



**Elizabeth Dole Foundation**  
CARING FOR MILITARY FAMILIES



# Military & Veteran Caregiver Mental Wellness Framework

## **Created by Caregivers, for Caregivers**

A mental wellness framework built for you, the caregiver, and those who support you. This first-of-its-kind resource provides a foundation for recognizing the importance of your mental wellness, and ways to support (nourish) your mental wellness journey. It has been created by caregivers who share your experiences and recognize the importance of reflection, connection, and resources.

## **When we take care of ourselves, we are stronger to take care of others.**

This tool is designed to be a force multiplier and includes tips and resources. With a special focus on mental wellness, this framework can enable you to be the best possible support to those who rely on you.

POWERED BY



# How to use the Caregiver Mental Wellness Framework:

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This framework can help you identify the potential impacts of military and veteran caregiving on your mental wellness, as well as offer examples of coping skills to help manage the times of imbalance. Use this as a reference you can continually come back to when looking for ways to nurture and protect your mental well-being—a precious resource that is yours alone. Some examples of how you might use this tool:

- **Validation:** Recognize that you are not alone. While caregiving can feel very isolating at times, there is comfort in knowing that other caregivers have experienced, and are experiencing, similar challenges.
- **Identification and acceptance:** The first step in seeking help or making any type of change is naming and identifying the challenges and/or emotions that you are experiencing. It helps to have a common vocabulary for the articulation and comprehension of often complex or difficult subjects.
- **Caregiver-vetted strategies:** Learn from the ways other caregivers have had success coping with the unique challenges of military and veteran caregiving.
- **Discussion-starter:** Beyond self-reflection and introspection, the themes can be a helpful provocation or framework for discussion with peers, family members, friends, mentors, coaches, counselors, or other sources of support.
- **Empathy and awareness:** For non-caregivers, this framework also offers a small glimpse into the caregiver's perspective in order to help others better empathize and understand how best to help.

The six themes in the framework represent discrete dimensions of mental wellness that can help us all better understand and address the unique challenges and needs military and veteran caregivers face. While there is inarguably overlap between them, each theme offers a unique perspective for you to learn what works for you, wherever you are in your caregiving or mental wellness journey.

**NOTE:** This framework does not constitute mental health advice, counseling, or therapy and is not a substitute for professional mental health advice, diagnosis, and/or treatment.

**For military and veteran caregiver-recommended mental wellness resources and information:**



Scan this QR code with your smartphone camera, or go to our website at :

[hiddenheroes.org/caregivermentalwellness](https://hiddenheroes.org/caregivermentalwellness)

# “Take care of your mental health, in good times and bad.”

—Dole Caregiver Fellow

Our mental well-being is fundamental to everything with think, feel, and do in daily life. Mental wellness is an active process and internal experience that encompasses our cognition, emotions, social connections, and psychological function.<sup>1</sup> The stress of taking on the responsibility to care for a wounded, ill, or injured veteran can have a significant impact on your mental wellness. There may be an imbalance between the internal energy and resources needed to care for your veteran, and even other family members, while still taking good care of yourself. While your mental wellness can be thrown off balance in the face of the challenges and hardship associated with caregiving, it can help to think of your mental wellness as a dynamic resource that is resilient and can be replenished.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Global Wellness Institute definition of “mental wellness.”



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# Military & Veteran Caregiver Mental Wellness Framework

Created by Caregivers, for Caregivers

Identifying military and veteran  
**Caregiver-Specific Resources**  
that are effective

