
Resilience 101

Understanding and Optimizing
Your Stress System
After Deployment



Workbook for Veterans
and Service Members

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Human Priorities

Resilience 101

Understanding and Optimizing Your Stress System After Deployment

This workbook is based on the belief that knowledge is power. If you understand your body's stress system, the challenges you've brought back from the war zone start to make a lot more sense. If you learn and practice skills for regulating your stress system, you become a stronger and more effective warrior, veteran, and human being.

Contents

Acknowledgments	iii
Chapter One: Getting Started	1
1A: What's this workbook about?.....	2
1B: Doesn't military training teach resilience?	3
1C: What's in this workbook?.....	4
Tool: Matching "Resilience 101" With Your Goals	5
Chapter 2: A Few Resilience Skills	6
2A: What's resilience?	7
Tool: Examples of Resilience Traits and Skills	8
2B: What does your body need?.....	9
Tool: Getting Your Body in Balance.....	10
2C: How do you deal with adrenaline overload?	11
Tool: The Virtual Tranquilizer® for Returning Veterans.....	12
2D: How do you deal with thoughts and feelings?.....	13
Tool: Grounding	14
Tool: Mindfulness	15
2E: What do you do with memories?	16
Tool: Managing Triggers	17
Tool: Triggers vs. Resilience Skills	18
Tool: The Strong Container.....	19
Tool: Remembering Success.....	20
2F: How do mission and purpose fit into all this?	21
Tool: Appreciation	23
2G: What kinds of help and support are available back home?	25
Tool: Letting Civilians In.....	26
Tool: Help and Training in Managing Stress Reactions.....	27
Tool: Changing the Way Your Body Processes Memories.....	28
Tool: Questions for Therapists or Referral Sources	29

Chapter 3: Understanding Post-Deployment Stress Effects	30
3A: What are post-deployment stress effects?	31
Tool: Myths vs. Truths About Post-Deployment Stress Effects	32
3B: Why different effects for different people?.....	34
3C: How do people react to these effects?	35
3D: What’s the major force behind all this?	36
3E: Whose survival are we talking about?	37
3F: Why does memory play tricks on people?.....	38
Tool: The Power of Common Responses to Operational Stress.....	39
and Suggestions for Getting Back in Balance	
 Chapter 4: Understanding The Stress System	 40
4A: What’s the autonomic nervous system?.....	41
4B: How does the stress system work toward balance?	42
Tool: The Stress System in Action.....	43
4C: How does the stress system react to threat?	44
4D: What chemicals does the stress system use?	45
Tool: The Human Chemistry Set.....	46
4E: What happens to these chemicals when the threat is over?	47
4F: How are the body and brain trying to re-balance after extreme stress?	48
 Letter to the Reader	 49
 Information and Help	 50

Cover Photo: National Guard SSG Joel Dalton cradles his seven-week old daughter Camden before boarding a plane to deploy to Iraq from Pope Air Force Base, N.C., on Oct. 6, 2004. Dalton serves with the 105th Military Police Battalion, North Carolina National Guard. DoD photo by TSgt. Brian Christiansen, U.S. Air Force. (Released)

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Expert Sources

Although I chose not to pepper this workbook with footnotes, please know that most of its content is distilled from conversations with individual veterans, and with information I’ve gathered from the books, articles, and lectures of many people. The following are by no means my only favorite experts on this subject, but each has contributed much to this work, including:

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- William L. White, MA, whose consistent encouragement and relentless emphasis on strength and resilience have (I hope) changed my approach forever



Getting Started

- 1A: What's this workbook about?
- 1B: Doesn't military training teach resilience?
- 1C: What's in this workbook?
 - Tool: Matching *Resilience 101* With Your Goals

1A: What's this workbook about?

It's about two things:

1. Building the resilience that can help you overcome/avoid post-deployment stress effects
2. Understanding the physical roots of these effects, so you'll understand why these are normal reactions to the experience of war—or any high-threat environment

“Post-deployment stress effects” are all the stress reactions that come up after—sometimes long after—people return from the war zone. At the low end, these might include things like moodiness or jumpiness, trouble sleeping, or feeling “shut down.” Higher up on the scale, they include things like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, alcohol/drug problems, and challenges staying out of trouble (physical, legal, financial, etc.). There are many different post-deployment stress effects (more are listed on Page 31), because there are many different people, with different bodies and different experiences happening at different times in their lives.

At the low end or the high end of the scale, these effects are all driven by physical changes to the body's stress and survival system. You might sometimes make the mistake of thinking of these effects as signs of weakness. That's because you only see the outer signs—strong emotions, jumbled thoughts, strong memories coming out of nowhere, troubling behavior, etc.

If you could see what's going on underneath—a stress system that went into overdrive in the war zone, to keep you going and functioning and saving lives—you'd understand the truth. These effects are signs of incredible strength, even if they're getting in your way right now. That strength is still yours, and it's one of the tools you can use to get your stress system back in shape.

Another tool is **resilience**, your ability to bounce back after difficult experiences.

You have resilience, no matter what you've been through and no matter how your stress system has reacted. You can tap into that resilience, and work on getting your stress system back in balance, by learning and practicing the skills of resilience. These skills won't make all your challenges go away, but they will put you in a stronger position to deal with your challenges.

This workbook includes:

- Information about the stress system
- Suggestions for getting back in balance
- Information about other resources you can tap into, and what you might find there

If you need professional help, this workbook isn't a substitute for that. But if you're not sure, or if your effects are milder, it can help you learn about managing your stress system, understand why the things you're experiencing actually make sense, and weigh your other options.

1B: Doesn't military training teach resilience?

Yes it does, in many ways. In general, training for military service is designed to make you strong and help you use your stress system to stay alert, stay disciplined, win in battle, and protect the man or woman fighting next to you. To do all those things, your body has to pump out a lot of adrenaline, the main "speed-up," "fight-or-flight" chemical. Your stress system goes into overdrive.

Training programs like the Army's Battlemind can help you channel that adrenaline-fed energy into the skills and the work of war. It can also help you understand how that intense energy can cause problems when you're no longer surrounded by the structure of military life.

This workbook deals with what's going on underneath Battlemind—the stress system that pumps out all those chemicals and sometimes goes out of balance in the intensity of the war experience.

Another example: The Real Warriors program (www.realwarriors.net) defines resilience as "The ability to maintain mission readiness before, during and after stressful situations in combat" and offers many resources for building strength and resilience before, during, and after deployment.

Because post-deployment stress effects are happening in human beings, they affect people on all levels of the human experience—and strengths on all these levels are important to resilience. With a balanced stress system, you might still have challenges in one or more of these areas of life, but they might be less intense and more manageable. So this workbook supports the Military's resilience work by focusing on understanding and balancing the stress system that drives operational stress effects—and respects the many ways in which all areas of our lives are connected.

What do you think?

1. What are some forms of strength, resilience, and resources you've developed as a direct or indirect result of your military training and service?

1C: What's in this workbook?

Resilience 101 has four chapters, and you can look at them in any order you want.

1. **Getting Started** can help you decide whether or not you want to read more, and which chapter(s) might fit your goals.
2. **The Skills of Resilience** can give you some ideas for optimizing your physical stress system, dealing with adrenaline overload, dealing with thoughts and feelings, dealing with memories, using your sense of mission and purpose in these efforts, and considering sources of help and support back home.
3. **Understanding Post-Deployment Stress Effects** can:
 - Correct some of the more common myths about these effects
 - Look at why different people have different types and intensity of effects
 - Look at the role of the instinct for survival—not only for the survival of the individual, but also for the survival of others (family, Unit, community, country, humankind)
 - Explain the strange ways memories act, by looking at our two separate memory systems and what they tend to do under stress, including:
 - Powerful survival-based memories that are stored on unconscious levels, so you're not aware of them until they "jump out at you"
 - More detailed conscious memories that aren't always recorded during times of stress and threat, so you can't always remember them later
4. **Understanding the Stress System** looks at:
 - How the stress system works toward balance
 - How it reacts to extreme and/or long-term stress and threat
 - The chemicals your stress system uses, and how those chemicals tend to affect you when the stress is over
 - How the body and mind work toward getting their balance back
 - How the skills of resilience can help that re-balancing process

Each of these chapters has:

- Regular pages with basic information, some with boxed-in "What do you think?" question sections at the bottom
- "Tool" pages with more information about specific skills and questions to help you look at ways you might use those skills

At the end of the workbook is a section with "Sources of More Information and Help." This is just a small selection of the many resources that are out there for veterans, service members, family members, and friends.

So to start it all off, on the next page is a Tool called "Matching *Resilience 101* with your goals." It can help you decide if, why, and how you want to use this workbook.

Tool: Matching *Resilience 101* With Your Goals

To map the parts of *Resilience 101* that meet goals you already have, you can check items below that are true for you. At the bottom, you can add any that aren't mentioned here. This tool can help you figure out if and how you want to use this workbook. For example:

- If your most pressing goal is to build your resilience and get relief from post-deployment stress effects, you might want to start with Chapter 2, Some Skills of Resilience
- If you'd rather start by understanding **how** and **why** the experience of extreme stress and threat can change the stress system, you can start with Chapters 3 (Understanding Post-deployment Stress Effects) and 4 (Understanding the Stress System).

Chapter 2: Some Skills of Resilience	Pages
I'd like to:	
<input type="checkbox"/> Learn more about the strengths, resilience, and resources I already have	7-8
<input type="checkbox"/> Find out how to get my body more in balance, so I can sleep better, feel stronger, feel more relaxed, have more energy, feel more in control	9-10
<input type="checkbox"/> Learn how to deal with "adrenaline overload," when it gets out of control or starts causing problems	11-12
<input type="checkbox"/> Get better at handling self-destructive thoughts, hyper-critical thoughts, or thoughts that come at me out of nowhere	13-15
<input type="checkbox"/> Learn how to deal with feelings that seem out of proportion to the situation	13-15
<input type="checkbox"/> Learn how to deal with hard memories and flashbacks (intense memories that come out of nowhere and seem like they're happening right now)	14-20
<input type="checkbox"/> Use what I've been through, or what I'm going through, to fulfill a purpose that means something to me	21-24
<input type="checkbox"/> Get out of my isolation back home, find people I can trust, and figure out how people can help me deal with my post-deployment stress effects	25-29
Chapter 3: Understanding Post-Deployment Stress Effects	Pages
I'd like to:	
<input type="checkbox"/> Find out if what I'm experiencing is really normal	31-33
<input type="checkbox"/> Find out why my effects are different in some ways from those of other people I know	34-35
<input type="checkbox"/> Find out if post-deployment stress effects really are signs of strength	35-37
<input type="checkbox"/> Understand why intense memories come crashing in on me	38
<input type="checkbox"/> Understand why I can react like I'm still back in the war zone, even though I'm home	38-39
Chapter 4: Understanding the Stress System	Pages
I'd like to:	
<input type="checkbox"/> Find out how my stress system is supposed to work	41-46
<input type="checkbox"/> Identify the natural chemicals inside me that are affecting my body and mind	44-47
<input type="checkbox"/> Find out why and how my stress system is doing some of the things it's doing	47-48
<input type="checkbox"/> Understand how my stress effects might be my body's attempts to re-balance itself	48

Other goals (that *Resilience 101* might or might not help you meet):

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

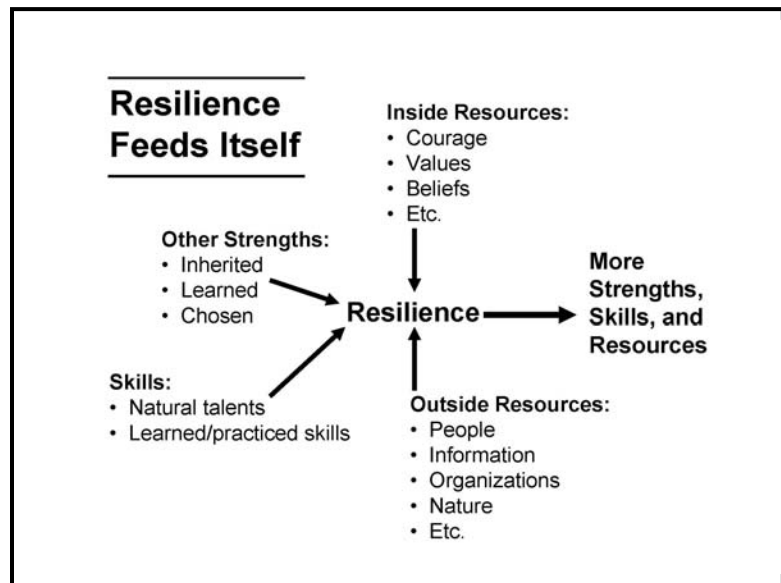


A Few Resilience Skills

- 2A: What's resilience?
Tool: Examples of Resilience Traits and Skills
- 2B: What does your body need?
Tool: Getting Your Body in Balance
- 2C: How do you deal with adrenaline overload?
Tool: The Virtual Tranquilizer® for Returning Veterans
- 2D: How do you deal with thoughts and feelings?
Tool: Grounding
Tool: Mindfulness
- 2E: What do you do with memories?
Tool: Managing Triggers
Tool: Triggers vs. Resilience Skills
Tool: The Strong Container
Tool: Remembering Success
- 2F: How do mission and purpose fit into all this?
Tool: Appreciation
- 2G: What kinds of help and support are available back home?
Tool: Letting Civilians In
Tool: Help and Training in Managing Stress Reactions
Tool: Changing the Way Your Body Processes Memories
Tool: Questions for Therapists or Referral Sources

2A: What's resilience?

