

Chapter 13

Ask for Help, Accept Help, Offer Help in Challenging Times

Acknowledge That Extra Help Is Necessary

Ask For—And Accept Help—When You Need It

A few years ago, Cherie, a marine spouse, found out—after the fact—that a dear friend had been going through serious depression. She hid it well, always putting on a positive front. None of her close friends knew. They all felt terrible when they found out. There was so much they would have happily done to lighten her load—if they'd only known!

Have you ever been there? You know how that feels. So turn it around. If you need help, and you don't let anyone know, you cheat your friends of the opportunity to help.

Most military spouses happily step in to help others. You really do reap benefits for yourself when you help others even though that isn't why you help. But when it comes to being able to ask for help for ourselves, we are among the worst.

Holly fits right into that mold—always reaching out to help others but not as good about asking for help when she needs it. As a single mom with twin infants while her husband was deployed, that trait came to a head one day. One of her four-month-old twins was sick and not sleeping for days on end. Holly was so sleep deprived she couldn't think straight.

Julie Woods and Beverly Young, two army wives who lived on Holly's street, stopped by that day to see how Holly was doing. In just minutes they realized Holly was at the end of her rope. They decided to step in and take over with the kids and told Holly to go to bed. Julie even got someone to fill in for her at work so she could help Holly.

Of course, Holly started protesting immediately. What is it about us that we can't just accept needed help graciously? When someone really wants to help you, thank him or her and accept the help.

We've heard many stories during the Iraq deployment of spouses who had to go into the hospital for a procedure or even a birth, who didn't let anyone know. They went on their own, in some cases with small children in tow, rather than asking help of their friends and neighbors. Everyone around them felt terrible after they found out.

We think this sometimes happens because we all know people who ask for help all the time, too much of the time, the ones who seem to expect everything to be done for them. You've all met someone like that. They are the ones complaining all the time, demanding that the military take care of them. They are the ones complaining about the military but not even accessing the resources that are provided. You don't want to be like that, so you end up not asking for the help that is reasonable to ask for, help that you really need. Think about this. You know how we joke about people who won't ask for directions when they are lost? Well, it's just as ridiculous to not ask for help when you need it.

Pay It Forward

Remember, when you think, "How can I repay you?" You don't have to. You can help someone else in the future. That's how this military life works. You probably can't repay the person who helps you, but you can pay it forward by helping someone else at a later date. Dorothy Wilhelm is an army widow and mother of six with two sons and one son-in-law who are career military. She learned the lesson about forward payment early in her military life.

Here's her story:

It was Christmas. I was alone in the maternity ward of a big Air Force Base hospital in California, facing months in bed as the result of a complicated pregnancy. My husband had taken our infant daughter to get settled with his mother until the new baby was born—and doctors weren't optimistic. They told us the expected child almost surely wouldn't live. I lay in the starkly furnished hospital ward, with twenty-two women, all happy new mothers, and I was not able to keep back the tears. I was only twenty-two years old. Without warning, a small tornado whirled into the room. Her name was Mary Ann and her husband was part of my husband's Army ordnance company. That was all I knew. I'd been on her mind, she said. She couldn't bear to think of my spending Christmas alone, she told me. I wasn't too crazy about the idea myself, I admitted.

"You're coming home with me," Mary Ann announced in a voice that brooked no argument.

This young mother had plenty of other things to do during the hectic holiday season with her own three small children and a dog, but she took care of me, confined to bed, as if it was the one thing she wanted to do. As in all good Christmas stories, her family made room for the stranger in its midst.

Despite the wise medical opinion, my baby didn't die. In the spring I wrapped my healthy new son in a blue blanket and went back to say thank you to Mary Ann. We already had orders to a new post, so I'd have no chance to repay her or even to see her again. "I just don't know how I can pay you back," I said. Mary Anne looked at me as if I weren't quite bright, something I was to become used to over the years ahead.

"You can't do anything for me," she said. "You'll do it for somebody else."

Those six words have followed me down the years—the motto for military families everywhere—we do it for somebody else."

(One time reprint rights granted by Dorothy Wilhelm. This column originally appeared in the Tacoma News Tribune on December 5, 2001. Contact Dorothy (www.itsnevertoolate.com).