**Caregiver-Specific Resources**

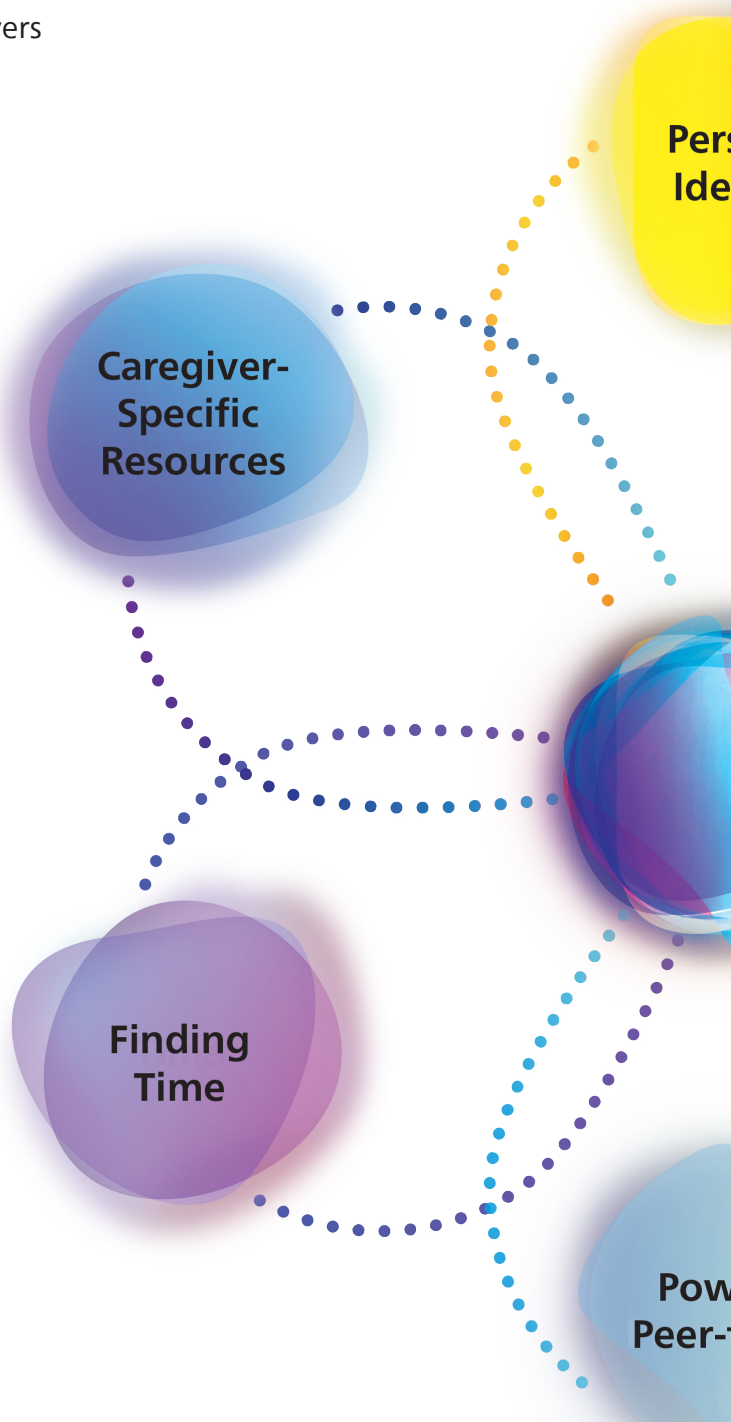
Seeking balance by **Finding Time** (including for yourself)

**Finding Time**

Recognizing the unique **Power of Peer-to-Peer** military and veteran caregiver connections

**Power of Peer-to-Peer**

**Personalized Ideas**



Understanding why **Personal Identity** is important for military and veteran caregivers

**Personal Identity**

**Compounding Stress**

Managing and relieving the **Compounding Stress** of military and veteran caregiving

**Big Emotions**

Experiencing and embracing the full spectrum of **Big Emotions**

**Power of Peer-to-Peer**

# For more information on the Military and Veteran Caregiver Experience Map:

This framework provides a new way to unpack the many complexities and nuances of the military and veteran caregiving experience, uniquely from caregivers' perspective on their mental wellness needs while in a caregiving role. This new layer of mental wellness builds upon the caregiver journey depicted in EDF's original Military and Veteran Caregiver Experience Map.



Scan this QR code with your smartphone camera, or go to our website at :

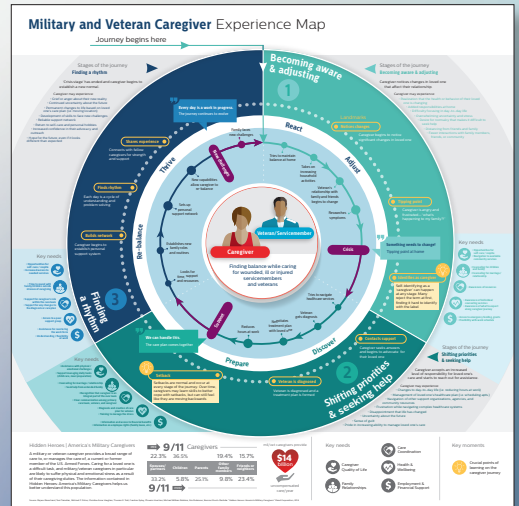
[caregiverjourney.elizabethdolefoundation.org/](http://caregiverjourney.elizabethdolefoundation.org/)

