

Finding Balance

Understanding the Effects of Stress
On Service Members, Veterans
and Families

Former title: Resilience 101



Guide for Military Families

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A Tool to Start Off With: Grounding

**Adapted from a workshop by Dr. Laurie Leitch and Elaine Miller-Karas, LCSW
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Grounding is one way of making sure you're in the "here and now," so you can keep troubling thoughts, feelings, memories, anxiety, etc. from taking over your head. It's a good skill to learn, practice, and get used to doing, because it can give you more overall control over your stress system. You can practice grounding when you're alone and doing nothing else, and then use the same skills and techniques later when you're in tense situations. No one will notice, except you might get more 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 keep your eyes open and rest them someplace neutral, if you like.
2. Notice the support that the back of the chair (or the wall, or whatever) is giving your back. Keep feeling that support, and notice any physical sensations it gives you.
3. Notice your feet, connecting with the ground. Notice any sensations about that.
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.
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. 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 calm place for a while, feeling it in your body. Remember it, 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 the chair (or the wall, tree, etc.), all the way down to your feet connected to the ground.
9. When you're ready, turn your attention to the room or the scene around you. Notice the people (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?

The more you practice this, the more you can use it when you're under heavy stress.



Finding Balance

1. This Workbook

If you love a service member or veteran who's showing the effects of war-zone stress, you have at least two good reasons to learn all you can about these effects: your loved one and yourself.

Most people who have been to war show some signs of the heavy stress, threat, loss, and inner conflict they've experienced. These effects run on a continuum, from mild and temporary effects to serious disorders in need of medical treatment—and many points in between. At the mild end of the continuum are things like a case of the “jitters” that goes away over time, or a short-lived tendency to get annoyed over little things or to feel distant and shut down. At the high end are stress illnesses like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), other anxiety disorders, and depression.

People who have been under other kinds of heavy stress and threat—including things like waiting at home for loved one to return from war, learning about the dangers they've been in, and coping with the challenges involved when they return from deployment or prepare for the next deployment—can also have heavy stress reactions.

When they get home, many service members and veterans are afraid their stress effects might be signs of weakness, cowardice, or being “crazy.” They may **feel** crazy, and the people around them might even wonder if that's the case. Friends and family members might find themselves “walking on eggshells” and/or resenting the way their loved ones are acting—and might even feel guilty or crazy for feeling the way they feel.

The *Finding Balance* series of materials is designed to answer that question—“Am I crazy?” or “Is my loved one crazy?”—with a resounding “no!” It focuses on two things:

1. Explaining the physical roots of deployment stress effects, so people will understand why these really are normal reactions to the experience of war
2. Building the resilience skills that can help people have milder effects, overcome these effects, and work around any challenges that remain

How to use the Finding Balance Workbooks

Each *Finding Balance* workbook has pages of text and questions mixed in with “tools.” The tools include some question-and-answer worksheets and some descriptions of resilience skills you and your loved one can practice. In the Appendices at the end, there’s also a list of web sites, a little more information about the brain (for those who like brains), some tips for getting better sleep, and a section acknowledging some of the people who have given their support and encouragement to these efforts.

You can use it alone, with your loved one back from deployment (who can use the service member/veteran version), with a friend, with a coach or mentor, in a discussion group, in a training program, or in group or individual counseling. It’s set up in short sections—four pages each—one for each of the 12 topics mentioned on the previous page. You can follow the sections in order if you want to, but you don’t have to.



One way to use this guide might be to follow your own interest: Try looking at the list of sections—or flipping through the workbook—and picking the section your “gut” says you’d like to look at right now. Then that section might raise your interest in one or more of the other sections, so you can try one of those next. If you’re working with a partner, in a group, or with a mentor, trainer, or counselor, you can negotiate the order in which you tackle the 12 topic sections—or just figure it out as you go along.

The information in each of these sections is closely related to the information in all the others. So from time to time you’ll see a note that says there’s more information on that subject in another section. This makes it possible to keep each section short and avoid a lot of repetition, but still give you as much flexibility as possible.

Finding Balance doesn’t cover the whole subject of deployment- or homecoming-related stress. There are many wonderful resources out there that go into a lot greater depth. This guide is just a quick introduction to the way the body works under heavy stress, and a few of the many ways of bringing the body’s stress reactions under better control.