

Invisible Wounds: Signs and Symptoms for Airmen

Signs and Symptoms of PTSD

Having physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions to a stressful or traumatic event is normal. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) means that these reactions, or signs and symptoms, persist for a month or more.

Intrusive Thoughts	Avoidance Behavior	Negative Thoughts and Mood	Hyper-arousal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disturbing thoughts and feelings that are constant, uncontrollable, and unwanted • Recurring distressful memories, thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing habits to avoid reminders of the traumatic event or to control symptoms • Feeling distressed in response to reminders of the traumatic event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling disconnected from oneself or other people • Unable to remember important aspect of the event • Feeling that the world is dangerous • Belief that “I am a bad person” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being in “fight or flight” mode all the time • Difficulty sleeping • Irritability • Poor concentration • Reckless behavior • Anger outbursts

Signs and Symptoms of Mild Traumatic Brain Injury

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is caused by a force or blow to the head that results in a disruption of brain function. TBI severity ranges from mild to moderate to severe. A mild TBI is also known as a concussion. Symptoms include:

- Difficulty remembering or concentrating
- Confusion or disorientation
- Problems with cognitive function (e.g., speed of processing, difficulty planning or organizing, impulsivity, poor judgment)
- Physical issues (e.g., headache, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, balance problems, blurred vision, ringing in the ears, insomnia, fatigue, sensitivity to light/noise)
- Mood and behavioral changes (e.g., irritability, depression, anxiety)

Invisible Wounds: Airmen Responding with Empathy

Knowing how to respond to someone with an invisible wound is challenging because there's so much going on inside the individual that isn't visible on the outside. Some of their behaviors or moods may make you feel uncomfortable, confused, or even annoyed. However, it's important to remember that a person with PTSD or TBI may be so distracted by painful thoughts, memories, or physical injuries that they are not fully able to focus and concentrate as well as they'd like to.

A great way to decide how to respond to a person with an invisible wound is to put yourself in their shoes, to practice empathy:

- Try to imagine how you would feel in their situation, even if you don't know all of the details of what they've experienced.
- Remind yourself and those around you of the sacrifice your Wingman has made in service of our country.
- Don't be afraid to ask what's going on. Give yourself permission to intervene if you think they need help, and make the time to have a sincere conversation with them.
- Listen. Once you've asked the question, allow your Wingman the time and space to give you the answer. Encourage them to share without fear of judgment or interruption. Listening shows you care, will help you understand them, and builds rapport.
- Acknowledge your Wingman's distress. It's not helpful to tell them they shouldn't feel a certain way. PTSD and TBI are both very real conditions that produce measurable changes in brain function. Acknowledging your Wingman's distress is a key step in dispelling myths about invisible wounds and removing the stigma associated with getting help.
- Discuss your Wingman's needs and offer to help them make a plan to address them. Often, this means suggesting a helping resource. Offering to accompany them can be a good way to make getting help seem less difficult.

Question starters to help you talk about this topic with your Wingman are:

- "What's going on in your life? I've noticed you seem upset"
- "I'm concerned about you. Can we talk about it?"
- "Is there something I can do to help you?"
- "What do you think might help?"

Invisible Wounds: Helping Resources for Airmen

It's important to know what resources are available to help an Airman with an Invisible Wound.

Primary Care, MTFs, and Mental Health

For all Airmen, the clinic is a good place to start. Primary care physicians are able to screen for PTSD and TBI and can initiate further evaluation, diagnosis, or treatment. Many MTFs offer the Behavioral Health Optimization Program, or BHOP, services on site. BHOP providers can screen and provide short-term treatment for PTSD or refer an Airman to the Mental Health clinic for a more thorough assessment and longer-term treatment. You can also call the Mental Health Clinic directly, if you prefer.

Other Installation Resources

- Chaplains and Chaplain Assistants
- Airman and Family Readiness Center
- Family Advocacy Program
- Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment, or ADAPT, Program
- Military OneSource
- Military & Family Life Counselor

When in doubt, you can always turn to other people for help if you're worried about a Wingman. Those people include:

- Family
- Friends
- Supervisors
- First sergeants
- Commanders