# For caregiver-recommended mental wellness resources and information, visit:



Scan this QR code with your smartphone camera, or go to our website at :

[hiddenheroes.org/caregivermentalwellness](http://hiddenheroes.org/caregivermentalwellness)



## Experiencing a mental health crisis?

Find 24/7 free, confidential, crisis support for you, your veteran, or your loved ones at:

### Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Dial 988

Text 988

Chat online at

[988lifeline.org/chat](http://988lifeline.org/chat)

### Veterans Crisis Line (for veterans & their loved ones):

Dial 988, then press 1

Text 838255

Chat Online at

<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help-now/chat/>

\*you do not need to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to access the Veterans Crisis Line



# Personal Identity

**“One challenge is balance, and having a life beyond caregiving.”**

— Multigenerational caregiver

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Understanding why **Personal Identity** is important for military and veteran caregivers

Finding space to nurture and develop **the parts of your identity that make you feel like you** provides a strong foundation to maintain your sense of direction and balance. The many daily responsibilities of caring for your loved one can often leave little room for the pursuit of personal goals or channels for self-expression. Even if you feel like you do not have enough time, there are many different ways to reconnect with activities you enjoy and make them a part of your life.

## This may feel like...

- Not initially realizing you are acting as someone’s caregiver
- Your identity is evolving with the changing relationship(s) to your veteran/service member and/or others
- Disconnection from your pre-caregiving “self”
- A lack of time to pursue your own interests
- Guilt around taking time for the non-caregiver parts of yourself
- Worrying about the impact of caregiving on other family members, especially children
- Balancing school or a career with caregiving, or needing to step away from school or work altogether (temporarily or indefinitely)

## Ways to cope and care for yourself:

- Reflect on your values, goals, and interests and how they can keep you connected to your pre-caregiver self and also fit within your caregiving journey
- Ground yourself in your personal values
- Have kindness and patience with yourself through the highs and lows of caregiving
- Prioritize time for your own interests and hobbies
- Seek fulfillment out of connecting both with fellow caregiver peers and non-caregiver friends, as each can nurture and support different parts of your identity and self
- Explore supportive work/career or school options that provide flexibility for caregivers

## Ways to care for the military and veteran caregiver in your family or community:

- Recognize that not all caregivers may identify as caregivers
- Invite conversation about what life was like before caregiving
- Participate in or suggest an activity that helps the caregiver feel connected to their interests
- Acknowledge the many areas of life that work/career or school can fulfill, and the gaps left when those elements are given up
- Support value exploration and goal setting
- Facilitate introductions and connections with different groups, both in person and virtually

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# Compounding Stress

“Finding space to decompress, shut down, lose it a little... small eruptions can help avoid ‘Pompeii.’”

— Caregiver to spouse

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Managing and relieving the **Compounding Stress** of military and veteran caregiving

The journey of caring for a loved one can be a bumpy ride. It comes with daily wins (both big and small) and can also add **another layer of unique stressors on top of the typical stress of daily life**. Noticing and attending to the symptoms of stress in our bodies and minds can help us develop tools to better manage them. While nobody can remove all stress from their life, there are many strategies to try in order to help yourself feel better as a caregiver.

## This may feel like...

- A sudden, rapid change in responsibility when navigating your new caregiving role
- Keeping track of a multitude of tasks and information for yourself and others (contacts, appointments, medications, finances, etc.)
- Fielding frequent changes to plans or unexpected events
- Investing countless hours into navigating all the complexities associated with seeking veteran care
- Carrying the burden of needing to “do it all”
- Putting additional pressure on yourself to be a positive presence and maintain emotional stability for your family
- Not being able to have a “bad day”
- Caring for multiple people in your life at the same time, including your veteran, children, aging parents, or others
- Reaching a breaking point without realizing (or accepting) how much stress has been affecting you

## Ways to cope and care for yourself:

- Take things one step (or day) at a time
- Allow yourself to say “no” without needing to qualify it
- Find what helps you to feel organized, including apps, to-do lists, automatic reminders, and setting routines
- Give yourself grace, and know it’s OK to not feel strong or on top of everything all the time
- Find the go-to coping strategies for stress that work best for you, so you have them to turn to in more challenging times
- Use healthy outlets for stress relief to decompress regularly
- Pay attention to the physical signs of stress in your body, to learn when to slow down or seek help
- Know you don’t have to do it all alone; lean on others for help and re-sourcement

