



**After**

# **Military Service**



## **IMPROVING MORALE**

**Among ex-forces personnel, reservists and military families**

# Introduction



There are thought to be about 4.5 million ex-forces personnel in the UK and most have a positive view of the military. Most families affected by the more challenging aspects of military life are generally just able to 'get on with it' and support each other through hard times. However, some aspects of military life can have a negative impact on a significant minority of individuals and their families.

For various reasons military-related problems have largely been under resourced by healthcare services, which has resulted in many ex-service personnel being distrustful of local services and an overall reluctance to seek help. Even where services are available for military-related problems, not wanting to be seen as weak can make it hard to seek support. The real barrier to asking for support is usually being too self-reliant.

This leaflet describes the most common stress-related problems among ex-forces, reservists and military families and even more importantly where you can get assistance wherever you are located in the UK.

# Adjusting to Civvy Street

**“Many ex-service men and women have been disappointed with civilian life.”**

In the past resettlement has focused on retraining in preparation for civilian employment. While learning a new trade is a critical part of leaving the forces, serving in the military is primarily about the way you function. All recruits go through the common military syllabus during Phase One Training, learning skills crucial to operating dangerous equipment safely, and in some of the most hostile and dangerous situations. Most military skills such as self-discipline, teamwork and leadership can give you a competitive edge after you have left the forces. However, some military skills are not so helpful on civvy street:

## Alcohol

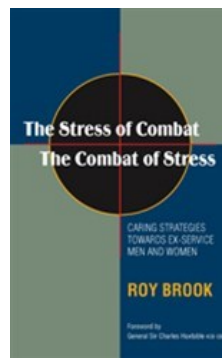
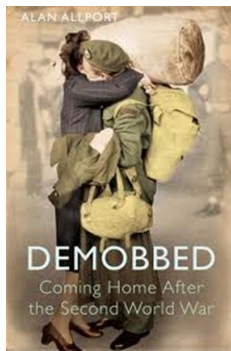
For a significant number of serving personnel alcohol is a normal part of socialising at mess functions or the NAAFI. British ex-forces personnel on the whole consume far more alcohol than civilians and is the most common problem among Armed Forces community. Without a disciplined military environment excessive alcohol use stops being a ‘social lubricant’ and can start to cause health problems, lower motivation and increase the likelihood of uncontrolled anger.

## Aggression

To ensure everyone will fight in the face of danger, instead of flee, controlled aggression is continually reinforced during service. However, being too forceful on civvy street can be intimidating for many civilians who are more used to avoiding confrontation. Some ex-service personnel might also find themselves getting into fights and in trouble with the law.

## Too switched on

Another widespread problem after military service is being too switched on to threats. Constantly scanning for the enemy or taking too many safety precautions is not very helpful on civvy street. An overly suspicious mind can lead to over-estimating danger, increased irritability and the potential to become isolated from other people.



## Not sleeping

Being able to stay awake for long periods of time with little or no sleep can feel perfectly normal. But when there is no chain of command planning rest periods cracking on regardless can lead to irritability and eventual exhaustion.

## Low morale

Many ex-service men and women have felt disappointed with civilian life. Life after military service can be a time of major losses such as no longer being part of the camaraderie unique to the armed forces, grieving fallen comrades, or leaving a rewarding career. Your morale may also be affected by the impact of service-related injuries while training or on operations, especially if this led to an early discharge.

## Civilians

As unit cohesion is essential to overcoming adversity, military conditioning deliberately forges strong bonds to form between serving personnel. The other side of ‘a band of brothers (and sisters)’ is being distrustful of civilians, especially if civilians are disinterested or have a negative view of the military. Many quickly learn to clam up about anything related to their military service, which can result in becoming socially isolated even from close friends and family.