One common definition of resilience is the ability to meet challenges and bounce back after difficult experiences. If you're not sure how resilience is different from strengths, skills, or resources, don't worry. It's more important to have it than to know exactly what to call it. The diagram to the right shows one way of looking at the way strengths, skills, and resources might relate to resilience.



Everybody has resilience. We all have strengths, skills, and resources in many areas of life—body, brain, thoughts, feelings, family, friends, values, beliefs, education, training, work, combat, finances, sports, creativity, spirituality, even goofing off. These all add to our resilience, and the fact that we have resilience—that we're able to live through difficult things and learn from them—helps build our strengths, skills, and resources even more. Resilience feeds itself.

Some people have an easy time finding and believing in their resilience, and others have it harder. This can sometimes be traced back to people's experience, but often it can't. Two people can lead very similar lives, but one ends up feeling strong and confident and the other has a lot of self-doubt. Is it genetics? Is it free choice? Something somebody said to them when they were young and impressionable? Divine intervention? Who knows?

People who don't know their own resilience often have just as much of it as people who are aware of their resilience. They tend to discount the courage they show every day. In tough times, just getting out of bed, stepping through the door, and showing up for a difficult task can be a sign of great strength and courage.

When your stress system is out of balance, you have more challenges to manage and overcome—on many levels of life—and you might have less confidence in your resilience. The changes in your stress system have probably ramped up the chemicals that mess with your confidence and tamped down the chemicals that would otherwise add to your confidence. (More about that in Chapter 4, "Understanding the Stress System.")

In this chapter we look at a few specific skills that we call "resilience skills." These aren't the only skills that build resilience. They're just a few of the many skills that can help you balance your stress system. If you start there, your better-balanced stress system can make it easier to get stronger, more resilient, and more successful in many areas of life that are important to you.

The next page gives you a few examples of resilience traits and skills. You might want to fill it out, then start a Resilience Journal where you can look at many more signs of your resilience.

Tool: Examples of Resilience Traits and Skills

A complete resilience inventory would be as long as this workbook, but this page might get you started. You can check off your resilience traits and skills (strengths, skills, resources) in four of the many possible areas of life, add more, then describe your experience with these traits/skills.

Resilience traits and skills that you have	Experiences that have built these resilience traits and skills	Examples: Things you've done, said, etc. that show these resilience traits and skills
Body: <input type="checkbox"/> Physical strength <input type="checkbox"/> Flexibility <input type="checkbox"/> Physical stamina <input type="checkbox"/> Speed <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to relax <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____		
Intelligence: <input type="checkbox"/> Solving problems <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding things <input type="checkbox"/> Explaining things <input type="checkbox"/> Math and/or science <input type="checkbox"/> Writing or storytelling <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of humor <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____		
Other People: <input type="checkbox"/> Protecting others <input type="checkbox"/> Showing respect <input type="checkbox"/> Loyalty <input type="checkbox"/> Accepting people <input type="checkbox"/> Being a good listener <input type="checkbox"/> Kindness <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____		
Character and Values: <input type="checkbox"/> Patriotism <input type="checkbox"/> Courage <input type="checkbox"/> Honesty and integrity <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of duty <input type="checkbox"/> Selfless service <input type="checkbox"/> Faith and/or spirituality <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____		

2B: What does your body need?

No matter which areas of life they affect, deployment stress effects get their intensity from your physical stress system. Here are a few things to help get your stress system back in balance:

- **Breathing:** Most of the oxygen your brain needs for clear thinking and problem solving comes from the bottom of the lungs, but most people—especially if we’ve been through high stress—breathe very shallowly. It’s important to take slow, deep breaths, feel the air going in and out, and notice what’s going on in your body. And smoking definitely deprives you of oxygen, because it clogs up the “pipes” in your lungs.

What could you do differently here? _____

- **Sleep:** Sleep problems can come from depression, anxiety, or nightmares—things that you might need extra help (like a doctor or a counselor) to deal with. But they can also come from some of the things you put in your body. How much caffeine do you take in (coffee, cola, chocolate)? How much sugar (candy, cookies, soda/pop)? Alcohol? Street drugs? Over-the-counter drugs or prescription meds? Caffeine may be the biggest source of insomnia for Service Members and veterans. It’s a powerful drug. Sleep problems can also come from habits like having lively discussions right before bedtime; watching TV in bed; or using TV, X-Box, or your computer late at night.

What could you do differently here? _____

- **Healthy food:** What you eat, how often you eat, and how much you eat can have powerful effects on the amount of fuel and oxygen that gets to your body and brain. Too much sugar, too much alcohol or caffeine, too little protein, or too long between meals can all set your stress system on edge and raise your levels of stress chemicals.

What could you do differently here? _____

- **Exercise:** Almost any exercise—fast or slow—is excellent for the stress system. Fast exercises (like running, sports, fast dancing) give you strength and energy, burn the chemicals that make you anxious, release the calming chemicals, and increase your stamina. Slow exercises (like Tai Chi, yoga, stretches) calm you down and give you a physical sense of balance. Side-to-side exercises (like walking, dancing, horseback riding) help the different parts of your brain communicate better. Repetitive exercises soothe the deep, primitive parts of your brain. Exercises (like team sports) that make you think and work with others can help you balance your body, brain, and relationships.

What could you do differently here? _____

- **Balancing stress and rest:** The way the stress system gets strong and resilient is by going back and forth between high-stress and low-stress situations. Wherever possible, it’s important to break up stressful activities with restful breaks. And long periods of rest aren’t as good as shorter rest periods mixed in with periods of activity.

What could you do differently here? _____

Tool: Getting Your Body in Balance

Tips for Improving Sleep (From *Courage After Fire: Coping Strategies for Troops Returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and Their Families*, Armstrong, Best, and Domenici, 2006).

- Maintain a regular sleep schedule
- Have a comfortable sleep environment
- Use the bed only for sleep or sex
- Have a wind-down routine before you go to bed
- Don't have food or drinks with caffeine (e.g., coffee, sodas, chocolate) within six hours of bedtime
- Don't use alcohol or drugs to help you fall asleep
- Don't have regular or extended use of over-the-counter or prescribed sleep aids
- Get regular exercise
- Stay active
- Avoid heavy food before bed
- Quit smoking or chewing tobacco
- Avoid or limit naps during the day
- Don't watch the clock as you try to fall asleep
- Get up if you can't sleep
- Try not to worry at bedtime (make a worry list for tomorrow)
- Make sleep a top priority
- Include your partner in this process
- Talk to a doctor
- Talk to a therapist

**Check the ones you
already do.**

**Circle the ones you
might want to try.**

Remembering the Positive Impacts of Stress (From Alison Lighthall, Deployment Mental Health Consultant, Fort Carson, Colorado)

- Increased endurance
- Enhanced physical strength
- Alertness
- Vigilance
- Team cohesion
- Increased faith in a higher power
- A sense of purpose
- Indifference to aches and pains
- Heroism
- Loyalty

**Check the ones you
already have.**

**Circle the ones you
want to develop.**

Exercise Suggestions for Balancing the Stress System (From therapist Lia Gaty, Evanston, IL)

- Yoga and meditation
- Breathing exercises (breathing deeply and slowly)
- Dancing vigorously and often
- Exercising vigorously
- Swimming
- Music, art, writing, creativity
- Laughing hard with someone else
- Acupuncture, massage, tai chi, qigong
- Sports

**Check the ones you
already do.**

**Circle the ones you
might want to try.**

Hint: Don't underestimate the power of music—whatever kind of music you choose—to help bring your stress system back in balance.

2C: How do you deal with adrenaline overload?

Adrenaline is a powerful “fight or flight” chemical, and everybody experiences “adrenaline overload.” Any situation where we feel threatened, insulted, guilty, etc. can signal the stress system to raise our levels of adrenaline. Adrenaline overload is one of the most common things that gets Service Members and veterans into situations they’ll regret later.

You can think of the brain as having higher, rational “thought” centers—and more primitive centers that run on instinct. Adrenaline overload blocks access to the higher brain and throws you down into the primitive brain. It hijacks your thought process.

When adrenaline has shut you out of the higher brain centers:

- Without those brain centers, you might not even know you’re on adrenaline overload
- You might misinterpret what others are saying (and see it as insulting or threatening)
- The things you say might not make a lot of sense to other people
- It might seem like you have no choice but to do something dangerous or illegal
- You might make risky or expensive decisions, with consequences you **really** don’t want

That adrenaline rush may feel good at first, and may remind you of the intense adrenaline highs that happened in the war zone. It may even seem like the only alternative to feeling numb. But it’s easy for adrenaline overload to get painful—and to bring on painful consequences.

What do you think?

Which of these signs of adrenaline overload have you experienced?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel intensely angry or scared | <input type="checkbox"/> It’s hard to put things into words |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I make unwise decisions | <input type="checkbox"/> My head gets hot or my face turns red |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Heat starts to rise in my body | <input type="checkbox"/> My jaw muscles get tense, clenched |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My chest or throat get tight | <input type="checkbox"/> A vein sticks out on my forehead |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My heart starts to beat faster | <input type="checkbox"/> My head starts hurting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My body gets stiff | <input type="checkbox"/> I hear a pounding in my ears |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My hands shake or close up in fists | <input type="checkbox"/> I get a prickly feeling on my skin |
| <input type="checkbox"/> _____ | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> _____ | |

Of all the resiliency skills you’ll learn, bringing down your adrenaline levels may be one of the most important. Not only will it improve your decisions, but it can also help you learn to avoid or manage other common post-deployment stress effects—like out-of-control thoughts or feelings, nightmares, savage memories, or flashbacks (intense and all-encompassing memories that come out of nowhere and seem like they’re happening in the present).

Tool: The Virtual Tranquilizer for Returning Veterans

Taken from *Conflict Unraveled: Fixing Problems at Work and in Families*, by Andra Medea

In her books, *Conflict Unraveled* and *The Conflict Unraveled Tool Kit®* (for sale at amazon.com), author Andra Medea gives a number of practical strategies for dealing with adrenaline overload. She's also developed a set of strategies called the Virtual Tranquilizer® and a CD called "The Virtual Tranquilizer: How to Handle Adrenaline for Vets Returning From Deployment," available to Illinois Guardsmen through the National Guard. (This tool may become available through the Guard in more states in the future. You can hear sample at <http://www.conflictunraveled.com/vets.html>.)

To Control Adrenaline Overload:

- **Watch for physical symptoms first:** Pounding head, racing heart, short breath, sweaty palms, dry mouth, heat rising in the body, tense muscles and jaw, etc. Make a list of your personal signs. Check the list when you're under stress. Checking the list is more important than yelling at someone.
- **Watch for mental symptoms:** Jumbled thoughts; circular thinking; or an inability to see options, remember time sequence, or handle math. Also watch for sudden loss of ability to speak clearly, and for a tendency to believe things without questioning them.
- **Burn up the adrenaline by using your large muscles:** Many non-destructive activities can do this. Which of these things might you do if the situation allowed?
 - Go for a run or a fast walk—outside if you can, or inside if you can't go out.
 - Run up or down the stairs (unless stairs might trigger hard memories for you).
 - Open a window and push sideways on the frames.
 - Close the door and do calisthenics (push-ups, jumping jacks, etc.).
 - Breathe slowly and deeply (the lungs are large muscles, too)
 - Do active home repair or yard work (cleaning the garage, putting on a new roof, hauling things, digging a garden, clearing brush, etc.).
 - If you're stuck in a meeting, use isometrics. If you're sitting at a heavy table that you can't lift, put your hands underneath it and push up (without anyone noticing), as if you're trying to lift it. Or "try" to pick up the chair you're sitting in.
- **Reverse the symptoms:** If your breathing goes short, make yourself breathe deeply and slowly. If your fists are clenched, open your hands and stretch your fingers. If you're hunched over, sit back. If your shoulders are scrunched up, lower them.
- **Focus on specifics:** List the facts one by one, then read them back, to keep your mind focused. Slow the pace.
- **If you can't break free of adrenaline overload at the time:** Recognize that you can't think and stop arguing. State clearly that you'd like to talk later, then leave and re-group. Try again after you've repeated the steps shown above.
- **Prepare in advance:** If you're going into a tough situation, practice taking yourself out of adrenaline overload. Practice first when you're just a little overloaded, and keep practicing until you can bring down high levels of adrenaline. (At Walter Reed's Deployment Health Clinical Center they call this a "mental rehearsal" or a "fire drill.") You can develop a resistance to adrenaline overload, or train yourself to snap out of it.
- **When all else fails, get it out of your system:** Find a private place and go smash something that nobody values—but not people or living things. For example, you might rip up a phone book, use a punching bag, throw empty bottles into a dumpster, etc.

