



LEAN ON US:

Advice for Talking with Your Veteran and Your Family About Afghanistan

Like so many of you, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and Sesame Workshop are deeply saddened by the recent developments and their impact on the people of Afghanistan along with our military community. We realize that this can be a particularly challenging time, both physically and mentally, for our veterans and their families, caregivers children, and survivors.

If you are a loved one caring for a service member or veteran, we know it can be difficult to know what to say in these situations. Below we have outlined some general guidance around how you can effectively communicate with your family during this time, with an emphasis on encouraging statements of support.

Remember, the more you can take care of yourself, the more you take care of your veteran and children. You're a military family, you've been through challenges before and come through. You can do this.



As always, if your veteran or a loved one is in crisis, please contact the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 (Press 1). You can also contact them by text at 838255.

For emergency mental health care, you can also go directly to your local [VA medical center 24/7](#) regardless of your discharge status or enrollment in other VA health care.

For non-crisis, emotional support, you may contact [Vets4Warriors](#) at 1-855-838-8255 or your local [National Alliance for Mental Illness \(NAMI\) warmline](#), which offers callers emotional support and is staffed by volunteers who are in recovery themselves.

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TALKING TO YOUR VETERAN

Reassure your Veteran that their service **MATTERED**.

- Watching the news and seeing these images can be shocking and difficult to understand. Remind your veteran that their service was important and vital in meeting the mission at that time. This withdrawal doesn't change that.

Create a sense of safety.

- Provide your Veteran with your full attention and be patient to allow them to talk through their thoughts and feelings at their own pace.
- Be mindful of the amount of time your Veteran is watching the news or on social media.
 - *Suggest that your veteran to take a break from watching or reading the news and social media throughout the day or at times when it is particularly triggering or upsetting.*
 - *Encourage your veteran to mute or unfollow accounts that are hostile or are negatively impacting their mood and wellbeing.*
- As a family you can care for one another by doing things that make you feel calmer and more connected: cooking together, taking a walk in nature, playing a board game, snuggling under blankets, or watching a favorite movie. Ground yourselves in the reality of "right now." Suggest activities to your veteran that promote happiness and wellbeing.
- Listen and bear witness to your veteran's experience without expressing whether you think it is right or wrong.

Validate your veteran's thoughts and feelings - acknowledge and respond with supportive statements such as:

- "I appreciate you sharing openly with me."
- "This is really difficult news, I'm here if you want to talk or just have someone nearby."
- "What you're thinking and feeling is normal."
- "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it right now."
- "Help me to better understand."
- "It sounds like what you're saying is that you're feeling [angry, sad, frustrated, etc.]...does that sound right?"
- "How can I best support you right now?"

Remember you don't need to offer advice or problem-solve or make the feelings go away.

- Your Veteran may be feeling a multitude of emotions, and that can be confusing. Grief can be overwhelming and often shows up in many ways.
- Feeling distress is a normal reaction to negative events, especially ones that feel personal.
- Offer reminders of coping strategies that have helped them through tough times in the past but allow them to choose whether to utilize that strategy or not.

Common reactions you might be seeing in your loved one:

- Feeling frustrated, sad, helpless, grief or distressed
- Feeling angry or betrayed
- Experiencing an increase in mental health symptoms like symptoms of PTSD or depression
- Sleeping poorly, drinking more or using more drugs
- Trying to avoid all reminders of their service, or shying away from social situations
- Having more military and homecoming memories



Additional information and resources for your loved one can be found [here](#).

TALKING TO CHILDREN/ADOLESCENTS

For veteran families with children, consider that children and adolescents are also experiencing a variety of feelings and may have many questions.

Check in with your child and/or teen and ask them how they are feeling

- Ask the child what they have heard and what questions they may have.
- Look for signs that the news may have triggered fears or anxieties.
- Take a look at this resource: [Terrorism and War: How to Talk to Children](#) from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Military Families Resource Center.

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Let your child know that he or she can always talk to you and ask any questions.

- Talk to your child about how your Veteran is reacting to the news and answer their questions.
- Let children know that all of their feelings are okay and there are safe ways to express them. Check out how Rosita from Sesame Street expresses her anger [here](#).
- You may need to help your younger children express their feelings or form questions. For additional tips on how to help your child express their feelings check out Sesame Street's [Self-Expression resources](#).

As much as possible, try to keep children away from news media. If your older child/adolescent wants to watch the news, make sure to watch it with your child.

Make sure you have adequate time and a quiet place to talk if you anticipate that the news is going to be troubling or upsetting to your child or adolescent.

If things are tense at home and your child is back in school, consider letting their teacher or school counselor know that they are going through a tough time so they can be aware.

RESOURCES FOR YOU

Lean on us & our peer support community:

- Give and receive emotional support to other caregivers through peer-lead social interaction in a private, safe, and welcoming virtual space. Join our Hidden Heroes Caregiver Community today by registering [here](#). Staff specialists are offering timely support and interventions around these recent events and stand ready to support you.

Give yourself permission to recharge:

- During this challenging time, the last thing you need to worry about is your to-do list of chores at home. Through our free Respite Relief program, you can step back, get out of the house - away from the news and heartbreaking images, and take time to regroup. We are providing FREE trained caregivers to assist you with housekeeping, meal prep, grocery shopping, and more, so you can focus on supporting yourself and your veteran. Apply for free help in less than 10 minutes [here](#).

Let us know how we can help:

- Trust and know that we are here for you. If there is a service that the Foundation or any other organization is not currently offering that you need, please contact us at info@elizabethdolefoundation.org. We will be tracking needs and responding as quickly as we can.