UNDERSTANDING SOLDIER AND FAMILY REACTIONS TO INJURY AND AND TIPS ON COPING WITH SEVERE INJURY

A Soldier getting injured or seriously ill during a military operation is a traumatic event. Part of the “trauma” is the unexpectedness. This is a time of big change. Initially, this may seem like a lot to deal with and may be frightening to all concerned. There are likely to be many questions, worries and concerns. Everyone (including the injured Soldier) in the family will be experiencing a wide range of emotions. Some of these feelings may be related to the injury, others to the impact of this traumatic event. These feelings and concerns are likely to change over time as the Soldier and family goes through recovery, rehabilitation, and transition to a redefined family life. All of this is a normal reaction and process.

Soldier and Family Members Reactions

- Shock (over the news and degree of injury)
- Relief (that the Soldier is alive)
- Denial
- Numbness
- Grief [over loss of future (i.e., what could have been), loss of control]
- Sadness
- Depression
- Anxiety (about caretaking responsibilities, changes in relationships, expenses, Soldier’s reactions to family’s new role)
- Fear (about whether the situation will become permanent, which is a common feeling at first, fear of abandonment)
- Anger (about this unexpected situation and cause of injury, new family roles; a spouse may be bitter about having to get a job; for the Soldier, anger about his/her injury)
- Frustration (including frustration over the length of the recovery process)
- Embarrassment or shame
- Resentment over change in lifestyle and loss of independence
- Isolation and feeling alone
- Guilt (for feeling any of these feelings, over something said or done)
- Worry (about health complications, changes in family relationships, finances)
- Stress (with caregiving, with handling caregiving along with other responsibilities, loss of free time).
Tips for Coping With Severe Injury or Disability

For Soldier and Family

- Maintain a positive attitude. Do not give up hope.
- Be aware that learning new functional skills (e.g., walking) can require more mental strength than physical.
- Be patient, there is much to learn how to do and/or manage.
- You are not alone. Seek out others and find resources. Connect with other injured Soldiers or veterans.
- Encourage the medical/VA team to address mental health issues as part of the recovery process.
- Try to establish good relationships with medical/clinical providers.
- Talk about the stress experiencing, especially when a Soldier is showing signs of posttraumatic stress.
- Allow the Soldier to grieve his/her losses.
- Get educated.

For the Family

- Remember that the Soldier’s behavior is not intended as personal attacks. Be prepared as the family to be the brunt of the Soldier’s emotions. Recognize that this may be part of the injury.
- Allow the Soldier to find effective healthy ways to deal with frustration and other emotions.
- Acknowledge Soldier’s feelings and listen. Also encourage two-way sharing of feelings.
- Offer support and reassurance on an ongoing basis.
- Allow the injured Soldier to try before rushing to help. Encourage the disabled Soldier to do as much as possible.
- Treat the injured/disabled Soldier like a regular person.
- Let the disabled Soldier contribute to the family.
- Some mental health problems can appear later. Get professional help if this occurs or if there are concerns about the Soldier’s emotional well-being. This is particularly important once the Soldier returns home.
- Take care of yourself. This is very important given the stresses of this situation and for you to be able to support your loved one.
Where To Go For Counseling And Support

- **Department of Veteran Affairs’ Veterans Readjustment Counseling Center** – offers counseling and referrals to programs in family's local area

- **U.S. Army’s Wounded Warrior Program (AW2) [www.aw2.army.mil]** – provides support services to severely wounded and ill Soldiers and their families that continue for a minimum of five years after medical retirement

- **Military One Source (MOS) [www.militaryonesource.com]** – A 1-800 telephone number and web site where Soldier and family can self-refer for confidential counseling at any time

- **Military Severely Injured Center** – offers personal, couple and family issues counseling

- **Military chaplain or local clergy**

- **Army Social Work Service**

- **Amputee Coalition of America [www.amputee-coalition.org]** – conducts a peer support program as well as offers a publication entitled *A guide to Adapting to Limb Loss*, one of the chapters of this publication addresses psycho-social issues (for more information, visit the web at [www.amputee-coalition.org](http://www.amputee-coalition.org) or call 1-888-267-5669)

- **Walter Reed Army Medical Center’s Peer Amputee Visitor program** – peer amputee visitors support new amputees and their families by providing information and serving as role models (For more information, contact the Amputee Coalition of America at [www.amputee-coalition.org](http://www.amputee-coalition.org) or call 1-888-267-5669)

**Note:** Many veterans and disability organizations provide peer support groups or opportunity to talk to others who have experienced similar situation. For a list of other Veteran Service Organizations, visit the VA’s Webpage at [www1.va.gov/vso/](http://www1.va.gov/vso/).

Source: This information is a compilation and adaptation of information provided in documents, such as National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder & Walter Reed Army Medical Center’s *Iraq War Clinician Guide*. Additionally, information was obtained from the web sites of the Military One Source, National Spinal Cord Injury Association, National Amputation Foundation, and Family Caregiving Alliance.