2D: How do you deal with thoughts and feelings?

Several resilience skills (some described in Tools on the next few pages) involve using your mind to manage thoughts/feelings and bring your stress system back in balance. You can:

- **Be in the “here-and-now”:** This skill can be challenging at first, especially if intense experiences have played tricks with your memory. One way is to notice things in the present—your breathing, sensations in your body, people and things around you, etc.
How could this skill be useful to you? _____

- **Practice physical and mental overwatch:** Most people are so lost in our own experience—our thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and opinions—that we almost think we **are** those thoughts, feelings, sensations, and opinions. It’s important to practice a skill that you might call overwatch of your own minute-to-minute experience. Don’t try to avoid having the experience, but while you’re having it, also watch it and notice things about it. How could this skill be useful to you? _____

- **Identify and manage “triggers” (Pages 17 and 18):** When your stress system is out of balance, even ordinary things can trigger intense stress reactions, from flashbacks to intense pain, anger, fear, or guilt. If the triggers are related to things people have said or done, facial expressions, or body language, you might even feel or believe that those people have caused your stress reactions—maybe even on purpose. It’s important to learn what kinds of things trigger your stress reactions, so you can: 1) make a plan for coping with them; and 2) connect the extreme stress reactions your body is having with the sights, sounds, or thoughts that have triggered them—and with the stress system itself—rather than with the people around you, who really didn’t cause your reactions.
How could this skill be useful to you? _____

- **Question things:** The more often we think a thought, the more it gets “burned” into the brain. Many people get used to thinking negative thoughts over and over, and it gets harder and harder to keep these thoughts from triggering stress chemicals. Some of the most upsetting thoughts we have aren’t true, or haven’t happened. One way to keep your thoughts from running you over is to question them: “How do I know this is true?” “Is this something I **really** believe in the present, or is was it just true in the past?”
How could this skill be useful to you? _____

- **Picture a calm, peaceful place:** You can use your imagination to “create” an image of a place in your head where you feel strong, calm, and peaceful. It might be a place you’ve been in the past, or one you’d like to find. Explore what that place looks like, sounds like, feels like, smells like, etc. Draw a picture, or find a photograph. Keep it handy in your head, so you can “visit” and use it to calm down your stress system whenever the chemicals rise and your stress reactions start to get out of control.
How could this skill be useful to you? _____

Tool: Grounding

**Adapted from a workshop by Dr. Laurie Leitch and Elaine Miller-Karas, LCSW
Trauma Resource Institute**

“Grounding” is one way of getting away from out-of-control thoughts, feelings, memories, etc. and returning to the “here and now.” It’s a good skill to learn, practice, and get used to doing. Practicing this skill can give you more overall control over your stress system. You can also use it to get back in balance when thoughts, emotions, or memories start crashing in on you. You can practice grounding when you’re alone and doing nothing else, and then use the same skills and techniques when you’re in hard situations—or even in ordinary situations. No one will notice, except you might get more quiet and calm. Here are some possible steps:

1. Get comfortable in your chair, with both feet on the floor. (If you’re standing, you can stand with your back to a wall, a strong tree, etc.) You can close your eyes if you’re alone or with people you trust who are grounding too, or you can keep your eyes open and rest them someplace neutral.
2. Notice the support that the back of the chair (or the wall) is giving you—on your back, on your seat. Keep feeling that support, and notice any physical sensations it gives you.
3. Notice your feet, connecting with the ground. Notice any sensations that gives you.
4. Push a little bit with your feet against the ground, and notice what happens in your body when you feel that extra contact. Now relax your legs (if you’re sitting). If pushing against the ground made you feel more comfortable, remember that, so you can use it in the future when you feel uncomfortable.
5. Check in with your breath, without changing the way you’re breathing or making an effort to breathe a certain way. Just notice your breath, and follow it as it goes in and out. See if you notice anything about your breathing. When you pay attention to it, does it get deeper or more shallow? Notice any physical sensations as you breathe.
6. If you notice any places in your body that may be feeling tense, just shift your attention to someplace else in your body that’s feeling less tense, or even someplace that’s feeling calm and relaxed.
7. Just connect with that place for a while, feeling that calm place in your body. Make a mental note of that place, so you can go back there at times when your stress system starts to overreact. If that place in your body still feels calm when your stress reactions start to rise, that might be a good place to remember and focus your attention on.
8. Let your attention drift like a very slow wave, down from the top of your head, all the way down, past your back, sensing into the support of your chair (or the wall, tree, etc.), all the way down to your feet connected to the ground.
9. When you’re ready, if you closed your eyes, open them and bring your attention back to the room or the scene around you. Notice the people around you (if there are any), the furniture, the walls, the trees, the ground, etc. You might ask yourself to name ten objects that you can see around you. What do you notice in your body when you notice what’s around you? Do you feel more or less comfortable?
10. Practice this whenever you can, so you’ll remember to do it when things get intense.

Tool: Mindfulness

The idea of Mindfulness has been around more than 2,500 years, originally as a Buddhist meditation practice. But lately many Western teachers, doctors, counselors, and people of all occupations have also been using it, to calm down and learn to think more effectively. It's a good skill to combine with the other skills described in the last few pages.

You definitely don't have to be a Buddhist or “into meditation” to practice being mindful. You don't have to sit still, cross your legs, or breathe a certain way—though it helps if you breathe slowly and deeply, but you don't have to. And you can be mindful anywhere—at work, driving, walking, waiting for appointments, watching TV, with friends or family, etc. You can practice mindfulness no matter what else you're doing. Nobody will even know you're doing it.

Being mindful is about getting a little relief from that constant “mind chatter”—that jumble of thoughts, feelings, and memories that most people have bouncing around in our heads. It's not about controlling the mind chatter or shutting it down, just getting a little distance from it. People who practice mindfulness understand that you can't make the mind chatter go away. But what you can do is focus your attention on what's happening right now—where you are, what's happening around you, how your body feels, etc. (the kinds of things you noticed in the Grounding exercise). That way, instead of focusing on the mind chatter, you can just be aware of it—watch it as it goes by. **And practice watching it without judging yourself or others.**

Mindfulness is a good technique for overwatch of your own experience. Thoughts may be happening inside your head, but your thoughts are not who you are. And because you're not so caught up in your thoughts, your feelings don't get so intense either.

You might think of your thoughts as clouds floating over your head, or cars rolling past you on the highway. You notice them, but they don't move you around or make you lose your balance. You're still in the same place, watching them. Your thoughts, feelings, and memories are like those clouds or cars. They're moving past you, but you're still grounded in the here-and-now.

You can also train yourself to remember to be more mindful in everyday life. You can decide that certain things are going to remind you to do it—like red lights in traffic, sidewalks, fences, certain people, etc. After a while, your mind really can get quieter. You can get calmer and start thinking more clearly. Mindfulness actually helps “grow” and strengthen the higher parts of your brain that help balance and strengthen your stress system. (There are many books, etc. on Mindfulness. One well known American author/expert on the subject is Jon Kabat-Zinn.)

What do you think?

What might be some of the benefits of Mindfulness, if you decide to try it?

2E: What do you do with memories?

Memories of threat environments can be complicated, because we have two memory systems:

- Our **conscious memory system** records all the things that happen in/around our lives.
- Our **unconscious memory system** records fragments of intense emotional memories—sights, sounds, smells, physical sensations, emotions—and relates them to our survival.

In Chapter 3 (on Page 38) you'll read about how, under intense threat, our stress chemicals can actually shut down that conscious memory system and “burn” memories of intensely negative things into the unconscious memory system. These memory fragments can invade the present in nightmares, flashbacks, and thoughts and feelings that seem to come out of nowhere.

Memories of war can be sources of many challenges, but also sources of a wisdom greater than any wisdom you could ever have earned at home. Many of the skills of resilience are designed to help you cope with and eventually resolve the challenges. Others are designed to give voice to the wisdom that's already a part of you. Here are a few skills you might want to try:

- **Managing triggers:** This is described on the next page.
- **Building a strong container for hard memories:** This is described on Page 19.
- **Taking hard memories in small quantities:** Remember that the stress system grows strong by moving in and out of stress. When you're ready, try remembering a little bit, then using resilience skills to calm your stress system and focus on the present. You can practice “togglng” back and forth between memories and the present. If you're not sure how your stress system will react, better to practice with someone who knows how to help you bring down your stress levels. If it causes problems, back away for a while.

How would your stress system react if you tried this? _____

- **Writing about your experiences:** You might want to do this with other veterans or a counselor, chaplain, or trusted friend. As you write, pay attention to the sensations in your body, look for signs of stress, and use the “togglng” skill described above to lower your stress and go back and forth between the story and the present. Make sure your stress doesn't get too high. When you describe your experiences, try writing about events in the order they happened. That uses your brain in a way that gets the two memory systems to work together. It helps you get more authority over your memories.

What would be the most comfortable way for you to do this? _____

- **Using memory in art:** If you're an artist of any kind—visual, written, music, whatever—you have something of great value to offer. You can use your experiences to fuel your art. The creative process also uses higher brain areas that can calm the stress system.

If you did this, what would you do? _____

- **Remembering success:** Focusing on positive experiences tends to increase your senses of hope and courage. There's a tool on Page 20 for practicing this skill.

How easy or hard might this be for you? _____

Tool: Managing Triggers

If you thought of your stress system as a grill full of charcoal soaked in lighter fluid, your triggers would be the matches that can set it on fire. Triggers might include:

- **Sights, sounds, smells, activities, feelings, or body sensations** that remind your brain of unconscious, survival-based memories, triggering intense memories or flashbacks. One common example is being around fireworks, whose explosive noises might remind your body of gunfire. Another is seeing trash on or near the road when you're driving or riding in a vehicle. The trash can trigger memories of IEDs. Just the act of driving can be a trigger, given all the dangers on the road in Iraq or Afghanistan.
- **Anything that would ordinarily bother you or stress you out:** This could be anything from an argument with your spouse to some stranger saying something that sounds insulting. Our stress systems always react to things we're not comfortable with. But when the stress system is out of balance, it can react to little things with great intensity.
- **Closeness or intimacy with other people:** No matter how strong or independent you are, being close to other people raises feelings—positive ones and negative ones. For anyone who has been through extreme stress and threat, **any** kind of feeling can trigger stress reactions. The experience of war can make that even more complicated, because it can affect you on so many levels of life (emotional, social, spiritual, etc.). The people you love most can be your greatest triggers for pain and anger, and it can sometimes feel like they're causing it—and even feel like they're doing it on purpose.

Sometimes, the more unexpected your triggers and their reactions are, the harder they hit you. And if you haven't consciously identified something as a trigger—and **owned** the stress reaction that follows it, rather than blaming others—a trigger can stay "unexpected" for a long time.

You might avoid many the challenges that some veterans experience—trouble at home, at work, with friends, with alcohol or drugs, with finances, with the law—if you:

1. **Become aware of your triggers:** You can start this by carrying a pocket notebook around and writing down everything that triggers a stress reaction. You can choose whether and when you want to learn more about a trigger—where it came from, why it's so intense, etc. That might be part of a counseling process later, when you're ready to resolve things. But you don't have to understand a trigger in order to manage it.
2. **Make a bulleted list of triggers:** Read the list often enough that the triggers are no longer surprising. Carry the list with you, so when your stress system "goes off" you can look at your list and see what might have triggered it. **See the form on the next page.**
3. **Keep things separate:** The trigger is not the problem. The fact that your stress system is out of balance is the problem, but there are many solutions for that.
4. **Make a plan:** On your trigger list you can also list the resilience skills you'll use to deal with your stress reactions. You can even list the steps you'll take. **Then use the list!**

Tool: Triggers vs. Resilience Skills

Adapted from the work of Marsha Linehan, PhD
University of Washington

Here's a tool that might help you think about and make a plan for dealing with some of your triggers.