## Ways to care for the military and veteran caregiver in your family or community:

- Understand that caregivers are experiencing all the same stressors as their non-caregiver peers, and so much more
- Rather than asking how you can help, offer to take something off the caregiver’s plate (for example, bring food, mow the yard, sit with their veteran)
- Assist the caregiver in planning ahead for emergencies, considering children, pets, home, etc.
- Help a caregiver recognize the signs of burnout that they may not see yet in themselves

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# Big Emotions

**“I wish I had known caregiving was both a grieving process and a celebration process.”**

— Caregiver to adult child

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## Experiencing and embracing the full spectrum of **Big Emotions**

Caregiving is emotional. It is a simple yet powerful act to acknowledge this truth, and to **offer yourself compassion as you experience many different feelings throughout your journey**. Some days may be filled with gratitude, perspective or a sense of accomplishment and creativity; others may bring more challenging feelings. We are built to experience the full range of emotions. While that may not always feel comfortable, it is helpful to keep in mind that all emotions are useful and equally valuable.

### **This may feel like...**

- Experiencing many powerful, complex, and sometimes seemingly conflicting emotions at the same time, including happiness, sadness, pride, anger, frustration, and many more
- Having intense or, at times, overwhelming, feelings without quite being able to put your finger on exactly what they are or why you feel a certain way
- Grieving your life prior to caregiving, your relationship with your veteran, and/or the future you imagined before their injury
- Finding it challenging to stay positive or feel hopeful at times
- Feeling guilty about taking time or doing something for yourself
- Feeling ashamed around making hard decisions that at times may contradict our sense of obligation or duty

### **Ways to cope and care for yourself:**

- Note that you are not your emotions
- Emotions are temporary, and all emotions are valid; there are no bad emotions
- Acknowledge that everyone processes, experiences, and shows emotions differently
- Explore tools that can help you process your emotions, whether it's talking to someone, journaling, meditating, or just unplugging
- Celebrate the small wins and periods of stability
- Talk to a counselor or other mental health professional if you are overwhelmed by difficult emotions or having a hard time managing/coping
- Tap into spirituality and faith-based communities for internal and external strength and support

### **Ways to care for the military and veteran caregiver in your family or community:**

- Remind caregivers that humans can experience multiple emotions at the same time
- Support the caregiver in identifying and naming their experience
- Be careful not to rush to give advice or problem solve
- Listen and hold space
- Reflect what the caregiver is sharing with you
- Validate the caregiver's grief
- Recognize the caregiver as the expert on their emotions and situation

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# Power of Peer-to-Peer

**“One thing that helps me feel better is my dear caregiver friends, who understand my life.”**

— Caregiver to parent

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Recognizing the unique **Power of Peer-to-Peer** military and veteran caregiver connections

Connecting with other military and veteran caregivers can provide you with a sense of community, support, and inclusion. At times, the caregiving journey can be isolating and caregivers may experience disconnections over time from their non-caregiving family, friends, colleagues, and community. In these moments, **it can be reassuring and validating to connect with someone who “just gets it.”**

## **This may feel like...**

- A growing distance and disconnect from non-caregiving friends or family members
- Turning down invitations for events with family and friends due to caregiving duties
- Seeking validation and confirmation that you're not alone in your caregiving journey
- Learning that other caregivers can provide a wealth of knowledge and recommendations
- Realizing you may need to utilize online communities to find and connect with other caregivers, near and far
- Connecting with fellow caregivers in a mutually supportive way, while being mindful of your own capacity

## **Ways to cope and care for yourself:**

- Join a peer support group for regular interaction and connection
- Plan activities that allow you to connect with fellow caregivers, either in-person or virtually, such as book clubs, walking together, fitness classes, or fundraisers/volunteering
- Look into the resources other caregivers have found helpful
- Lean into, and embrace, the experience and expertise of caregiver peers who have been in your shoes
- Remember that online communities can be draining or negative at times, so set boundaries for yourself in how you engage
- Connect with other caregivers to create the opportunity for someone to reach out and check on *you*

## **Ways to care for the military and veteran caregiver in your family or community:**

- Be proactive: reach out to check in on the caregiver rather than waiting for the caregiver to come to you
- Show interest by asking the caregiver what their journey is like
- Educate yourself on available resources (if you are a clinician or in a support role that works with caregivers)
- Share peer communities they might not be aware of
- Offer to facilitate introductions to other caregivers in the community or in your network

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# Finding Time

**“It’s important to remember, it is ok to leave dirty dishes in the sink.”**

— Multigenerational caregiver

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Seeking balance by **Finding Time** (including for yourself)

It can feel like there is never enough time in a caregiver’s day. In addition to caring for your veteran, you likely have many other responsibilities and commitments to attend to, including managing your household, parenting, school, work, or volunteering. In order to maintain this level of care and commitment to those around you, caregivers can optimize their time and find ways to intentionally nourish and resource themselves more regularly. It’s important to find a **balance between caring for others and caring for yourself**.