Be Specific in Your Offers of Help

When you do offer help, don't just say, "What can I do to help?" A lot of us can't easily verbalize what we need. That question often results in the polite but untrue answer of, "Oh nothing, I'm fine."

Be specific. Here are a couple of Holly's favorites from that time of deployment.

- "I made dinner for my family and I made an extra plate for you. Can I bring it over?"
- "I'm going to the commissary. Do you need milk or anything?" What a gift. Getting two babies ready and shopping at the commissary was an insurmountable task at times, especially when it was just for one or two items.

Another army spouse, Linda Beougher, dealing with challenging medical problems, shares some things that helped her during that time.

- Other parents took my two girls for play dates or sleepovers so I could get the sleep I was supposed to be getting to heal.
- Since I wasn't able to drive and my husband couldn't take any more time away from work, friends drove me to doctor appointments and drove the girls to their activities so they could keep some routine going.
- Neighbors gave us dinner coupons for local restaurants—especially helpful were those restaurants that delivered.

Asking for help and offering effective help aren't always automatic skills we have. Like many other skills, we develop them over time.

Access the Help That Is Available

Part of asking for help is asking about and accessing the help provided by the services. One of the biggest frustrations of the people coordinating family programs is the small number of people who take advantage of them. Check with your family support center, read your post newspaper, and pay attention to the flyers on post. Don't assume you know everything that is available just because you've been married to the military for a while. New programs arise regularly.

Here are some recent examples:

- Many posts/bases provide some free respite care, taking care of children so that mom or dad get time for themselves during deployment.
- Some units have overnight “lock-ins” with activities, fun, and supervision for the kids so mom or dad gets one night to themselves.
- Operation Purple, a joint effort of Sears and the National Military Family Association, provided free summer camp for children of deployed military during the summers of 2004/2005/2006, hopefully to be repeated in future years.
- Operation Homefront at operationhomefront.net, where communities are stepping in to help the families of deployed military with everything from car repairs to home repairs to Internet connected computers.

Make Use of Military OneSource—One Incredible Resource

Hopefully, you've heard about Military OneSource.com by now, but if not, this is a key military benefit to know about. And even if you've heard of it, you might not appreciate the magnitude of help available to you through this service. We bet most military spouses don't. We sure didn't—until recently.

A comment by a marine corps spouse at a recent workshop opened our eyes.

As we brainstormed one spouse's dream in our workshop, which entailed pursuing a degree, ideas flew onto the flipchart paper, including ideas on how to research scholarships and grants. Her reply to these ideas was, “Well, that's great, but that in itself can be a fulltime job, doing that kind of research, and I'm fully loaded with work as it is during this deployment.” At that, another woman piped up.

“Call Military OneSource and they'll do the research for you,” she said. “They will?!” we asked a bit incredulously? “Yes, we were told that at a briefing about Military OneSource last week. They will research grants and scholarships based on your specific situation.”

We admit we found that a bit hard to believe, so we checked it out. It's true. While asking the Department of Defense policy section this specific question, we also requested examples of the kinds of information individuals have asked Military OneSource to provide. Here's a sample:

- Childcare availability in a particular area. The counselors on the end of the phone can provide a list of providers on and off base as well as whether or not they are licensed. (There are online locators for things like childcare, eldercare, massage practitioners as well.)
- School reports that provide teacher/student ratios at schools and SAT scores of the schools located near a particular base.
- Exceptional family member services available in an area.
- All types of parenting issues, such as potty training for toddlers.
- Where to get car repairs done.
- Landlord/tenant problems.
- Relationship problem solving.
- Dealing with relocation stress.
- Adoption assistance.
- Gambling addiction or eating disorders.
- Pet care availability.

Families can request a Know Your Neighborhood guide, a zip code based report provides information about any community they are in or moving to.

You can also get six free confidential in-person counseling sessions through this service (this is available to the military member, spouse, or child). We're also impressed by the kind of information and resources available on their website, things like online self-assessments and free CDs on stress and deployments, free TurboTax software, free home baby proofing kits.

Another thing to be aware of is the fact that simultaneous translation is available over the telephone for about one hundred fifty different languages. You can even fax in a doctor's bill or utility bill for translation (and the fax service is available free through family service centers on base).