Trigger	How you feel around this trigger	Your usual reaction	Some consequences of reacting this way	Resilience skills that might help	A more helpful reaction

Tool: The Strong Container

Adapted from an exercise in a presentation by Lisa Ferentz, LCSW-C, DAPA

If you have a strong imagination, this tool might be for you. As a few of the pages and tools in this chapter have mentioned—and you can read more about in Chapter 4—your stress system grows stronger and more resilient when you go back and forth, in and out of mild or moderate stress. You can use hard memories to do this, if you're talking to someone you trust, who knows how to help you calm your stress system. The trick is just to go a little bit into the memory, then turn around and use the resilience skills to lower your stress levels. **You'll always want to do this without letting the stress get so intense that it triggers flashbacks or adrenaline overload.** But if you let it go too far and it does trigger a reaction:

- Skills like the Virtual Tranquilizer® and large-muscle exercise can help you bring down your adrenaline levels.
- Skills like Grounding and Mindfulness can help you get back into the present.

So what does the “Strong Container” do?

Once you let an emotionally charged memory “out of the bag,” you don't want it bouncing around in your head and body, distracting you and putting you off balance. You may want to visit that memory again—in counseling, with a trusted friend, or whenever you feel strong and ready—but you don't want it to mess you up in the meantime.

So when you're done looking at a memory for a while, you might try this:

1. Use your imagination to “build” a container strong enough to hold the memory. You can make it any size and shape you like, of any material you like. You'll want to equip it with some sort of secure lock, so you can lock the memory in it and the memory can't get out.
What would your container be made of? _____
What would it look like? _____
What would you use to seal and lock it? _____
2. If you've been talking to a counselor or trusted friend about the memory, you can talk to him/her about the container. Describe it, how big it is, what it's made of, how it locks.
3. Open the container, put the memory in, and lock it up. Imagine what the lock looks and sounds like, and notice what happens in your body when you lock it. Make sure the lock is secure. Ask your stress system if the memory is securely locked away, and notice the sensations in your body to see if it feels secure. If you need to, add more seals or locks.
4. Put the container somewhere where the memory can't get out. If the memory is particularly intense, you might want to bury the container underground. At each step along the way, check your body sensations to see if it's locked away securely enough.

Next time you're ready to work on the memory, you can dig it up, unlock it, get it out, and work on it. **Only you can decide when it's time to let the memory out again.** As long as the memory is still emotionally charged, you can keep it locked up. When the day comes when it's comfortable to have the memory around, you can stop locking it up.

Tool: Remembering Success

Inspired by a suggestion from Desert Storm Veteran Steve Robinson

This skill isn't just about the way the world defines "success"—achievements that others might think are important. This is also about remembering things like:

- **Peak experiences:** These may be times when you've felt happy, free, triumphant, successful, inspired, creative, "in the zone"—any or all of these things. These experiences are important, because they help you explore and believe in the best in you.
- **Times when you've overcome adversity:** These experiences show how strong you are, show you how to handle stress, and remind you that you can successfully handle stress. They can increase your sense of hope and confidence.
- **Times when your mind has been opened:** Sometimes your greatest triumphs might include conquering the way you've always thought about someone or something. When you end up liking, admiring, or respecting a person, an idea, or an experience that you judged negatively in the past, your world gets a little bigger, with more possibilities.

Make a list of 10 such experiences below, then picture each one and hold it in your mind:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

2F: How do mission and purpose fit into all this?

Of course, you're much more than just a stress system. This workbook focuses on getting the stress system back in balance, because the chemicals from that system can fuel intense and painful reactions on all other levels of life. But some of those higher levels—like your sense of mission and purpose—can be very important in helping you balance your stress system.

Whoever you are, whatever your age or experience, there are probably higher or deeper kinds of connection that are important to you.

- You may have been raised in a religious faith that follows you still
- You may have a strong sense of connection to nature or to humanity as a whole
- You may practice a spiritual discipline that adds depth and dimension to your life
- You may have values or principles or people you live for—and have proved yourself willing to die for
- Your love of country and loyalty to the mission may be a powerful force in your life

If any of these are true, you may already be calling on these resources to help you get your stress system back in balance. It's important to recognize this, see its value, and—if you can—connect with others who share your commitment. What are some of the higher kinds of connection that are important to you?

- Religious faith _____
- Connection to nature _____
- Connection to humankind _____
- Spiritual discipline _____
- Values/principles _____
- Principles _____
- People _____
- Love of country _____
- Loyalty to the mission _____
- Warrior Ethos _____

It's also important to know that, with all the ways war has changed you, there are many changes that have made you a better person—stronger, wiser, deeper, with more potential to be of service. Of course, if you can't sleep and you're ambushed by flashbacks or rages or unexplained pain, this may seem beside the point. We have to learn to walk before we can learn to fly.

But please put a bookmark here: There's something important in you. It's worth all the work, all the skill building, all the re-balancing. You still have a mission to carry out. It may not be the same one you found in country, but it's yours. You might not know what it is for a while, but it will wait until you're ready.

Does the idea that you might have a higher mission, purpose, or calling sound:

- Comforting?
- Disturbing?
- Both?

Why? _____

The “Appreciation” tool on the next page might help you identify some of the things in your life that you value, calm your stress system, and clarify your sense of mission and purpose.

Rituals are important, too. Never underestimate the power of positive ritual to balance the stress system. It “grows” the parts of the brain that help you handle stress, it calms your body, and it focuses spiritual attention and energy. Whether it’s a religious service, a prayer or mantra that you repeat over and over, a martial art, a meditative practice, or a bunch of veterans sitting around and talking, the right ritual can take your re-balancing process to the next level.

Some cultures have rituals they use to welcome warriors back into the community, cleanse their spirits, return their bodies to balance, and help them take on the higher roles that battle has prepared them to live. For example, many Native American communities have the benefit of these great traditions (the sweat lodge, for example). In most other communities, though, it’s up to the individual veteran, group of veterans, family, or community to design new rituals that will help veterans both get their lives “back to normal” and rejoin the community as the new people they are now that they’ve come back from war. (www.realwarriors.net has some good ideas.)

What do you think?

1. Can you think of any positive rituals in your life that might be helping you balance your stress system and move toward fulfilling your mission? Please describe them.

2. What other positive rituals are available that you might consider trying?

3. If you designed your own “re-balancing” ritual, what would it be like?

Tool: Appreciation

Appreciation is a powerful tool for balancing the stress system. You might think of it as appreciation, or as gratitude (gratitude is basically appreciation combined with the feeling that the person or thing you appreciate is also a gift to you). Appreciation and gratitude:

- Activate and strengthen the higher brain areas that help regulate the stress system
- Give the survival brain something positive to chew on, to distract it from its preoccupation with pain and danger (the survival brain is actually involved in all kinds of emotions, pleasant and unpleasant)
- Give you hope—not false hope, but a general feeling of hope (appreciation and gratitude are to the past and present what hope is to the future, so they make it easier to hope)
- Give you a clearer sense of mission and purpose, by showing you what you value

Here's a skill you might want to practice regularly (maybe first thing in the morning), and/or pull out when things are bothering you. Times when things are bothering you are often times when you **really** don't feel like looking for things you appreciate. But they're also times when this kind of exercise can be most effective at lifting your mood and giving you perspective. You just write down as many people/things as you can think of that you appreciate. If you're having a hard time thinking of things, you can start with any or all of these categories:

Comfort (physical, emotional): _____

Strength: _____

Security: _____

Belonging: _____

Pleasure: _____

Interest: _____

Fun: _____

Humor: _____

Calm: _____

Excitement: _____

Fulfillment: _____

Joy: _____

Beauty: _____

Love: _____

People: _____

What else? _____

2G: What kinds of help and support are available back home?

Knowing how and when to let other people help is a very important resilience skill. Throughout your life, your body has needed people to help you build a strong and flexible stress system:

- When you were a baby, “growing” your brain and learning how to handle stress
- In the field of battle, when your body needed that bond with your comrades-in-arms
- Back home, where it’s important to be welcomed and respected by the civilian world
- With family and friends whose love, trust, and respect are essential to your well being
- In those all-important ongoing connections with fellow veterans and Service Members
- In the relationships you may form with counselors, doctors, Chaplains, and others

Some stress chemicals (the ones that try to balance out the adrenaline) make it easier to “shut down” and feel numb and separate from people—and harder to seek or accept help. But that doesn’t cancel the fact that your stress system needs people to help it get back in balance. That’s just how stress systems work.

If your post-deployment stress effects are causing you or others discomfort—maybe even keeping you from living according to your values or principles—you know what to do. You can start building resilience skills and taking a look at other possible sources of help. You can get:

- Support from fellow veterans/Service Members, in general and in times of high stress
- Training from other veterans, trainers, or therapists in any or all of the resilience skills
- Help from a counselor in lowering your stress system’s reactions to memories of war
- Help from a counselor or doctor in dealing with anxiety, depression, and other effects
- Help from a counselor, doctor, or support group in dealing with alcohol or drug problems

If you’re in the Active Component, help and support may be easier to find. Even when you’re not deployed overseas you’re surrounded by the military structure/culture and people who share many of your experiences. But if you’re in the Guard or Reserve, it may be harder to find other Service Members and veterans. The Tools on the next few pages (“Letting Civilians In,” “Help and Training in Managing Stress Reactions,” “Changing the Way Your Body Processes Memories,” and “Questions for Service Providers”) describe a few options you might consider.

What do you think?

1. How comfortable is it to think of your stress system as needing people, and why?

2. What might be the most difficult thing about accepting help or support from others?

Tool: Letting Civilians In

Civilians who have never been in a war zone haven't seen, done, or experienced anything close to what you experienced there. Many returning veterans and Service Members find it hard at first to communicate with civilians—even those they're closest to—for a number of reasons.

Trust

Within your Unit, you may have experienced friendships that were stronger, closer, and more intense than anything you could have experienced outside the war zone. In the war zone, you had to trust your fellow warriors with your life. Compared to that, relationships back home may seem superficial and trivial. It may feel like you can't trust civilians at all, even the people you love most at home. It might help if you tried thinking of trust something you do in a lot of different ways, for different reasons, rather than all-or-nothing thing. For example, name:

Three civilians you can trust (in some ways)	A few things you can trust them to do (or not do)

Questions

Some civilians—out of concern, curiosity, or feelings of awkwardness—will ask you well meant but intrusive questions about your war experience or your reactions to it. You can control these questions by finding direct, courteous ways of protecting your privacy. For example, you might say something like, “I appreciate your interest, but that’s a more complicated question than I can go into right now.” You can practice different ways of stopping the questions or changing the subject without shutting people out. What are some good ways you might respond?

Victoria Bruner, LCSW, RN, BCETS (Deployment Healthcare Clinical Center, Walter Reed Army Medical Center) suggests writing a letter to your loved ones, letting them know that you understand their questions are coming from a place of concern, but asking them to wait until you're ready to talk about it, and asking them to let you know what they need from you.

Here are some things about your stress reactions you might explain to people when you're ready:

- What's happening in you is a normal response to the experience of war.
- Civilians can't understand the experience of war, but if they can respect that fact, it's enough.
- Stress reactions are universal human experiences. We all have the same stress system.
- You can learn from each other and negotiate the types of topics and questions that are okay

Tool: Help and Training in Managing Stress Reactions

If your stress reactions are causing challenges for you or others around you, chances are those challenges won't just solve themselves. But many veterans who are having trouble with post-deployment stress effects say they don't want any kind of help that's going to take a long time or ask them to dig deep into their memories, talk about feelings, or talk about personal things.

You might think of the help that's available in two basic types: 1) help in managing triggers and stress reactions and 2) help in changing the way your brain and body process and react to war memories. The first type of help—in managing your triggers and reactions—is really more training than therapy. You don't have to relive the past or talk about your feelings, and you can start in small, manageable ways. For example:

- ❑ Other veterans who have dealt successfully with operational stress reactions can tell you what has helped them, give you pointers, and coach you in using these resilience skills.
- ❑ The research supports many kinds of skill-based therapies that train you in the resilience skills you'll need to balance and regulate your stress system and operate in more effective ways. These skills work, and many can be taught on shorter, time-limited schedules.
- ❑ There are also other approaches that work on building your awareness of body sensations, and using that awareness to teach you to balance your stress system. Some of these approaches have helped many people, though they haven't yet been researched fully.
- ❑ Many veterans are finding help from practitioners of alternative therapies such as acupuncture, acupressure, and massage therapy. For example Fort Bliss and Walter Reed have model programs in which veterans receive some alternative services. Any physical technique that helps you learn to balance and manage your stress system can be helpful.