## This may feel like...

- Having a never-ending to-do list, and feeling like you have to “do it all”
- Pressure to be productive all the time, as if “wasted time is a crime”
- Finding your plans are constantly in flux, depending on the needs of others
- Not having enough time for meeting your own basic needs, such as eating full meals or drinking water
- Realizing over time that caregiving is more like a marathon than a sprint, requiring self-pacing and refueling to sustain yourself over the long-term
- Deliberately scheduling or assigning time for yourself: building in even small amounts of time each day or a couple times a week to sustain yourself

## Ways to cope and care for yourself:

- Set reasonable expectations for yourself and others; you do not have to be perfect
- Delegate tasks when you are able, instead of feeling like you need to do it all yourself
- Give yourself permission to take breaks, or even to intentionally “do nothing”
- Anticipate and expect obstacles, while remembering “what you can’t accomplish today can always be done tomorrow”
- Build self-care into everyday responsibilities, such as listening to your favorite music while walking the dog, or taking an extra five minutes in the shower
- Keep a list of self-care activities you can use when plans change and you don’t want to “waste” time
- Remind yourself that your veteran has autonomy

## Ways to care for the military and veteran caregiver in your family or community:

- Empathize, don’t compare
- Validate their situation, and how their reality impacts their time
- Help with concrete plans and prioritizing
- Don’t ask how you can help; just help
- Help caregivers come up with accessible and practical ways to care for themselves
- Brainstorm ways to integrate small moments of self-care into daily life
- Challenge caregivers to do one thing (over the week, month, etc.) to care for themselves
- Help caregivers write themselves a “permission slip” to do (or not do) something

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# Caregiver-Specific Resources

“If I had a magic wand...  
I would make it easy to  
get mental health care.”

—Caregiver spouse

Identifying military and veteran **Caregiver-Specific Resources** that are effective

As a military and veteran caregiver, you have access to many mental health and mental wellness-related resources. While all this information can be empowering, it is often overwhelming to navigate. **Identifying trusted resources and reliable tools for mental wellness** such as providers who are trained in military and veteran culture can help caregivers cut through information overload, and quickly find the right resources at the right time.

## This may feel like...

- Reluctance to ask for help or search for mental health and wellness services for yourself
- Seeking care and support that is unique to your needs and may be different from that of other caregivers; support for mental health and wellness does not always mean therapy for all caregivers
- Navigating financial challenges or barriers to accessing care for yourself
- The resurfacing of emotions from life before caregiving brought about by current caregiving
- Connecting with organization(s) that can provide case management and help you navigate personalized referrals
- Caring for yourself by ensuring you eat full meals, drink enough water, get enough sleep, and engage in physical activity

## Ways to cope and care for yourself:

- Establish, communicate, and stick to your own boundaries
- Reach out to resources fellow caregivers have tried and recommended
- Take a mental health screening if you're not sure if you need clinical support
- Look for therapists who specialize in what you're dealing with
- Reach out to a warmline to connect with a trained peer who can offer emotional support, a listening ear, and resources
- Seek out and lean on peer support
- Sign up for VA's Caregiver Support Program
- Utilize respite care for short-term relief with daily activities
- Join a local or virtual community group with other caregivers, such as EDF's Hidden Heroes Caregiver Community (HHCC)

## Ways to care for the military and veteran caregiver in your family or community:

- Be proactive: reach out to check-in on the caregiver rather than waiting for the caregiver to come to you
- Help set caregivers up for success with realistic, achievable goals
- Focus on simple ways to help, starting with things like food, support, and listening
- Research resources prior to referring to ensure eligibility and availability of services
- Provide a warm hand-off to further resources by connecting the caregiver to a specific person, rather than a website or general phone number
- Focus on simple and practical ways to help (listening, household help, family support)
- Understand and remove any barriers to getting care, including transportation, financial, and technology limitations
- Keep an open mind: resist jumping to conclusions or making assumptions

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