

Department of Veterans Affairs Caregiver Support Program Information for Caregivers During COVID-19

Tip Sheet

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Caregiver Support Program (CSP) recognizes that caregivers play a critical role in caring for Veterans every day, and even more so now, in the time of COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) believe symptoms appear 2 to 14 days after exposure. VA recognizes that new information and guidance is being released frequently. For the most up to date information, please visit: [VA COVID-19 Guidance](#) or [CDC COVID-19 Guidance](#).

Your health and well-being are important to us. The CSP is here to provide support to you during this uncertain time. Your local [Caregiver Support Coordinator](#) (CSC) can link you to important resources and services that are available to you, as a caregiver, and to the Veteran. The Caregiver Support Line (CSL), 1-855-260-3274, is also available and offers support by caring licensed professionals. Please don't hesitate to call.

In addition, here are some important things to be aware of, to help you care for your loved one and yourself during this time:

Prepare

- Check medication and supplies and submit refills or requests for renewals via [My HealthVet](#), or the call-in number (1-877-327-0022).
- Your health and well-being are also important. Contact your healthcare provider for medication refills and to learn more about what telehealth services may be available to you.
- Learn to use VA Video Connect through the [VA mobile app store](#) or by contacting the Veteran's VA care team, before any urgent problems arise.
- Have 2 weeks-worth of non-perishable food at home so you are prepared to stay home for some time. It is important to minimize trips to the grocery store. If needed, contact your local CSC for information on community resources.

Create Back-up Plans

- Contact family and friends who can assist with grocery shopping, pharmacy pick-ups or other essentials.
- Arrange a back-up plan for who can provide care to the Veteran, should you fall ill.
- Keep records and important information about the Veteran's care, including an [Advanced Care Plan](#), in a safe and accessible place, should another person be needed to provide care. Make sure you share the location or a copy of the plan with appropriate family or friends.

Protect yourself:

- Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds after you have been in a public place or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- If soap and water are not readily available, **use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol**. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid people who are sick.
- Avoid places where many people are closely gathered.

- Don't travel to areas known to have COVID-19 outbreaks.
- Get a flu shot to protect you from flu.

Protect others:

- If you are sick, stay home, stay away from others, stay in touch with your doctor, and avoid public transportation. Read more at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/steps-when-sick.html>
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with your arm/sleeve or use tissues.
- Dispose of tissues in the trash.
- Immediately **wash your hands** with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not readily available, clean your hands with a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects often.

Monitor

- Monitor yourself, the Veteran and other household members, for symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat). Contact your or the Veteran's health care team for guidance and medical advice.
- If the Veteran has a chronic condition, their immune system may already be stressed. Follow the health care plan to avoid further stress to the Veteran's immune system.
- If you have help coming in from outside the home, make sure they observe all the precautions you are taking (i.e. hand washing, hand sanitizing) and self-care procedures. Request that they monitor themselves for any symptoms of COVID-19.

Finding Ways to Connect & Receive Support

Taking care of your well-being, including your mental health, is essential during this time. Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. Many people may experience stress, fear, anxiety, or feelings of depression. This is normal. There are things that you can do to manage your stress and anxiety:

- Exercise regularly, try to eat well-balanced meals, and [get plenty of sleep](#).
- Limit alcohol.
- Practice breathing exercises and/or meditation. VA has many [free mental health apps for Veterans](#).
- Take breaks from the news.
- Stay connected with others while practicing social distancing (see below for tips).
- Participate in activities or hobbies that you enjoy or learn a new one.
- Keep your current mental health appointments. VA offers both video and phone telemental health options that do not require you to go to your closest facility in-person should you have a medical concern or need to follow specific social distancing guidelines in your community.
- Learn ways to connect with VA providers using telehealth options and [schedule or reschedule your appointment online](#). If you are requesting a new mental health appointment, please call your [local VA](#) and they will work to arrange an appointment for you. If you need same day access for mental health services, call your [local VA](#) to request this and you will be connected to care.

During times of social distancing, it is normal to have increased feelings of loneliness, sadness, fear, or anxiety. It is important for everyone to stay connected. Here are some ways to feel more connected:

- Seek support from family, friends, mentors, clergy, and those who are in similar circumstances. While face-to-face communication may be difficult, be flexible and creative using phone, email, text messaging, and video calls. Sign up or join a virtual social network that includes service members and Veterans.