Managing Stress Reactions With Help From Medications

Many veterans with post-deployment stress effects receive short- or long-term prescriptions for medications. The right medication can help you stabilize your stress chemicals more quickly—though **it's not a substitute for practicing resilience skills and learning to manage your stress system**. Here are notes on just a few of the many kinds of medications prescribed:

- The most common and best-researched medicines for war-zone stress reactions are the antidepressants that make the chemical serotonin more available (Chapter 4 will tell you why serotonin is important.) You don't have to be depressed for these to help you.
- There are alpha blockers and beta blockers (heart medications) that can help block the effects of adrenaline on the body without many side effects.
- If other medications aren't working, some doctors may add drugs like anticonvulsants or atypical antipsychotics to increase their effects. You don't have to have a seizure disorder or a psychosis for these to help, but some of them have difficult side effects.
- To bring down extreme stress reactions quickly, a doctor might prescribe the temporary use of a sedative in the benzodiazepine family. Benzos are addictive, so if you have problems with alcohol or drugs, they're not a good idea. And used on a regular or long-term basis, these drugs are likely to make your stress reactions a lot worse. So if your doctor insists on prescribing the ongoing use of benzos, it's time for a second opinion.

Tool: Changing The Way Your Body Processes Memories

You can learn to manage and cope with your triggers, stress reactions, and troubling memories, but that won't "neutralize" them. As mentioned on Page 16, and explained in more detail in Chapter 3, the fact that the body has two separate memory systems can cause complications after experiences of extreme stress and threat.

If you have stored war experiences that are triggering intrusive memories, flashbacks, nightmares, or night terrors, there will come a time when it's important to deal with the way your brain and body process these memories. The good news is that there are effective ways of changing the brain's and body's relationship to these memories, and these approaches are well supported by the research. The unfortunate news is that these kinds of therapies often involve bringing up memories and feelings you'd rather not deal with. Here are a couple of approaches:

- The research supports a process called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), which uses both thoughts and some physical (side-to-side) techniques to lower the intensity of your reactions to memories and present-day experiences. Sometimes this approach involves bringing up and "neutralizing" difficult memories, but sometimes it can be effective—and more comfortable—just working with images or body sensations. Of the people this approach works for, some report that it brought them relief in a relatively short time.
- Research also supports the use of exposure therapies, in which a therapist walks you through difficult memories while helping you regulate your stress system. Examples of these approaches include many cognitive-behavioral therapies, systematic desensitization (gradual exposure), and prolonged exposure therapy. Some of these approaches include homework between therapy sessions, in which you write about your memories or listen to recordings of your voice describing the memories.

These approaches fit in with what we know about the stress system: It grows stronger by going back and forth between high and low stress—by experiencing threat in an atmosphere of safety. Done safely by therapists who are well trained, experienced, and careful, these approaches can help you cut the ties between your memories and your stress reactions.

But when you're thinking about trying an approach that works with stressful memories, remember that these approaches can be a little like a roller coaster ride—at best, a controlled roller coaster ride. Before you start, you'll want to think about the answers to these questions:

1. Am I ready to deal with these memories? Yes No
 - How are my skills at bringing my stress system down? _____
 - What's likely to happen in my life if I **don't** deal with the memories? _____
2. What do I know about the therapist's training and skills in this approach? _____
3. Am I willing to work on my resilience skills, and use them to bring my stress system down during the therapy sessions? Yes No

Tool: Questions for Therapists or Referral Sources

When you look for help for post-deployment stress effects, it's important to be a well informed consumer of the services that are available. You may not always know what questions to ask your referral sources or providers of training or therapy, so here are a few important questions about some of these services (not including questions about cost or insurance coverage):

General questions:

- What kinds of help or services are available for me here?
 - Skill training
 - Medication
 - EMDR (Eye Movement, Desensitization, and Reprocessing)
 - Exposure therapy
 - Other: _____
- What kinds of help or services would you recommend for me? _____
- Why do you recommend this for me? _____

If the provider prescribes medication:

- What's the name of the medication? _____
- What kind of medication is it? _____
- How can it help me? _____
- What are the most likely side effects? _____
- Are there any danger signs I should look out for? _____
- Why is this the best medication for me? _____

If the provider recommends exposure therapy:

- What kinds of training and coaching will I receive—before the exposure starts—in ways of bringing down my stress reactions? _____
- Will the exposure to stressful memories be gradual enough to give me a chance to regulate my stress system? Yes No
- Will the therapist:
 - Take me into and out of stressful thoughts and memories, or
 - Ask me to stay with a memory until it becomes very uncomfortable?
- What kind of signal can we set up so that I can let the therapist know if I start to move toward adrenaline overload?

- If I give that signal, how will the therapist work with me to lower my stress level so I won't go into adrenaline overload?



Understanding Post-Deployment Stress Effects

- 3A: What are post-deployment stress effects?
Tool: Myths vs. Truths About Post-Deployment Stress Effects
- 3B: Why different effects for different people?
- 3C: How do people react to these effects?
- 3D: What's the major force behind all this?
- 3E: Whose survival are we talking about?
- 3F: Why does memory play tricks on people?
Tool: The Power of Common Responses to Operational Stress and Suggestions for Getting Back in Balance

3A: What are post-deployment stress effects?

The effects of war on the stress system can be mild, moderate, or very intense. They can start right away, or wait months or years before causing problems. They can range from something as mild as a bad temper, or a tendency to jump at loud noises, to PTSD or an overwhelming urge to numb out on alcohol or drugs. There are also many different kinds of effects. Here are just a few of the most common examples. You can check the effects below that you've experienced, and add any others that aren't mentioned. You might:

- Feel too many things all at once—or not be able to feel anything at all
- Feel really bored and out of touch with civilian life, and long for that chemical “rush” of battle
- Have strong urges to do risky things—like driving too fast, running up your credit cards, getting in fights—just to be able to feel something besides numb
- Not be able to remember important things that happened—or not be able to shut off the bad memories
- Suddenly feel exactly like you're **right there** under fire, even if you're far away and physically safe
- Have that rush of memory and panic come on you just because you heard a loud noise, or because you saw, heard, smelled, or felt something that reminded you of the war zone
- Have unexplained stomachaches, headaches, or pains in other parts of your body, even if you weren't injured in those areas
- Have the shakes, or find your fists clenching as if they had a mind of their own
- Have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep—or have trouble getting out of bed at all
- Feel like you have to be busy and doing things all the time—or feel paralyzed
- Lose all patience with the people around you
- Feel panic, anger, or rage at little mistakes you've made or small things that other people do
- See people or situations as threatening or insulting when they're really not, and feel your body and brain reacting as they would if you were under attack
- Have a hard time thinking of different choices you might have and weighing the possible consequences of each choice
- Feel intensely guilty about people you killed, people you didn't kill, people you couldn't save, or the fact that you survived and can still feel happiness
- Feel a deep sense of shame about who you are now, or about your role in the war
- Feel overwhelmed by the losses you've experienced and witnessed in the war zone
- Feel cut off and separate from anyone who hasn't seen combat, including the people you love back at home
- Find yourself judging people harshly who seem overly concerned with trivial things
- Find yourself trying to escape or “numb” these feelings by drinking too much, using drugs, gambling, blowing all your money, having sex with the wrong people, getting into fights, etc.
- _____
- _____

These and other post-deployment stress effects can get better when you do things that help get your stress system back in balance. Resilience works, whether you've had the skills of resilience all your life or you learn these skills during or after deployment.

Tool: Myths vs. truths about post-deployment stress effects

Myths	Truths
<p>People who have post-deployment stress effects are “crazy,” weak, cowardly, or “defective.” (False!)</p>	<p>Post-deployment stress effects come from the body’s normal and powerful responses to high stress, intense experiences, and the threat of injury or death. These are physical effects—driven by the stress system—that naturally spill over into many aspects of life. These are not signs of weakness, cowardice, or being “crazy” or “defective”—even if they sometimes feel that way. They’re signs of the body’s power to respond to extreme threat and keep you functioning, fighting, and saving lives.</p>
<p>Post-deployment stress effects are mental illnesses. (False!)</p>	<p>Post-deployment stress effects are changes in stress system functioning caused by exposure to intense stress and threat—reactions that help people survive and function in the war zone but don’t work well at home. Most of these effects are not mental illnesses, although people sometimes become more vulnerable to illnesses because of the effects of war-zone stress. These illnesses can include diseases of the stomach or intestines, immune system conditions like fibromyalgia or chronic fatigue syndrome, mental illnesses like depression or anxiety disorders, and other illnesses. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is classified as an anxiety disorder—that’s how people are able to provide medical and counseling services for it—but most experts agree that a more accurate description is to call PTSD an injury to the stress system, a result of the body’s normal and natural ways of adapting to stress and threat.</p>
<p>Post-deployment stress effects are always permanently disabling. (False!)</p>	<p>Most people have milder or more temporary effects that aren’t at all disabling. They work through them. If they don’t already have strong resilience skills, they learn these skills or get help or training from others. Other veterans or Service Members who have been there and overcome these effects are often very powerful resources. A much smaller percentage of Service Members and veterans have stronger stress effects that get in the way of their ability to do one or more of the things it takes to adapt to life at home or in the garrison. But that doesn’t mean these disabilities are permanent. There are ways of overcoming very powerful effects, even though it might not seem that way for a while. And if there are some lasting changes to your stress system, there are many ways of managing them so they don’t get in the way.</p>

Myths	Truths
<p>All post-deployment stress effects are PTSD. If you have problems, it must be PTSD. And if you don't have PTSD, you don't have any problems. (False!)</p>	<p>There's a whole range of post-deployment stress effects, from mild challenges to very difficult problems. There are also many different directions these effects can take. For example, they can speed you up, slow you down, or do both at the same time—like having one foot on the gas and the other on the brake.</p>
<p>Only people in direct combat roles have post-deployment stress effects. (False!)</p>	<p>Everyone who spends time in a war zone is under threat, and their stress systems can react in powerful ways that can have powerful effects. If you're in a threat environment, the fact that your role doesn't include fighting won't keep your stress system from doing what stress systems are built to do.</p>
<p>The only thing they can really do for post-deployment stress effects is dope you up on a bunch of medications. (False!)</p>	<p>Some of these effects—like extreme anxiety—need medicine to stabilize them, but once you're stable, your doctor can move you on to the next phase of balancing your stress system. In many cases things like anxiety, depression, or rage can last longer, so doctors might prescribe medicine to manage them (see Page 27). The most important thing is to be a well informed consumer of medical services, and to have people in your life who can give you feedback on any side effects you may be having. You'll want to keep track of the effects of medications, learn about possible side effects, report any side effects you have, and negotiate with your doctor for a medication change if the side effects are unacceptable to you. You can also get a second opinion or change doctors.</p>
<p>If you get counseling for your post-deployment stress effects, people are going to probe your psyche, make you talk about your feelings, keep you in therapy forever, and generally make you weaker and less able to fulfill your role as a Service Member and/or productive citizen. (False!)</p>	<p>There are many kinds of counseling to choose from, and many are focused on skill training, managing stress effects, and using the body to help balance the stress system. Some counseling approaches are supported by the research, some still need to be tested more but are already helping people, and some haven't shown much promise. So you'll want to be an informed consumer here, too. (See the Tools on finding help and support, Pages 27 through 29.)</p>
<p>What's another myth?</p> <p>(False!)</p>	<p>What's the truth about this?</p>

3B: Why different effects for different people?

Many things go into the way an individual body reacts to the experience of war, or to any other intense experience. Different people bring different things with them into the military, things like:

- Basic brain chemistry and genetic makeup
- Past experiences
- Ways of understanding and thinking about experiences
- Ways of experiencing and managing thoughts and feelings
- Values, principles, and religious or spiritual resources
- Relationships, dreams, stresses, and challenges back home

At any moment, who you are includes your whole body, everything you've learned, everything that's important to you, and all your past experiences. So even if you and your buddy are in the same place when the blast goes off or the mortars are coming in, you're not having the same experience. If you have an extreme reaction and your buddy doesn't, it's because you're two different people, in different bodies, with different sets of skills and experiences.

Different people also have different experiences once they get into the military, including:

- How well their training prepared them for the experience of war
- The leadership styles of the commanders they follow
- The relationships and bonds they form in their Unit or with others in the war zone
- How their officers and Units respond to experiences in the war zone
- The length and number of deployments
- What they see, hear, and experience in the theater of war
- How often they're under fire, and the level of threat when they're not under fire
- How much they see of injury and death
- Whether their deployment roles require them to kill, and how often that happens
- Any injuries, particularly blast concussions or more serious brain injuries

What do you think?

1. What were your best ways of handling stress before you joined the military?

2. What forces or experiences in your life helped you learn those skills?

3C: How do people react to these effects?

Post-deployment stress effects can also trigger reactions on all the “layers” of being a human being—body, thoughts, feelings, relationships, family life, social life, religious/spiritual life, etc. When that happens, it’s easy to think that these are—at their roots—emotional problems, relationship problems, family problems, substance abuse problems, spiritual problems, etc. But even if these kinds of problems are real, they’re not at the root of what’s getting in your way.