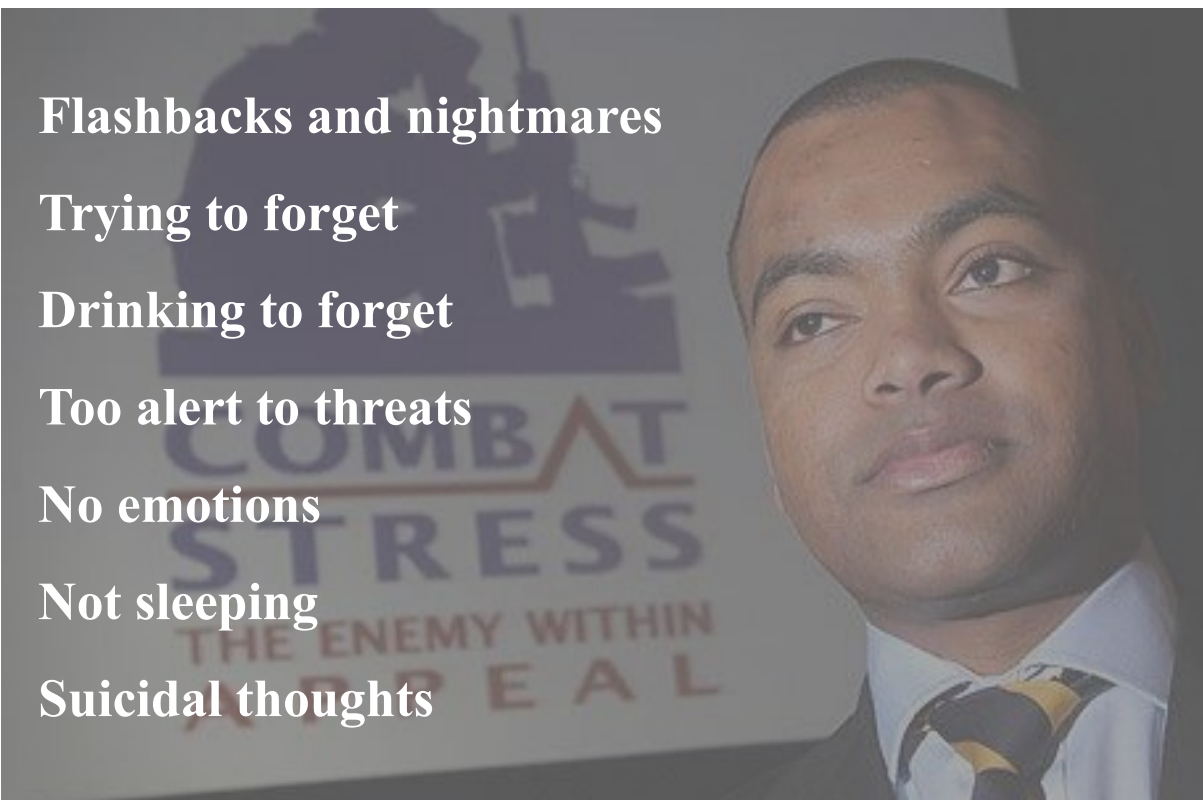
# Reliving traumatic memories

All recruits sign an oath to Queen and Country accepting that military service may require the ultimate sacrifice. Unfortunately many have paid this price, but for those who have faced their mortality and survived, it's perfectly natural to be left with a lingering sense of fear which usually lessens over time.

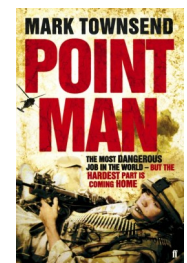
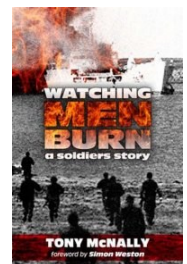
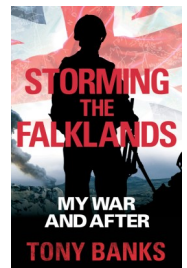
However it isn't always so easy. This is true whether you are a young recruit medically discharged after surviving a potentially fatal training accident, or an experienced frontline soldier who has served on multiple operations. Recovering from life-threatening situations can be complicated for ex-forces personnel.

During life-threatening events it may have been more important to carry on with the mission or exercise. Having the additional pressure of adjusting to civvy street can make it difficult to take the time to think through unpleasant memories, and come to terms with inhumane or immoral situations that others may find hard to understand.