What a gift to individuals! And what a gift to unit leaders, Family Readiness Group Leaders, Key Volunteers, Ombudsmen, and Family Service staff members. Now when you are asked a question or faced with a situation you have no experience with, you have an instant place to turn to get helpful information.

This service is available online or by phone 24/7 365 days a year so it's available to families who are living away from a military installation. It solves the problem of family members who work and can't access the 9 to 5 services available on base. The individuals who answer the phone are all master's level consultants and the service can be used anonymously. The policy is that a

telephone must be answered within three rings, and you don't have to jump through the kind of "push 1 for, push 2 for," hoops some companies make you deal with. Military OneSource is available to all active duty, guard, and reserve members (regardless of status), their family members, installation helping agencies, Individual Ready Reserve (IRR), and Department of Defense civilians who live overseas.

Talk about an easy and accessible way to ask for the help you need!

Get Professional Help When Necessary

There is another kind of help that needs to be discussed—help when you are depressed. It's something we don't talk about openly enough. The fact is that people who need help—who need counseling or therapy or maybe even drug therapy—often won't ask for it because of military culture and reality. In some cases people don't even recognize they are depressed and that help is available.

"I just couldn't get myself out of bed," she told us. "I dragged through each day doing the bare minimum of things that had to be done. I procrastinated on everything, even important things. I just couldn't seem to care." Cheryl is an air force spouse describing her experience with depression. "I kept thinking, what's wrong with me?" She went on, "I have nothing to be depressed about. My husband isn't deployed to Iraq like so many of my neighbor's husbands are. If anyone deserves to feel depressed right now, it's them, not me. I have a good life, a great relationship with my husband, good friends. What do I have to be depressed about?" That kind of thinking kept her from asking for help for months. Finally her uncontrollable crying, constant insomnia, and feelings of failure and helplessness drove her to get help.

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates nineteen million adult Americans suffer from depression during any one-year period. Two thirds of those do not get the help they need. Eighty percent of people who are treated show significant improvement, but many people do not even recognize that they have a condition that can be treated, or even if they do, many won't go for help.

There is a social stigma. As Dr. Susan Fletcher, who has worked with adult depression in private practice for more than twelve years says, "Many people grew up hearing 'Get over it—life's not that hard.'"

Depression is one of those things many of us don't talk about, in society at large, but especially in our military world. People who need help often won't ask for it because of military culture. This applies to both the spouse and the military member.

"If I go for counseling it goes on my record and affects my promotability and security clearance." The Defense Department study on post-traumatic stress and other mental disorders among soldiers and marines returning from Iraq and Afghanistan reported this attitude in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Of

the troops whose responses indicated they had a mental disorder, between 23 to 40 percent sought professional help. Troops said seeking mental health care would kill their careers—that their command climate was to just “suck it up.”

The civilian spouse of a military member has related fears. “If I go for counseling it will go on my husband’s record and affect the way he is seen by superiors—‘Can’t you control your family? If you have problems at home, you most likely aren’t as effective a leader or team player at work either.’ And that can affect our family livelihood. Am I really prepared for that?”

Plus there’s the whole confidentiality thing. The on-post community is small. Who is going to go for counseling on post if they fear their neighbors will know about it? Yes, we know that counselors are supposed to maintain confidentiality and we expect most do, but that doesn’t mean we don’t still have the fear that a counselor won’t. It may be an irrational fear but who ever said you are fully rational, especially when you are depressed?

For the military member and many males, there is the whole macho/strength factor—with depression seen as weakness. In fact, the National Institute of Mental Health started a “Real Men, Real Depression” campaign to bring more attention to that subject in society.

We have a similar challenge as military spouses. We have a bit of the “pioneer” mentality. We say, “We are strong and can handle anything

thrown our way. At least that is what everyone else seems to manage, so what is wrong with me?” “No matter how bad my situation is, there is another military spouse who has it worse. . . . I’ve had to move too much, every three years, sometimes after only one or two. But that family had to move three times in two years! . . . My husband deployed into a danger zone for six months. But our neighbor’s been in three major deployments *and* did an unaccompanied tour in Korea. . . . I’m struggling here being the ‘single’ parent of two babies. But my neighbor is managing with five kids while her spouse is deployed.” “How can I complain? What’s wrong with me that I can’t handle it? Why can’t I just ‘snap out of it,’ have a positive attitude, get moving?”