All these effects get their intensity from physical changes, fueled by stress chemicals and driven by the stress system. They just happen to be taking place in human beings, and human beings are complicated. We all have thoughts, feelings, memories, values, principles, relationships, careers, etc. Any of these areas of life can be messy and difficult, even without post-deployment stress effects.

All areas of your life are connected to your brain and the rest of your body, and many are powerfully affected by changes in the stress system. Check any of these that apply to you:

- If your thoughts are scrambled, you can’t sleep, you have nightmares, your feelings or actions seem “out of whack,” or you’re losing it over little things, you might sometimes wonder if you’re “going crazy.” **You’re not.**
- If your body is experiencing reactions that feel like fear, you might be tempted to think you’re being cowardly or weak. **You’re not.**
- If you can’t remember important experiences—or intense memories come crashing in on you out of nowhere—you might sometimes feel like you’ve lost all hope of controlling your mind and memories. **You haven’t.**
- If you have intense urges to drink or use drugs, you might be afraid that’s the only way you can ever feel normal or okay. **It’s not.**
- If you’re experiencing some of these things with no relief, you might feel as if nothing can bring you back in balance. **You’re wrong. There are definitely ways of getting back in balance.** Chapter 2 has some suggestions to start with, and there are many more resources out there. Some resources are mentioned in the list that starts on Page 50.

Once again: Post-deployment stress effects are normal reactions to intense experiences in the war zone. The rest of this chapter looks at why these reactions are so powerful.

What do you think?

Name one area of your life, and tell how your stress system might be affecting it.
Area of life: _____ How the stress system might be affecting it:

3D: What's the major force behind all this?

The major force behind post-deployment stress effects is the same as the major force behind many of our most powerful experiences—the human instinct to survive and to preserve our species. It's the unconscious force behind things like:

- Sexual desire for an attractive potential mate
- The urge to protect children
- The drive to make a living and get ahead in the world
- Generosity toward people who are less fortunate
- Commitment to serving our country
- The Service Member's dedication to the safety of his or her comrades in arms.

It's all about keeping us—all of us—going. Our species is wired to survive.

Our stress systems are ancient and primitive, designed to help us escape temporary threats, like a stray lion or tiger that wanders into our cave. The body pumps out powerful chemicals and goes into overdrive. We kill the invader, fight him off, or get the [bleep] out of the cave—using our powerful stress chemicals as fuel for our “fight-or-flight” responses. Then we're safe, and our body pumps out other chemicals to calm us down. The stress system goes back to normal, and so do we. End of story until the next marauding mammal wanders in.

Of course, our society has evolved way past all that, but our bodies haven't. In ordinary 21st century life, most of the stresses we face are things we can't or don't want to fight or run away from—jobs, traffic, family problems, etc. So a lot of chemicals build up in our bodies, and our stress systems sometimes ramp up out of control—or shut down and make it hard to function.

Nowhere is this more intense than in a war zone. The threat is non-stop, so the stress system never gets to rest and “reset.” The intensity of combat is also beyond anything our bodies were designed to handle. They do handle it, but sometimes at a high physical price.

What do you think?

1. Think of a time when your stress system's natural calming chemicals have kicked in after a short period of alarm or high stress. What were the physical sensations, thoughts, feelings, etc. as the calming chemicals took over?

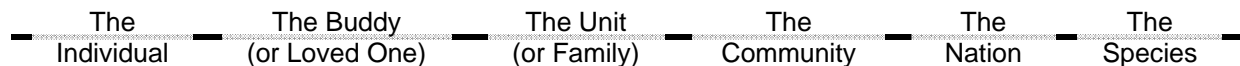
2. When your stress system has been activated, how likely is it that the calming chemicals will kick in before long and calm you down naturally?

Not likely Sort of likely Very likely

3E: Whose survival are we talking about?

If the survival instinct were only there to protect your own survival, it would be a lot simpler. You might not even volunteer for military service, because it would seem a lot safer at home. But we're built to support the survival of the species as a whole, and that often means putting our own well being aside to support and protect others. That's why the military mission is so powerful, because it taps into your instinct to protect your country and preserve your society.

You can look at it as if the survival instinct were laid out on a long line. Depending on whether you're at war or at home, this might include survival of:



We all move back and forth on that line all the time, depending on what happens, what's needed, and what's important to us. Sometimes we're called on to support or protect ourselves, and sometimes to support or protect others.

At each point on the line, the survival instinct is powerful, and it activates our powerful stress systems. This might explain why some Service Members have such powerful stress reactions to guilt, and to other experiences that don't directly threaten their lives.

Two examples of situations in which the larger survival instinct might trigger high stress:

- When Service Members are unable to protect their buddies or their Unit, this may activate the instinct for survival of loved ones and the community
- When Service Members are exposed to the aftermath of fatal attacks—especially those with large numbers of casualties or with children as casualties—this may activate the instinct for survival of the species, even if they didn't know the people who were killed

These are all ancient, powerful, instinctive drives, hooked into powerful, automatic stress systems. Military training can teach you what to do and make you strong enough to keep moving or stand and fight, but it can't wipe out instincts and automatic physical processes that have been around as long as human beings have walked the earth.

What do you think?

What's one example you've seen of a decision or action—yours or someone else's—that might have shown a powerful instinct to help or protect others?

3F: Why does memory play tricks on people?

For some it's a source of relief, and for others a source of worry or frustration. But sometimes people who have been through intense experiences of pain or threat can't remember all or parts of those experiences later. This can be troubling, especially if people also:

- Have vivid nightmares, flashbacks, or sudden and powerful memories of things that may have happened, whether or not they remember those things happening
- Feel as if threatening or painful things that happened in the past were happening **right now**, including the sights, sounds, smells, emotions, and physical sensations

It's not just people who have been to war. Many people who have been in disasters or attacked in their homes or communities have the same confusing effects. Even many women who have been through the intense pain of childbirth say they can't remember the pain later.

This all makes perfect sense, but only if you know how the brain works. As we looked at briefly in Chapter 2, we have two **separate** memory systems, run by different parts of the brain.

1. Our **conscious memory system** makes and stores the kinds of memories that help us live our everyday lives and carry out tasks: facts, figures, maps, people we know, things that have happened in our lives, etc. You might think of this as part of your thinking brain, where memories are laid out on an open bookshelf, so you can find them easily.
2. Our **unconscious memory system** stores memories related to survival: emotions (pleasant and unpleasant), pain, pleasure, threats, things to be avoided, things to be desired, etc. You might think of these memories as being kept hidden in locked drawers. Your **survival brain** (including an "alarm center" in your brain called the amygdala) holds the key, and takes these memory fragments out when it thinks that's necessary for your survival. And when it takes these memories out, it puts them **right in your face**.

When you're under threat, the stress system pumps out chemicals that sometimes shut off your conscious memory system, so it leaves "holes" in conscious memory. But your unconscious memory system is working overtime, making intense, realistic memories of pain and threat. Then it can pull out those memories later, often when something reminds you of those events.

What do you think?

1. How might you use Grounding (Page 14) when memories jump out at you?

2. How might Mindfulness skills (Page 15) help you connect with the conscious memory system?

The Power of Common Responses to Operational Stress—and Suggestions for Getting Back in Balance

	1. Common Responses in the War Zone	2. Power of These Responses	3. Possible Impact Afterwards	4. Suggestions for Restoring Balance
The Body	Powerful chemicals go into “overdrive”—heart racing, “super-human” strength; if helpless, go into “freeze” responses, tensing protective front core muscles.	In combat, speed and strength help you feel confident, react quickly and decisively, fight, save lives, escape harm. “Freezing” can save lives.	After these chemicals go into overdrive, the body has some unfinished business. It may be shaky, “jumpy,” or very tired or weak (feeling “paralyzed”) for a while.	Use the Virtual Tranquilizer® and Grounding. Exercises to relax and release energy from front core muscles. Good diet (whether or not you feel hungry), rest, exercise, vitamins and minerals, and medical care to help the body handle stress and learn to make stress chemicals again. Patience with the time it takes the body to “normalize.”
	In constant threat, these systems can stay on overdrive for a long time.	You can stay ready for battle at all times, for long periods of time.	Constant stress makes the body jumpy, weak, vulnerable to chronic illness.	
The Brain	Some chemicals speed up thoughts, raise feelings of alarm and fear.	Speedy thoughts help you take action. Alarm and fear help you judge threat.	“Speedy” chemicals cause jittery nerves, anger, feeling threatened, sleep trouble.	Understand that these are normal chemical reactions to sometimes unimaginable events. Use Grounding and Mindfulness skills to become an observer of your own reactions. Watch your reactions to things that seem like threats or insults, and question whether they really are, or if it’s just your brain chemicals talking. Avoid alcohol, drugs, and caffeine, and get medical advice if you think you might need help. Get help for depression and any other reactions that last more than a month.
	Some chemicals calm you down, help you control your actions/reactions; keep your moods stable, even in unstable situations like combat.	These calming chemicals help you think more clearly, make better decisions, react in more effective ways, cooperate better, be a better leader.	Calming chemicals can “wear out” after they’ve been needed too much, causing anxiety, depression, urges to drink or use drugs, higher risk of getting addicted.	
	Some chemicals relieve pain and sometimes help you forget what you experienced under intense stress.	Pain relief during the crisis—and forgetting the pain afterwards—helps you keep going in spite of the pain.	You might lose important memories later, or memories might “come at you out of nowhere,” even long after combat is over.	
Thoughts	“This isn’t happening. It isn’t so bad.”	Makes it easier to cope and function.	You might neglect signs you need help.	Talk about what happened, how it really was. Question the thoughts that sound self-critical or self-destructive. Balance helping others with getting the support or professional help you need. Let trust grow back slowly. Question blame, and put it in context. Talk about responsibility.
	“I’m strong; other people need me.”	Brings more hope, courage, action.	You might see needs as weaknesses.	
	“I can’t trust anyone outside the Unit.”	Helps you spot danger and react to it.	You might not trust anyone outside Unit.	
	“This is all happening for a reason.”	Helps you accept pain and move on.	You might blame yourself or others.	
Feelings	Not feeling emotions (numbing them).	Less pain/fear, more decisive action.	You might not grieve important losses.	Practice noticing what you feel, putting a name to it, and feeling whatever it is. Use skills like Grounding and Mindfulness to help you notice and manage your feelings. Let the grieving happen in whatever form or timetable it seems to want to take. Remember: It takes great courage to feel.
	Feeling only “safe” emotions (anger).	Helps you focus on fighting and winning.	You might take feelings for weakness.	
	“Projecting” your feelings onto others.	Helps you not notice/feel your feelings.	You might resent, damage relationships.	
	Giving in to just feeling overwhelmed.	Lets people know you need help.	You might ignore real strength/courage.	
The Spirit	Connecting with your spiritual beliefs.	Strength in safety, connection, meaning.	You might reject others’ help or beliefs.	Know that there’s plenty of room for your beliefs, others’ beliefs, and human help. Use questioning to strengthen your beliefs and get closer to what you really believe. Balance acceptance with need for action.
	Questioning or rejecting your beliefs.	Helps explain painful and unfair things.	You might lose connection, meaning.	
	Finding new spiritual feelings/beliefs.	Brings in new spiritual strength/hope.	You might lose beliefs when crisis is over.	
	Accepting and transcending events.	More clarity, calm, sense of purpose.	You might accept things you should change.	
The Unit	Military discipline, high expectations.	Standards promote strength, discipline	You might be ashamed of reactions to stress.	Know that it’s not weak or disloyal to get help for the body’s and brain’s reactions to war-zone stress. Make and keep deep friendships with others who have served.
	Staying alert for danger at all times.	You’re ready to react to any emergency.	Toll on body and brain (see above).	
	Sense of unity within the Unit.	Cooperation saves lives, wins battles.	You might feel lost/alone after deployment.	
Home	Keeping in contact from the war zone.	Sense of connection brings strength.	Stronger feelings of stress, loss, missing them.	Accept that you’ve changed, and those at home have changed, too. Learn who you all are now. Use resources for re-learning trust, communication, and relationships.
	Not talking about bad experiences.	Protects loved ones from pain and fear.	You might feel disconnected from home.	
	Remembering your home as ideal.	Reminds you what you’re fighting for.	Nobody can live up to an ideal in real life.	

This page reprinted from *Finding Balance After the War Zone: Considerations in the Treatment of Post-Deployment Stress Effects* (Woll, 2008).