These are warning signs to watch out for three months after surviving a life-threatening situation :



**“Recovering from life-threatening situations can be complicated for ex-forces personnel.”**



# Military families

Military families generally experience stresses specific to military life. Common problems include not being able to negotiate work commitments and a lack of privacy. Relocation can also cause uncertainty about accommodation, welfare and schooling. Additional stresses may arise if your serving/ex-serving family member is aggressive or drinking excessively.



## The deployment cycle

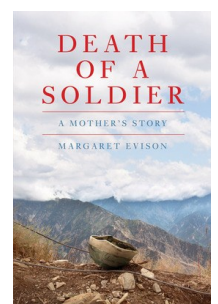
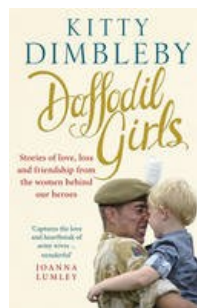
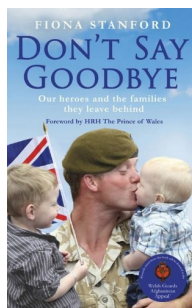
Many families also experience difficulties during the deployment cycle. Long periods of separation may mean being absent from important family occasions and significant life events. At first family members can feel as if deployment isn't going to happen and start to feel detached from their loved one. During deployment this can give way to negative emotions. There may be struggle with the conflict between military service and family life, and not being able to share responsibilities with a partner. Communication problems during deployments can also cause stress, whether this is not being in touch due to operational demands, experiencing personal difficulties at the same time or having less contact than expected.

**“... some military families can feel detached from each other, and experience problems with trust..”**

After the initial relief of a loved one returning home this can soon lead to problems agreeing the division of labour. Any family back home will have their own experience of what it has been like during the deployment cycle. However, you may communicate less as a family and avoid talking about each other's experiences. As a result some military families can feel detached from each other, and experience problems with trust and intimacy.

## After military service

After military service some families may be struggling with looking after a loved one who is medically discharged or injured as a result of their military service. Psychological injury may mean being at the receiving end of verbal or physical aggression as well as the whole family also avoiding reminders of life-threatening situations. Some families may also be grieving a loved one due to a military-related accident or as the result of enemy action during deployment.



# How to get support

**“If you have a service-related condition you are entitled to NHS priority care.”**

## Priority Care

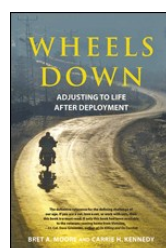
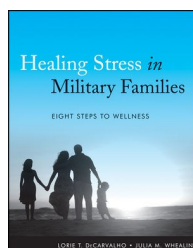
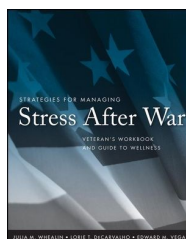
In England, Scotland and Wales, if you have a condition related to your military service you are entitled to NHS priority care. The first step is to register with a local GP, inform them that you are a reservist or ex-military and pass on any medical records. Civilian services use the term ‘veteran’ to describe anyone who has served in the Armed Forces for at least one day. The NHS has produced the following leaflet:



For those who served: Meeting the Healthcare Needs of Veterans in England, NHS/Royal British Legion

## Adjusting to civilian life and traumatic memories

Currently the USA is the only country which has written books to support ex-forces personnel, and their families. In England a local NHS IAPT service (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) can support you using these books from a British point of view, or provide cognitive-behavioural therapy to help reduce the problems caused by traumatic memories. Your GP may even be able to refer you to a specialist trauma service, which may offer other therapies such as EMDR, or a service for ex-forces personnel, such as Combat Stress or the Veterans and Reserves Mental Health Programme.