People who need help often won’t ask for it because of military culture.

There may well be spouses who move smoothly through this military life. We’ve met them—so have you. They seem to take it all in stride. In fact, some thrive on crisis and change. Which of course makes us wonder, why can’t we?

Kathie’s friend Claire says, “Don’t compare your inners to their outers.” We never really know what’s going on in someone else’s life and mind while we know our own intimately. We judge how others are doing based on our perceptions of how they are doing, based on what they show to the outside world. Who knows what the reality of their lives really is?

Another thing to consider is this. We are all so different in our energy levels, in our basic mood levels, in our organization habits, and in past experiences that have taught us or not taught us effective coping skills. Some people inherit a tendency to depression. Just because one person can easily handle a tough situation doesn't mean we all can.

Depression can happen because of many different things, from life experiences to chemical imbalance. Experts tell us that psychological stresses that can bring on depression include loss or major life changes—positive as well as negative ones. Well, if anyone faces major life changes and loss on a recurring basis, it's military spouses! The experts also say that most people will have signs of depression at some time in their lives. It can be a minor illness that lasts a short time and goes away by itself. It can be a major illness that severely limits how you function, and requires treatment.

In 2006, concerned by rising stress levels in the ranks, the Defense Department started an online self-screening program in hopes that anonymity will help some service members and their spouses overcome reluctance to confront possible mental health problems. The Mental Health Self-Assessment program is offered online at www.militarymentalhealth.org and assesses answers to questions about recent behavior and mood swings. If the responses indicate possible trouble, the program suggests options for seeking help.

We can also make confidential calls to Military OneSource for advice and referral for six sessions of free counseling off-post.

The first step is to know the signs of depression so we might recognize it in ourselves, in our spouses, or in our friends. Sometimes when a person is deeply depressed, they can't take action to get help. It can mean a friend stepping in to help them get the help they need.

If more people are open about their need for counseling it will become more accepted. Hopefully, like other outdated "rules" of military life, we can eventually get rid of the stigma that keeps people from getting the help they need, spouses and military alike.

As for Cheryl, she finally saw her doctor who prescribed a mild antidepressant medication. With that, increased exercise, and getting involved in activities again, things shifted. She said, "I feel like I have my life back!"

Recognize the Signs of Depression

These can all be symptoms of depression:

- feeling down, blue, hopeless, sad, or irritable,
- no longer feeling pleasure when you do things that would usually be fun,
- having low self-esteem ("I'm not a competent person."), negative think-

ing (“I’ll never feel better.”), and trouble concentrating,

- feeling less energy,
- seeing changes in your appetite, weight, sleeping patterns, or having more physical pain,
- feeling bad enough that you are having trouble doing your normal activities at work or at home,
- abuse of alcohol or drugs.

Based on the above list, if you answer yes to the following three questions, it’s time to get help.

1. Do you have some or all of the symptoms listed above?
2. Have you had them for two weeks or more?
3. Are they getting in the way of your normal life at home, school, or work?

Resources

Finding My Way: A Teen’s Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has Experienced Trauma, by Michelle D. Sherman, Ph.D., and DeAnne M. Sherman (2005)

National Institute of Mental Health. www.nimh.nih.gov.

We found Dr. Fletcher’s CD on Adult Depression to be clear and helpful. www.HearSusan.com/products.asp.

Military OneSource, www.militaryonesource.com—User ID: military; password: onesource.

MilitaryOneSource:

U.S.: 1-800-342-9647

Overseas: 800-3429-6477

Overseas collect: 484-530-5908

Access codes can be found online.

(Besides the availability of free confidential in-person counseling, the website has many resources about depression, from articles to free CDs.)

New Light on Depression: Help, Hope, and Answers for the Depressed and Those Who Love Them, by Harold George Koenig (2004).

Tricare will connect you with a counselor to talk with outside the military base—all confidential. Like Military OneSource counseling, referrals are strictly confidential unless you are seeking to hurt yourself or others. Then it is their obligation to break your confidentiality and to involve others to help you.