Understanding the Stress System

- 4A: What's the autonomic nervous system?
- 4B: How does the stress system work toward balance?
Tool: The Stress System in Action
- 4C: How does the stress system react to threat?
- 4D: What chemicals does the stress system use?
Tool: The Human Chemistry Set
- 4E: What happens to these chemicals when the threat is over?
- 4F: How are the body and brain trying to re-balance after extreme stress?

4A: What's the autonomic nervous system?

Sometimes the best way to understand that an experience really **is** normal and natural is to know a little about how it works—the science underneath it. In the case of the human stress system, that can also be a good way to start learning how to make it do what you want it to do.

The stress system's official name is the **autonomic nervous system** (diagram on Page 43), and it has two arms:

- The **sympathetic** (“speed up,” “fight-or-flight,” “fast system,” “surge”)
- The **parasympathetic** (“slow down,” “rest-and-reset,” “slow system,” “parachute”)

(You won't have to remember the technical names “sympathetic” and “parasympathetic,” but if you want to, you can keep them straight by remembering that the sympathetic system is **sympathetic** to your need to fight back or escape danger—or by thinking of the parasympathetic system as a **parachute**, something that brings you down gradually.)

The stress system uses several brain parts and organs in the body to trigger or pump out the chemicals it needs to respond to stress and threat, and to keep the body and brain in balance (more about these chemicals later in this chapter).

For example, the “fast” system's favorite brain part is the survival brain (led by a primitive structure deep in the brain called the amygdala). The survival brain functions like a guard dog—not very sophisticated, but absolutely clear on its mission: protecting you. It's also in charge of one of the memory systems mentioned in the earlier chapters, the one that records unconscious fragments of memory related to survival (sights, sounds, smells, emotions, etc.).

The “slow” system has several brain parts that do its calming work, including higher brain centers like the **prefrontal cortex**. Located behind the forehead, the prefrontal cortex is the part that does logic and reason, considers morality, thinks through options and consequences, and comes up with effective plans. All those skills are designed to help us reason with the growling, barking survival brain and keep it under control.

What do you think?

1. How do you know when your stress system has been activated? What do you notice in your body? Your feelings? Your thoughts?

2. Which side of your stress system—the fast system or the slow system—tends to get activated most easily? What are some examples of this?

4B: How does the stress system work toward balance?

If the stress system's first job is to keep us alive, its second job is to keep itself—and us—in balance. Many of its functions are organized around balance, including:

- The fact that the stress system has two opposite arms (the fast system and the slow system) that can balance one another out, the way your arms would balance your body if you were walking along a narrow board
- The **feedback loops** that run between the fight-or-flight chemicals and the rest-and-reset chemicals (with high levels of one kind of chemical designed to trigger the release of the opposite chemical, which then tells the first chemical to slow down)
- The fact that several brain parts know how to “talk to” the survival brain and provide more information, so it can calm down if there's not really an emergency

Even the way we develop in early life is designed to help the stress system learn how to stay in balance. For example:

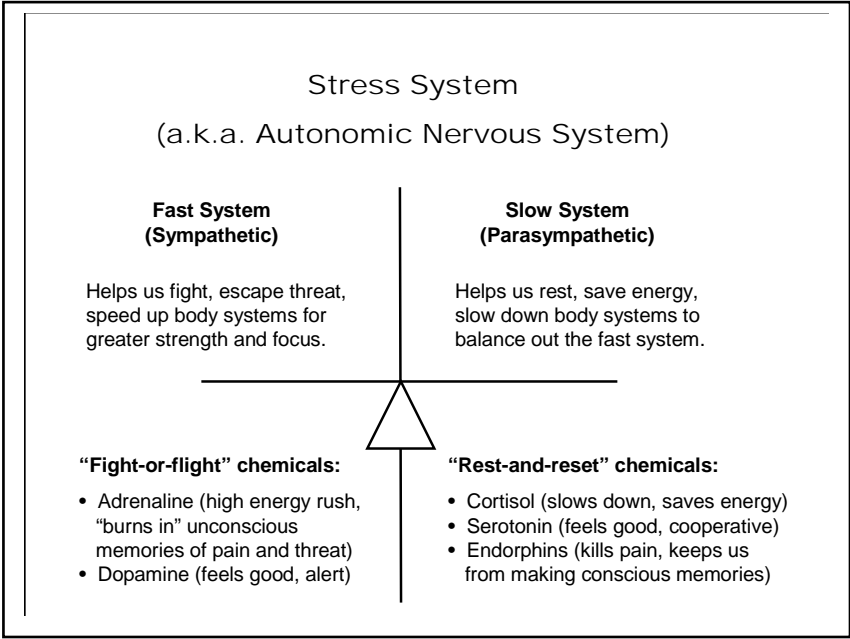
- When a parent and a baby make long, loving eye contact with one another, it “grows” the part of the prefrontal cortex that helps us calm down and regulate the stress system.
- If the baby gets upset and the parent responds lovingly and kindly to his/her needs, the baby comes to believe that his/her little world is safe and stress isn't permanent.
- As the baby watches the way the parent reacts to his/her stress, the baby learns how to handle stress. If the parent handles stress well, the baby starts to learn about resilience.

Think of the way you grow strong muscles—by stressing them, then resting them, over and over again. In the same way, our stress systems are designed to go back and forth between stress and calm, and between the fast system and the slow system. It's usually that back-and-forth motion that helps us grow strong and resilient stress systems, so we can handle stress and return to balance quickly. Many people who have strong resilience skills learned them as they were growing up, often by going back and forth between high-stress and low-stress experiences.

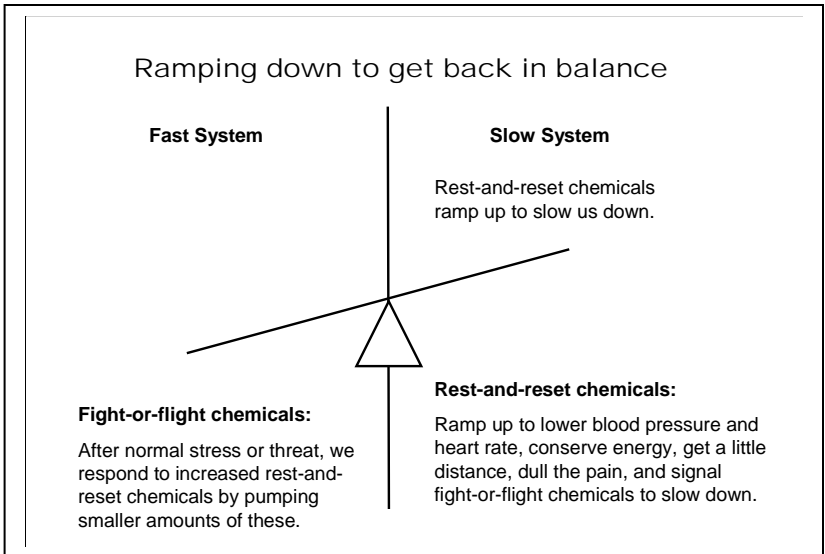
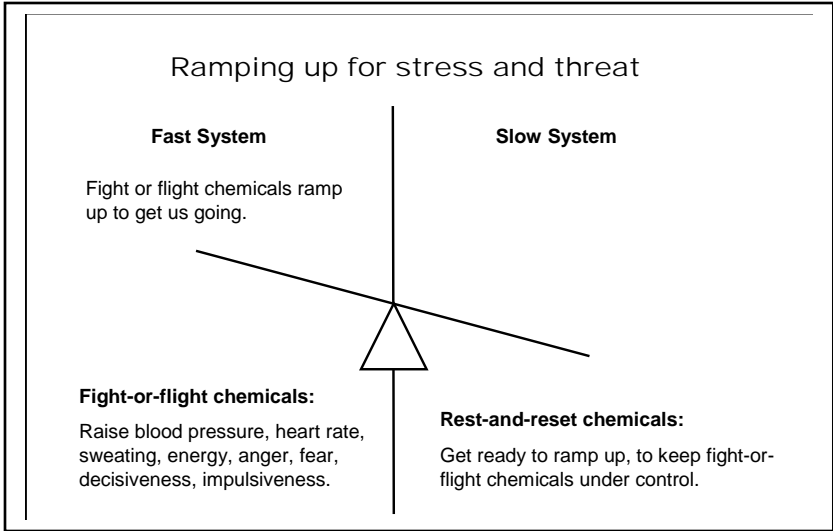
What do you think?

1. How might you use the Virtual Tranquilizer® Tool described on Pages ___ and ___ to go back and forth between high and low stress?

2. How might you use the Grounding Tool described on Page ___ to go back and forth between high and low stress?



Tool: The Stress System in Action



4C: How does the stress system react to threat?

When there's only mild or moderate stress or threat—and it doesn't last too long—the fast system and the slow system play well together. That's what our bodies were designed to do.

But if the threat is extreme or long lasting, the survival brain takes over and refuses to listen to anyone else. It blows through all the feedback loops that are supposed to keep things in balance. It just wants to keep pumping a lot of adrenaline and other fight-or-flight chemicals, and store intense memories of threat and pain, so it can pull them out later and warn you if the danger seems to be returning. It just wants to protect you, and this is its best shot at it.

Meanwhile, the slow-down system just wants to send out chemicals that will shut you down, numb you out, and keep you from making conscious memories of what's happening. Some of these chemicals can be just as powerful as the speed-up chemicals sent out by the fast system.

And what if the threat is intense, but the situation doesn't give you a chance to react in the fight-or-flight way your survival brain wants you to react? Sometimes, when the situation adds that element of helplessness, the speed-up and slow-down systems can both go into overdrive at once, and you can experience something called a “**freeze response**.” This is an ancient, automatic response from the most primitive part of the brain, designed to slow your breathing and heart rate way down, and lower your body temperature, so a potential predator will think you're dead and lose interest in you. Have you ever seen this happen? Yes No.

The freeze response might just last a second, because military training has prepared you to snap out of it and keep fighting. But the freeze often tenses the front core and hip muscles (the muscles joining the abdomen and the hips). Some experts (Peter Levine, for example) believe that the freeze experience leaves a lot of tension behind in these and other muscles, and that survival-based memories are stored in the brain's relationship with these muscles.

Even one threatening event—like a car crash—can put your stress system in overdrive and affect the way it works for a long time. If the threat happens over and over for months or years, as it often does in the war zone, it's no wonder many people's stress systems go out of balance.

What do you think?

1. Which physical exercises might be good for releasing tension from the front core and front hip (called “iliopsoas”) muscles?

2. How might you use Grounding to find relief from tension stored in your muscles?

4D: What chemicals does the stress system use?

It helps to think of the stress system chemicals in three categories: chemicals that speed you up, chemicals that slow you down, and chemicals that ease the pain.

- **Fast system (fight-or-flight) chemicals:** If you've been to war, you already know what these are like—the racing heartbeat, the pounding of blood in your head, the increase in physical strength, the overwhelming urge to take physical action. The most important of these chemicals is **adrenaline**. Just enough of this chemical makes you alert and decisive. Too much, and you get the adrenaline overload described in Chapter 2. You lose touch with your higher, more rational brain, and you tend to make decisions that can backfire on you. Another speed-up chemical is **dopamine**. Dopamine makes you think quickly, feel confident, and feel very good. These chemicals give you a “rush” in battle.
- **Slow system (rest-and-reset) chemicals that slow you down:** A couple of these are most important. **Cortisol** can slow down your stress system, but it can also make you anxious. Cortisol helps protect you during the first half hour of a crisis, but after that, having a lot of cortisol isn't good for your body—and it stays there a long time. Long-term stress can give you too much cortisol. **Serotonin** is another important slow-down chemical, helping you feel calm, think of solutions, cooperate with others, and resist counterproductive urges. Serotonin helps protect you from deployment stress effects.
- **Slow system chemicals that ease the pain:** The most common of these chemicals are the **endorphins**, the body's natural pain relievers. These are the same chemicals that can kick in when you've been doing heavy physical exercise for a while (sometimes they call this “runner's high”). When you're in pain, your body sends endorphins to your brain. It makes you less aware of the pain and helps you feel detached or separate from the situation. If you have enough endorphins, they can join forces with cortisol to keep the conscious memory system from recording memories of the event. But they don't keep the survival brain from recording intense fragments of unconscious emotional memory. That's how you get the unconscious memories without the conscious ones.

The Human Chemistry Set Tool on Page 46 can help you identify which chemicals your body tends to release under stress.

What do you think?

1. Do you sometimes miss the rush of battle? What do you tend to do at those times?

2. Did you ever experience an endorphin high in battle? Yes No. If so, do you ever miss it now? Yes No. What do you tend to do at those times?

Tool: The Human Chemistry Set

You can get a “picture” of the chemicals your body tends to pump out by checking any of the signs (feelings, physical sensations, etc.) you tend to get when you’re under stress or threat.