- Keep in touch with fellow Veterans and assist them in navigating this new environment if they are having a hard time. Teach them how to use VA Video Connect through the VA mobile app store as VA increases virtual health and mental health appointment availability.
- As a Veteran, you have been uniquely trained in emergency response situations. Your resilience and strength can assist others during these times. Connection can also happen when you give back to your community by sharing your expertise and support with family, friends, and neighbors through acts of kindness and volunteer opportunities which will arise.

Practice good self-care and remember to re-fuel:

- Get fresh air every day, even if this means opening the windows and turning on a fan.
- Drink plenty of water and eat good nutritious foods.
- Find ways to move your body, as you are able.
- Create a routine that includes getting to sleep and waking up at a reasonable time.
- Give each other emotional space and take breaks.
- Reach out for professional support, often available via phone or virtually.
- Limit the amount of time you watch COVID-19 related news stories and use reputable sources.

Caregiver Support Program Resources

Annie Caregiver Text Support* is VA’s text messaging service that promotes self-care for caregivers. Caregivers need a phone capable of text messaging to enroll.

Building Better Caregivers*™ (BBC) is a 6-week online workshop for caregivers of Veterans of all eras who are caring for someone with dementia, memory problems, post-traumatic disorder, a serious brain injury, or any other serious injury or illness. BBC helps caregivers in two key ways: training in how to provide better care, and helping caregivers learn how to manage their own emotions, stress, and physical health.

Caregiver Education Calls* are monthly telephone education calls for caregivers with a theme of “Care for the Caregiver.” The topics change monthly and scripts and audio recordings of the calls can be found on the CSP website.

Caregiver Support Line (CSL) offers support by caring licensed professionals. The CSL, 1-855-260-3274 is available toll free 8 a.m.- 8 p.m. E.T., Monday through Friday.

Caregiver Support Program Website contains tips, tools, videos and links to resources for caregivers of Veterans of all eras. The link is: www.caregiver.va.gov.

Peer Support Mentoring Program provides an opportunity for caregivers to receive guidance and share their experiences with a more experienced caregiver. Mentors and mentees communicate regularly for at least six months through email, telephone and letters.

Resources for Enhancing All Caregivers Health (REACH VA) Intervention* is an evidenced-based intervention that is delivered by VA clinical staff to provide individual support to stressed and burdened caregivers of Veterans of all eras, and those with dementia, spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis (MS), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

*For more information, please contact your local [Caregiver Support Coordinator](#).

VA Resources

[VA's COVID-19 home](#): This is VA's home for all COVID resources and information about VA's response

[Frequently asked questions for Veterans about accessing VA health benefits during COVID-19](#): This FAQ is updated frequently with information and guidance for Veterans about different ways to access VA health benefits during the COVID-19 outbreak

[VA mental health resources & guidance for Veterans during the COVID-19 outbreak](#): This page includes helpful guidance, articles, and applications as well as instructions for Veterans about accessing mental health care during the COVID-19 outbreak

[VA PTSD & Managing Stress COVID-19](#) provides practical steps and a printable handout for Veterans with PTSD and their families, to improve well-being related to increased stress and anxiety, as well as feelings of uncertainty.

[VA Intimate Partner Violence Prevention COVID-19](#) provides resources and supports when relationship conflict occurs and escalates during times of crisis.

[VA Suicide Prevention Toolkit for Caregivers](#) includes important information about suicide prevention, as well as evidence-based mental health and substance use disorder treatments that can help Veterans recover and meet their goals. This toolkit also offers resources that anyone can access in the event of a crisis.

Additional Resources**

- [AARP COVID-19 Caregiving Tips](#)
- [American Red Cross Military and Caregiver Network](#)
- [Caregiver Action Network COVID-19 Tips](#)
- [Elizabeth Dole Foundation COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [Family Caregiver Alliance COVID -19 Resources & Articles](#)
- [PATRIOT link](#) (resource navigation)
- [Rosalyn Carter Institute COVID-19 Tips](#)
- [SesameStreet.org/caring](#) (for young children)

Disclaimer: **This list is not all inclusive. Links will take you outside of the Department of Veterans Affairs. VA does not endorse and is not responsible for the content of the linked websites.