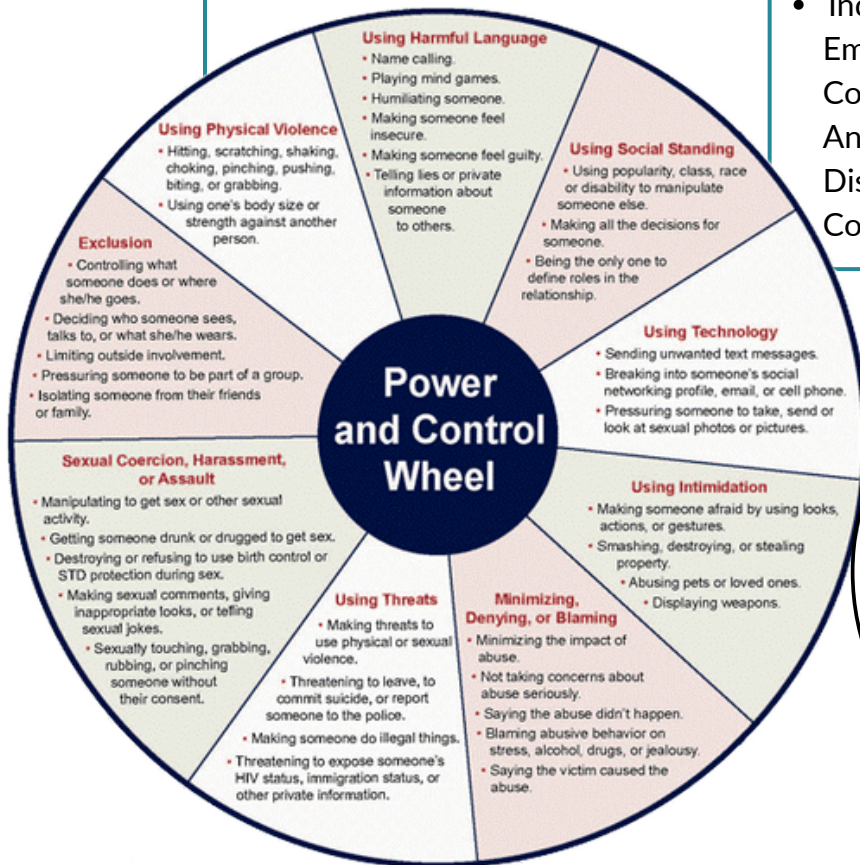


Consider the types of intimate partner violence and the Power and Control Wheel.

**Do you believe that any of these are present in your partnership or family?**

NO	YES	YES & Child or Elder involved
Consider reviewing the decision tree to help a friend a friend	Is it characterological or situational?	Call CPS if a child, dependent adult or elder is being abused, or neglected, to include being driven in a car by someone who is intoxicated.

Characterological (any time, place, or person & hard to treat)	Situational (due to work stress, financial stress, intoxication, poor communication)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get Clean and sober</li> <li>• Engage in individual therapy for all</li> <li>• Safety planning</li> <li>• Exit Strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get clean and sober</li> <li>• Couples therapy</li> <li>• Safety planning</li> <li>• Exit strategy</li> <li>• Individual therapy to address:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotion regulation</li> <li>Communication skills</li> <li>Anger management</li> <li>Distress tolerance</li> <li>Co-occurring TBI, PTSD, mood disorders</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



\*Image taken from Cal Poly Campus Health resources

# PROCESSING TROUBLE AT HOME



Are you worried for your health and safety or have a friend you are concerned for?

Reflect on the following to think through your response.

The experience at home fits best . . .	Would therapy be helpful?
<p><b>Calm</b></p> <p>Play is possible here</p> <p>Desired direction of change and healing</p> <p><b>Disconnected</b>      <b>Connected</b></p> <p>No play, no laughter</p> <p>Even relaxed, mil/vet and first responders tend to remain here: Connected but vigilant is Play, with an edge</p> <p><b>Stressed (PTS)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer Support</li> <li>• Group therapy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Works when group cohesion is strong, working alliance is strong</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Outpatient 1:1 Therapy</li> <li>• Medication management</li> <li>• Intensive outpatient</li> <li>• Residential treatment for addiction, trauma</li> </ul> <p><i>If the answer is yes or maybe to any of these types of help, consider looking at other resources and start exploring and vetting support.</i></p>
How to Vet a Program	What to Expect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check licenses online</li> <li>• How to pay for the program</li> <li>• Ask for proof of trainings/certifications</li> <li>• Ask about evidence base of the program</li> <li>• Be skeptical of flashy marketing</li> <li>• Be skeptical “miracle cures”</li> <li>• Word of mouth, from people you trust</li> <li>• Avoid clinicians/programs asking for: testimonial, photo, name, to be used</li> <li>• Avoid clinicians more interested in war stories than your goals.</li> <li>• Avoid clinicians who share their story with you. You want their expertise, not their own experience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidentiality</li> <li>• Empathic, nonjudgmental listening</li> <li>• Initial assessments, and regular reassessment</li> <li>• Diagnoses</li> <li>• Answers to your questions (but NOT advice!)</li> <li>• Let clinicians know if you have a TBI so they can help you be successful or make a referral because people with TBI are more likely: to drop out of therapy, have difficulty engaging, and be viewed as noncompliant (if TBI is unknown/provider lacks skills).</li> <li>• Limited contact outside of sessions</li> </ul>