Two fast system (fight-or-flight) chemicals that speed us up

How adrenaline sometimes responds to stress and threat:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel decisive | <input type="checkbox"/> I lose my appetite |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have a burst of energy | <input type="checkbox"/> I feel impatient |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I might feel angry or scared | <input type="checkbox"/> It’s hard to put things into words |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I make some unwise decisions | <input type="checkbox"/> My head gets hot or my face turns red |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel a tightness in my chest or my throat | <input type="checkbox"/> A vein sticks out on my forehead |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The heat starts to rise in my body | <input type="checkbox"/> My jaw muscles get tense and tight |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My heart starts to beat faster | <input type="checkbox"/> My head starts hurting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My body gets stiff | <input type="checkbox"/> I hear a pounding in my ears |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My hands close up in fists | <input type="checkbox"/> I get a prickly feeling on my skin |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My shoulders and arms get tense | <input type="checkbox"/> I have a metallic taste in my mouth |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Later on, I may have strong, intense memory fragments that come at me out of nowhere | |

How dopamine sometimes responds to stress and threat:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel excited | <input type="checkbox"/> I feel energetic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel good | <input type="checkbox"/> I feel inspired |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel confident | <input type="checkbox"/> I don’t feel hungry |

Two slow system (rest-and-reset) chemicals that slow us down

How cortisol sometimes responds to stress and threat:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel cold | <input type="checkbox"/> I don’t remember things as well |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel numb or kind of “dead” inside | <input type="checkbox"/> I get sick more easily |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel tired and don’t want to move | <input type="checkbox"/> I feel really, really hungry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel tense and out of sorts | <input type="checkbox"/> I gain more weight, especially belly fat |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> I’m restless, and I have trouble sleeping |

How serotonin sometimes responds to stress and threat:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel calm | <input type="checkbox"/> My moods are even and good |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel cooperative | <input type="checkbox"/> I tend to take a leadership role |
| <input type="checkbox"/> It’s easy to think of solutions | <input type="checkbox"/> It’s easy to resist unwise impulses |

One slow system chemical that eases pain and dulls memories

How endorphins sometimes respond to stress and threat:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel comfortably numb | <input type="checkbox"/> I feel relaxed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel unreal | <input type="checkbox"/> I feel much less afraid |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel like I’m leaving my body | <input type="checkbox"/> Later on, I don’t remember events well |

4E: What happens to these chemicals when the threat is over?

This question gets to the root of many challenges you might face after you come back from the war zone—or any other place where your stress system has to kick into overdrive. Most of these challenges come down to two things: too much or too little of certain chemicals. This can knock you off balance and give you urges to do things that your body thinks will balance it out. Unfortunately, many of those things tend to knock you even farther off balance. For example:

- **Adrenaline:** Your body can get so used to pumping out a lot of adrenaline that it starts overloading over little things or nothing, keeping you from sleeping, sparking rage or panic, prompting you to do risky things, or giving you the jitters or the shakes. Or your body may have pumped so much adrenaline that your “pump” is worn out, and you can’t find any energy, excitement, or motivation to do anything. The adrenaline rush is addictive, and we need adrenaline to keep functioning. So whether you have too much or too little adrenaline, you may be drinking too much caffeine—which makes many problems worse—and you may get cravings for danger and drugs that will speed you up.

What might help you balance your adrenaline levels? _____

- **Dopamine:** In the war zone, you may have gotten used to high levels of dopamine, too, and you might miss them back in the States. Dopamine is the main pleasure chemical, something many drugs give you (and so do things like gambling, sex, smoking, eating, spending money, etc.). So you may feel a lack of pleasure and get powerful cravings for alcohol or drugs, and/or for overdoing the other activities that give you pleasure.

What might help you balance your dopamine levels? _____

- **Cortisol:** If your body has reacted by pumping too much cortisol, you may feel both tired and anxious, shut down and distant from others, and more vulnerable to depression—not feeling hopeful, not wanting to do anything (except maybe lie around, stare into space, drink caffeine, or use drugs that will pep you up). Cortisol can also weaken your immune system, so you’re more likely to catch colds and other infections.

What might help you balance your cortisol levels? _____

- **Serotonin:** People often come back from the war zone with much lower levels of serotonin. This raises the risk of anxiety and depression; makes it harder to deal with people; and makes it harder to resist cravings for cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, etc.

What might help you balance your serotonin levels? _____

- **Endorphins:** If your body reacted to the stress of war by pumping out pain-killing endorphins, you’re really going to miss those endorphins when you get home. You might have trouble feeling pleasure and tolerating pain, have cravings for alcohol or drugs, or have a higher risk of getting dependent on prescription pain killers.

What might help you balance your endorphin levels? _____

4F: How are the body and brain trying to re-balance after extreme stress?

If there's one theme that runs through all we know about the stress system, it's that back-and-forth motion: in and out of stress, speeding up and slowing down, one chemical followed by its opposite.

That's how the stress system is set up, that's how babies first learn how to handle stress, and that's how we learn to re-balance the stress system through a variety of skills—like the resilience skills described in Chapter 2. All our lives, we learn to handle stress by experiencing brief periods of threat followed by periods of rest and safety.

Believe it or not, that part of our nature may also contribute to some of the more troubling post-deployment stress effects, like flashbacks, adrenaline overload, and memories that come up out of nowhere. Many experts say these are the stress system's best efforts to get back in balance.

When are these effects most likely to surface? When you've left the war zone, when you're back in situations that are physically safe. That's when the stress system starts to react to little triggers. That's when the memories and flashbacks start to invade the present.

Just as a baby learns balance by getting stressed out in the company of a safe and soothing caregiver, your body may think you'll get back in balance if it throws you a terrifying memory when there's nothing to fear in the present moment.

Of course, your body may be a little optimistic about this. Those memories often trigger more intense stress responses that make things worse instead of better. That's one reason people with strong post-deployment stress effects should get help sooner rather than later. Conditions like PTSD and depression tend to progress and get harder to treat if you don't deal with them. And if you're not sure, it's important to get a qualified assessment.

But even if it doesn't solve the problem, this response shows that your body understands what you need, and it's trying in its primitive way to help you. **It means that post-deployment stress effects are logical. They make sense. They're not signs of being "crazy."**

For people with mild stress responses, the body's wisdom and a few resilience skills can often help get the stress system back in balance. For people whose effects are strong or have gone too long without relief, it may take any or all of these things:

- Training and practice
- Trustworthy relationships, including bonds with others who have served in the war zone
- Qualified counseling
- Medications to bring back chemical balance
- Higher senses of mission, purpose, and spiritual connection

If you've been reading this workbook to try to understand your own stress effects and balance your own stress system, it's just a start. May you learn the skills of resilience, find people and resources that are right for you, and strike a balance that fits your goals, your life, and the new person you've become.

Letter to the reader

In this workbook, I've tried to take a small piece of the post-deployment experience and look at it from many angles. If there are two things that most people with post-deployment stress effects don't know enough about, it's:

1. How capable they are of building resilience and finding other good resources that will help them balance their stress systems
2. The true, physical nature of operational stress injuries

There are many important homecoming challenges that we haven't looked at here—for example:

- People, experiences, and aspects of yourself that you've lost
- Moral or spiritual challenges connected with war-time experiences
- Ways you've changed at war
- Ways your family and friends have changed while you were gone
- Many civilians' lack of appreciation for the sacrifices you've made
- Finding and keeping a job, or getting an education
- Getting access to needed services
- Dealing with people back home who mean well but say all the wrong things

Some of the resources discussed on Pages 26-28, or listed in the "Information and Help" section (Page 50), might prove useful in some of these areas.

But if you close this workbook and remember only two things, let them be these:

1. You are not "crazy."
2. You can get back in balance.

You didn't make the ultimate sacrifice—though your presence in the theater of war says you were willing to—but the sacrifice you made was a profound one. You took upon yourself, your life, and your stress system a burden that has left you changed in ways you may not even know for a while.

Among the many challenges awaiting you at home is one central one: the challenge of doing whatever it takes to return your stress system to balance. Whatever you need to learn, whatever you need to practice, whoever you need to talk to, whatever you need to talk about, however long it takes, wherever your strength comes from, **it's worth the effort.**

This may sound like a cliché, but you really do owe it to yourself, your family, your buddies, your country—and to all who have fallen to protect what you love and serve.

Bless you, bless your generosity and courage, and thank you for your service.

Pam Woll
August, 2009

Information and Help

Note: Many of the resources in this very brief and incomplete listing are reprinted from Ray Scurfield's "War Trauma Resources," a very complete and considerate guide to web sites and other sources of help, support, and information. Ray Scurfield, DSW, LCSW is a Professor of Social Work at the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast and author of the *Vietnam Trilogy*. You can get the current version of "War Trauma Resources" by going to Ray's web site, <http://www.usm.edu/gc/health/scurfield/>, and clicking on its link at the bottom of the page.

Veterans for America has developed *The American Veterans' and Servicemembers' Survival Guide*, a comprehensive resource for veterans and Service Members seeking to understand and navigate the services available to them. You can find it at: <http://www.veteransforamerica.org/survival-guide/>

After Deployment (lots of interactive web self-help tools)
<http://www.afterdeployment.org>

America Supports You 9Lists non-profit groups devoted to helping service men and women)
(<http://www.americasupportsyou.mil/AmericaSupportsYou/index.aspx>)

American Veterans With Brain Injuries
<http://www.avbi.org/>

American Veterans and Servicemembers Survival Guide. How to Cut Through the Bureaucracy and Get What You Need – And Are Entitled to. (Veterans for America, 2007)
www.veteransforamerica.org

ArtReach Foundation (art therapy for children)
info@artreachfoundation.org

Battlemind Training web site
www.battlemind.org

Books for Military Children
(<http://www.military.com/opinion/0,15202,121091,00.html>)

Brain Injury Association of USA
(www.biausa.org)

Books for Soldiers
www.booksforsoldiers.com

Cell Phones for Soldiers
www.cellphonesforsoldiers.com)

Community of Veterans (online Community for OIF/OEF Veterans)
<http://communityofveterans.org/>

The Coming Home Project
<http://www.cominghomeproject.net/cominghome/>

Deployed Military Family Support
(<http://www.dtra.mil/be/deployed/index.cfm>)

Employer Support of the Guard & Reserve
www.esgr.org

Fallen Patriot Fund
www.fallenpatriotfund.org

Family Caregivers
www.familycaregiving101.org/index.cfm

Fisher House
www.fisherhouse.org

4MilitaryFamilies.com
<http://www.4militaryfamilies.com/about.htm>

Give an Hour (network offering free mental health services to veterans)
<http://www.giveanhour.org>

GI Bill information
www.mygibill.org

Hand 2 Hand Contact (a number of great resources for veterans, families, etc.)
hand2handcontact.org

Healing Combat Trauma
<http://www.healingcombattrauma.com/>

Hooah4Health
www.hooah4health.com

Marine Corps Key Volunteer Networks
www.usmc.mccs.org

Military Home Front (Department of Defense)
<http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil/>

Military Mental Health
www.militarymentalhealth.org

Military OneSource (lots of materials, services, referrals)
<http://www.militaryonesource.com>

Military Wives Network
www.MilitaryWives.com

Military Writers Society of America
www.militarywriters.com

MyVetWork
www.myvetwork.com

National Center for PTSD (Veterans Administration)
<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/veterans/>

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV)
<http://www.nchv.org/about.cfm>

National Military Family Association
www.nmfa.org

One Freedom (training and resources for veterans)
www.onefreedom.org

Operation Vets
<http://www.operationvets.com/>

Our Military Kids
<http://www.ourmilitarykids.org/>

Patriot Outreach
www.patriotoutreach.org

PTSD Anonymous (12-step approach)
www.ptsdanonymous.org

Real Warriors (lots of resilience information/resources for Service Members and veterans)
<http://www.realwarriors.net/>

Red Cross
www.redcross.org

Resources for Military Children Affected by Deployment
<http://www.armymwr.com/cys-images/Deployment%20A%20Compendium%20of%20Resources.pdf>

Resources for U.S. Troops and veterans, their families, and those who provide services to them
<http://kspope.com/torvic/war.php>

Semper Fi Fund
www.semperfund.org

STOMP Specialized Training of Military Parents
<http://www.stompproject.org/>

Student Veterans of America
<http://www.studentveterans.org/>

VA Suicide Prevention Hotline.
Toll-free number, 1-800-273-8255

VA Veteran Recovery
www.veteranrecovery.med.va.gov

Vet Centers (community based, informal, run by the VA)
<http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/>

Veterans for America
www.veteransforamerica.org

Veterans Legal Assistance
www.nvlsp.org

Vets4Vets (support and training for vets, by vets)
<http://www.vets4vets.us/>

Wounded Warrior Project
<https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/>