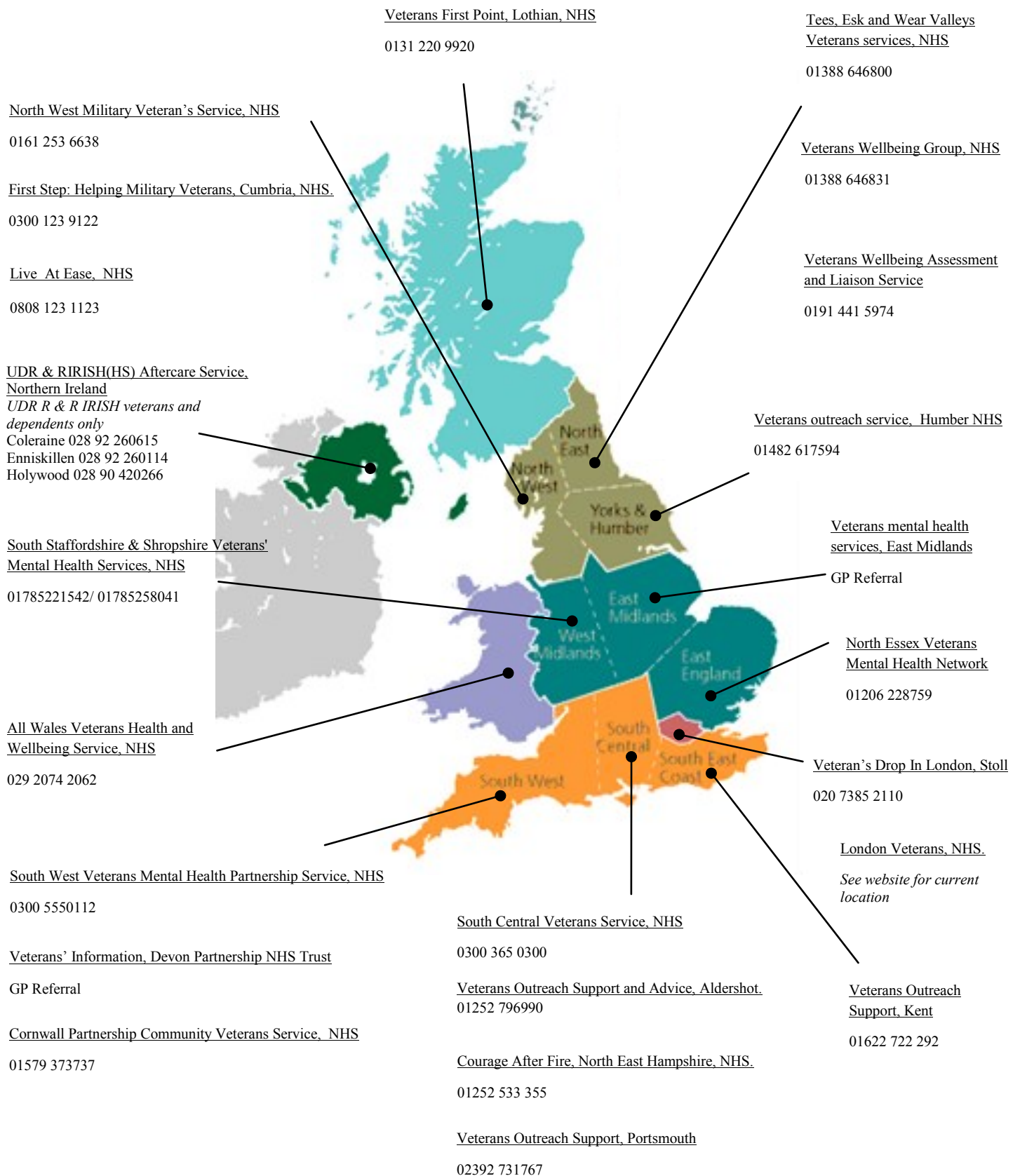


## Forcesline

Forcesline is a free and 100% confidential helpline that is completely independent of the military chain of command. The experienced civilian staff provide a supportive, listening and signposting service for serving personnel and their families, as well as former members of the Armed Forces. You can talk about anything including personal concerns, worries and problems. Where possible, you will be given factual information or be signposted to appropriate ways forward.



# Map of Local Services



### **About the Author**

Graeme Davy-Watts served six years in the Territorial Army, including service overseas on Op Telic, alongside a civilian career as Senior Therapist within the Priory Group, Her Majesty's Prisons and the NHS.