# HOW TO RESPOND TO TROUBLE AT HOME




Are you worried for your health and safety or have a friend you are concerned for?

Reflect on the following to think through your response.

Signs of stress apparent?	Trusted People?	Access to basic resources/needs?
<p>Everyone, regardless of their situation at home, needs to have understanding and control of their health, caring and invested people in their life, and the tools and resources to provide for the physical and emotional needs of themselves and kids, if they have kids. A reflection of these three realities, impact what you need to do to respond to trouble at home.</p>		
How to help a friend	How to help yourself (& kids)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Express concern kindly but specifically, eg “I don’t like how she talks to you”</li><li>• DO NOT pressure a person to leave the relationship</li><li>• Educate yourself about safety planning, and other resources</li><li>• Ask before tagging or checking in on social media (safety)</li><li>• Listen well, without judgment</li><li>• Be a role model</li><li>• Be a source of safety</li><li>• Get clean and sober</li><li>• Build a support network</li><li>• Create a safety plan</li><li>• Get into counseling</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Get clean and sober</li><li>• Build a support network</li><li>• Create a safety plan</li><li>• Get into counseling</li></ul>	

Try/Practice this 3 minute Mindfulness Meditation



GET HELP NOW



EXPLORE MILITARY RESOURCES



MAKE A SAFETY PLAN



LEGAL INFO FOR MILITARY



# WHAT IS STRESS?



How do we recognize it? How does our lifestyle impact how we think about stress?

Normal reaction the body has when changes occur, resulting in physical, emotional and intellectual responses The Cleveland Clinic	Physical or mental response to an external cause, such as having a lot of homework or having an illness <i>Nat. Inst. of Mental Health</i>	Feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure Mental Health Foundation
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**Stress is a human response to try to conserve, protect, or gain resources needed to live well. Often these are intangible things like love, joy, support.**

## AM I STRESSED?

Sometimes we are so busy keeping the wheels turning that we are not conscious of our stress. Living well requires us to be aware of our stress. Use this space to reflect on the stress you may be experiencing right now. You may want to reference The Gottman Institute's Feeling Wheel and the handout about the signs of stress.

Do I feel under-pressure? If so, what is causing it?

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What is weighing on my mind?

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How is stress impacting my time, day, life? My finances, friendships, normal routine, work?

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How long has this been impacting me?

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Have I been through this before?

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What can I do to gain control of this stress?

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Resource: Conservation of Resources Theory from A New Attempt at Conceptualizing Stress by S. Hobfoll

# HOW TO RESPOND TO TROUBLE AT HOME



Take time when you are calm to reflect on your experience of your own anger.

## ANGER ICEBERG

What does my anger cost me?

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What are the benefits my anger provides me?

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What others see when you are angry.

Who would you be without your anger?

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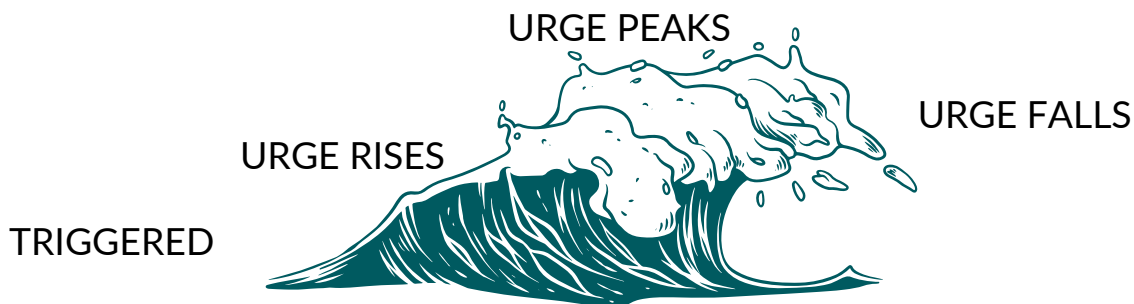
What is under the anger that others cannot see.

