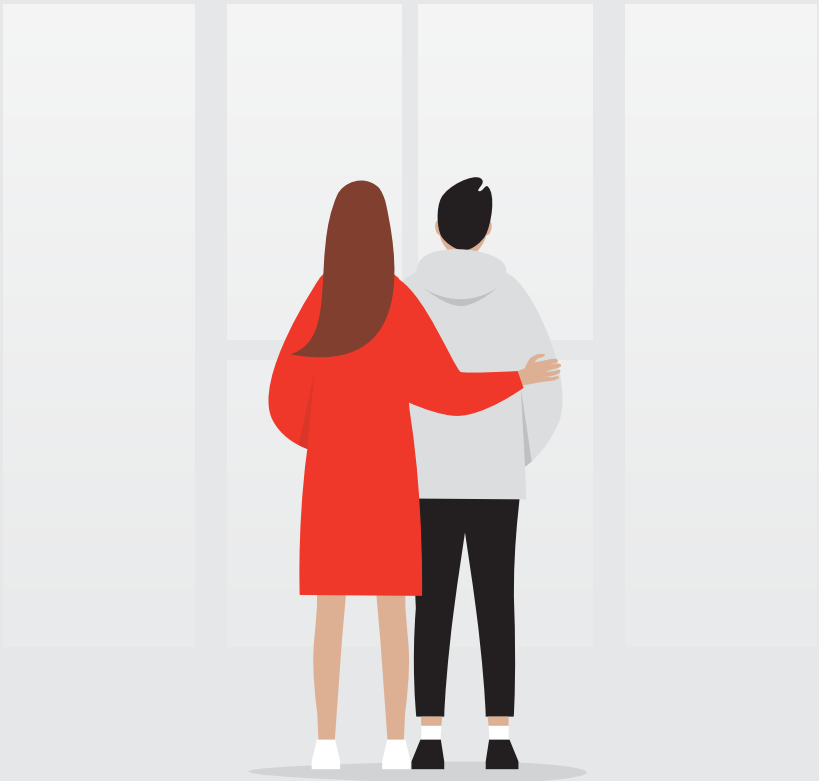




Mental & Emotional Health Support

For Veteran & Military Family Caregivers

A collaboration between AARP and the Elizabeth Dole Foundation



Elizabeth Dole Foundation

CARING FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

Five Ways Veteran & Military Family Caregivers Can Practice Self-Care

As more than two decades of war come to an end, United States military service members and veterans may be experiencing a range of emotions, including reliving past trauma related to their service. As you support them, your self-care may move to the bottom of the list. The emotional, financial, and physical stress can build up, leading to feelings of negativity, apathy, hopelessness, and complete exhaustion — a path to caregiver burnout.

AARP and the Elizabeth Dole Foundation have come together to share a variety of resources to support the 5.5 million military and veteran caregivers across America during this critical time, including a toll-free family caregiving and referral line, mental health resources, and community support. You do not need to go through this alone.

We all know that we need to take care of ourselves so we can care for others, but it's often very difficult to find the time, energy, and ways to do so. These five tips can help you practice self-care.

1 Acknowledge & Accept Your Feelings

- Remember that feelings of hopelessness and guilt, or feeling overwhelmed, are valid, normal reactions to stressful events.
- Heightened anxiety and ambiguity may be part of your daily life as a military or veteran caregiver. Acknowledge the “not knowing” and hold on to what you do know.
- Talk about your feelings with a friend, family member, in a virtual or in-person support group, or with a therapist/counselor. Being open about your feelings can help you process them and may even help others who are facing similar challenges.

2 Take Care of Your health

- Sleep, exercise, and eating well can help you manage stress and stay healthy. Make sure to stay on top of your own doctor’s appointments and advocate for your health just as you would for loved ones.
- Do the things you like to do. It’s important to recharge and have activities to look forward to, like family movie night or spending time with friends.

3 Set Boundaries for Yourself

- Be realistic about how much you can do. Talk with your loved ones when you need a break and plan for their support during those times.
- Log off social media and take a break from the news. You need updated information regularly, but you don't need to immerse yourself in it 24/7.

4 Pay Attention to Behavioral Changes in Yourself

- Take notice of changes in your eating, sleeping, exercising, socializing, personal care, or work habits. Watch for changes in your alcohol, drug, or medication use, and note changes in how you relate to others.
- Recognize the warning signs of suicidal ideation, including feeling hopeless or purposeless. Don't minimize disturbing feelings; take them seriously.
- People within the same household may respond differently to the same stress. Everyone will go at their own pace and that's OK.

5 Know that You are Never Without Support

- Seek help. Speak with your doctor and/or a mental health care practitioner.
- Connect with friends, family, and support groups. Isolation is a common challenge of caregiving, and it can be detrimental to both your physical and mental health.
- Find online support. The **AARP Family Caregivers Discussion Group on Facebook** and the Elizabeth Dole Foundation's **Hidden Heroes Caregiver Community** are two forums where civilian and military caregivers can vent, support one another, and share advice, best practices, and inspiration.
- Download **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' mobile apps** for tools to deal with common reactions like stress, sadness, and anxiety.

Warning Signs of a Mental Health Crisis

A recent study by researchers at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio found that 1 in 4 military caregivers have had suicidal thoughts.

If you are worried a veteran or family caregiver you know is struggling or at risk for suicide, these are a few warning signs:

- Increasing social isolation
- Not asking for help and/or total social withdrawal
- Neglecting hygiene, not changing clothes
- Being unreachable by phone or to talk at regular intervals
- Personality changes, going from chatty and bubbly to not talking much — even about the loved one's progress

GET HELP IN A CRISIS

- Call the Veterans Crisis Line at **1-800-273-8255** and **press 1**, or text **838255**.
- Chat with a trained responder on the **Veterans Crisis Line website**. All communication is confidential, private, and free. You can decide how much you want to share.

Resources & Support

- The **AARP Mental Health Center** provides advice and guidance to veterans, caregivers, and others seeking help.
- **AARP Family Caregiving** brings resources together into one place for family caregivers. The dedicated, toll-free Family Caregiving line is available Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. ET at **1-877-333-5885** or in Spanish **1-888-971-2013**.
- Visit the Elizabeth Dole Foundation's **Veterans & Military Caregivers Respite Relief Program**. The program, which is supported by AARP, VA, Wounded Warrior Project, and CareLinx, provides free, trained caregivers to assist so you can focus on supporting yourself and your veteran.
- Read the **AARP and Elizabeth Dole Foundation's Military Caregiving Guide**.
- More AARP resources for veterans and military families are available at **aarp.org/veterans**.



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