Emotions, Thoughts  
Fears,  
Memories

## SURF THE URGE

### URGES, REACTIVITY, OR DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

Meditation adapted for high performers and TBI



Resource: Integrative Performance Labs for First Responders and Special Forces



# FINDING YOUR FEELINGS: LEARN WHERE THEY HIDE

## HARD-TO-FIND FEELINGS

**Love:** Affectionate, caring, close, proud, passionate

**Anger:** Frustrated, exasperated, enraged, indignant

**Hurt:** Let down, betrayed, disappointed, needy

**Shame:** Embarrassed, guilty, regretful, humiliated, self-loathing

**Fear:** Anxious, terrified, worried, obsessed, suspicious

**Self-Doubt:** Inadequate, unworthy, inept, unmotivated

**Joy:** Happy, enthusiastic, full, elated, content

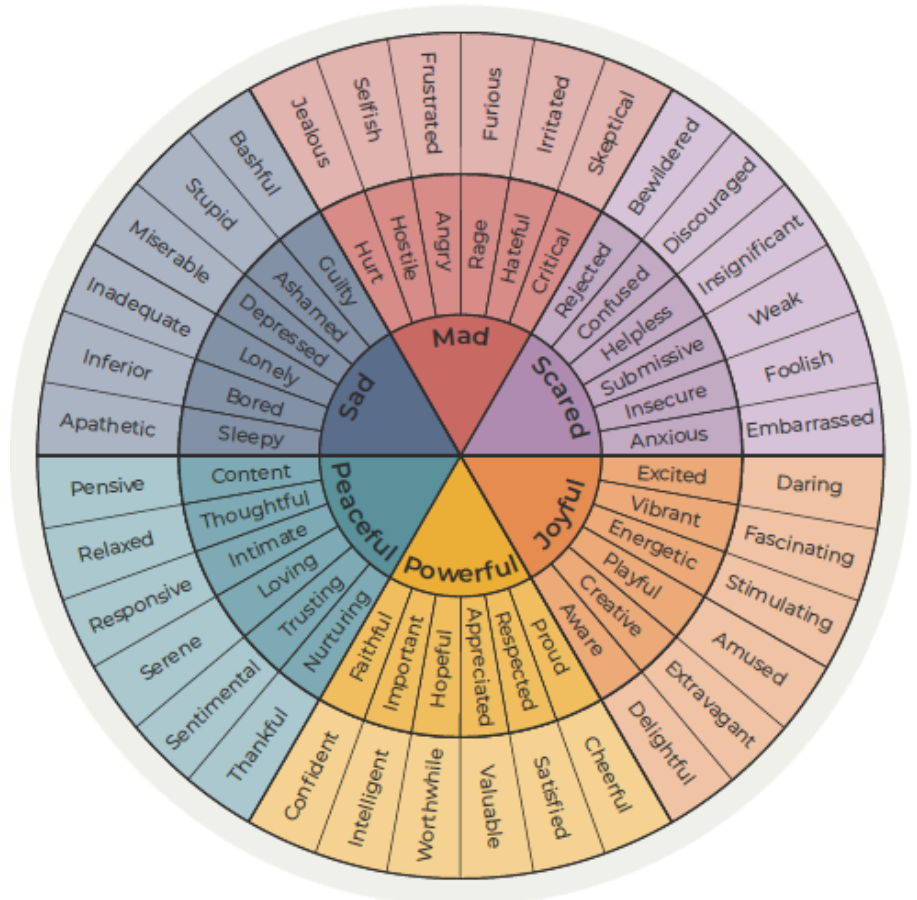
**Sadness:** Bereft, wistful, joyless, depressed

**Jealousy:** Envious, selfish, covetous, anguished, yearning

**Gratitude:** Appreciative, thankful, relieved, admiring

**Loneliness:** Desolate, abandoned, empty, longing

## THE FEELING WHEEL



The Gottman Institute  
Developed by Dr. Gloria Willcox

## WE TRANSLATE OUR FEELINGS INTO...

**Judgements** - "If you were a good friend you would have been there for me."

**Attributions** - "Why were you trying to hurt me?"

**Characterizations** - "You're just so inconsiderate."

**Problem-Solving** - "The answer is for you to call me more often."

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (2010). *Difficult conversations*. Penguin. Pages 91 and 99.

Willcox, G. (n.d.). *The Feeling Wheel*. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from [https://cdn.gottman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/The-Gottman-Institute\\_The-Feeling-Wheel\\_v2.pdf](https://cdn.gottman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/The-Gottman-Institute_The-Feeling-Wheel_v2.pdf)

# MANAGING STRESS

Once you are aware of stress, you can take action to control and manage it. Then you can invest more time and attention to wellness needs that help you live well and thrive. Here are four simple strategies you can practice to counter and control your body's response to stress.

## BODY TENSION EXERCISE

Increase your body tension awareness by practicing this simple muscle relaxation exercise.

- Start with your forehead, and work your way down your body
- Take a slow, deep breath in while tightening your forehead muscles for 6-10 sec
- Notice the discomfort and strain while you're doing this
- Slowly breathe out and relax your muscles; notice the feeling of relaxing
- Take a few even breaths and repeat, moving down through the muscle groups: neck & jaw, shoulders, forearms & hands, abs, thighs & buttocks, calves & feet

Very Well Mind. Do the Progressive Muscle Relaxation Exercise. Dec. 6, 2020. <https://www.verywellmind.com/do-the-progressive-muscle-relaxation-exercise-2584167>

## TAKE NOTE OF THE GOOD

Our feelings and emotions are shaped by habit. You can change how you approach this with deliberate practice. You may want to reference *The Feeling Wheel* on page 36 in your reflection.

- At the end of the day, write down 3 things that you are grateful for that day
- Reflect for a few seconds on why those people, actions, events were good
- Work to take note of these moments each day

Adapted from The Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital. 2021.

## DEEP BREATHING EXERCISE

This 4-7-8 breathing exercise engages the parasympathetic nervous system (needed for relaxation) and calms the sympathetic nervous system which triggers the stress response.

- While sitting, close your mouth and breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds
- Hold your breath for 7 seconds, being mindful of any tension in your body
- Breathe out slowly for 8 seconds. Repeat the exercise 2-4 times

Very Well Mind. What is 4-7-8 Breathing? Oct. 26, 2021. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-4-7-8-breathing-5204438>



# TYPES OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT

These 5 types of support are human and needed by everyone. Spend a moment reflecting on these types of support, how they impact your and your family's well-being, and brainstorm ways you can strengthen your support network.

<b>Types of Support and Connection</b>	<b>Why it Matters</b> My common, shared, basic, human needs. You should never feel guilty for wanting or needing this support or connection.	<b>Reflection</b> Do you have it? Do you give it? Do you utilize the support you have? And.....	<b>Tips</b> How can you be mindful of these resources? What needs do they help fill?
Emotional Support	<b>Feel Acceptance and Understanding</b> Can be words or gestures.	What expressions, words, touches calm you? Who are people in your life that provide this type of support? Are you mindful and try to reciprocate?	
Informational Support	<b>Resources, Information, and Education.</b> Help, knowledge, or support that equip you to accomplish a task, navigate a policy, or learn a skill.	What information or resources would help you solve a common hurdle or frustration? Is it a practical challenge or a challenge more tied to your health or goals?	
Tangible Support	<b>Practical Needs</b> People/services that help you accomplish practical tasks	Who do you call when you need something practical, mundane - like an ingredient, childcare, or a ride?	
Affirmational Support	<b>Feel Valued or Respected</b> Often associated with skill, responsibility or service.	What makes you feel respected? Do you feel respected? If this is challenging, reference The Feeling Wheel on page 31 to brainstorm.	
Belonging Support	<b>Belonging</b> Feel part of something bigger than yourself.	What gives you a feeling of belonging? Profession, faith, family/tradition....	

The Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital. 2021.  
Mayo Clinic. Healthy Lifestyle: Stress Management. March 24, 2021. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987>



## WELLNESS RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

### SEEKING PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

The decision to seek professional support for well-being is highly personal. You may decide to seek professional support if you are struggling to cope with the challenges of the special operations family lifestyle. Always seek professional help if you have thoughts about hurting yourself or others.

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

When reaching out for professional support, be sure to consider where you are comfortable seeking help (online/app resource, military affiliated, nonprofit, medical referral, etc). Look for options that are more likely to have familiarity with special operations stress. And always be an advocate for yourself!



CENTERSTONE

- Free counseling up to 12 visits for active duty service members, national guard and reserve, veterans, and their families
- International and 4 physical locations in TN, IN, IL, and FL
- Call 1-866-726-4560 or visit [centerstone.org/military-services](https://centerstone.org/military-services)



- Confidential, no cost, mental health services to qualified individuals
- Service is not strictly military based, but they do serve military & vets
- Search for a provider at [giveanhour.org/military](https://giveanhour.org/military)



- High quality mental health services in person at nationwide clinics and via telehealth for veterans and family members
- Appointments for telehealth can be scheduled by calling 833-CVN-NETS or online at [cohenveteransnetwork.org](https://cohenveteransnetwork.org)



- Outpatient mental health requires no referral or prior authorization at military treatment facilities & in-network civilian providers
- Telehealth services include family, group, and psychotherapy
- East Region: Humana Military 1-800-444-5445
- West Region: Health Net 1-844-866-9378
- Find a provider at [tricare.mil](https://tricare.mil)



- Confidential, face-to-face, and free counseling from licensed mental health counselors through the Military Family Life Counselors
- Contact 1-800-342-9647 or live chat at [militaryonesource.mil](https://militaryonesource.mil) for more information



- Meditation and mindfulness app
- FREE for Blue Star Families members at [bluestarfam.org/perks](https://bluestarfam.org/perks)