



Coping with Current Events in Afghanistan: A guide for service providers to support individuals who have been impacted by events in Afghanistan

Acknowledgements

This resource has been adapted from the National Centre for PTSD's (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) resource ['Provider Guide to Addressing Veterans' Reactions to Current Events in Afghanistan'](#).

It is intended to provide supportive suggestions to service providers who care for individuals impacted by events in Afghanistan, including CAF members and Veterans, current and former RCMP members, and their Families and Friends. It offers information related to common reactions many may be experiencing at the moment, as well as supportive strategies and available resources for immediate mental health and well-being supports.

* Common Reactions among current and former CAF and RCMP members

Individuals who have been impacted by events in Afghanistan, whether they served there or not, may be experiencing a range of emotions in reaction to the events unfolding there. For current and former CAF and RCMP members who did not serve in Afghanistan, current events may be reminding them of their own military or deployment experiences. These individuals may have had similar experiences in previous contexts and eras. For current and former CAF and RCMP members who did serve in Afghanistan, they may be experiencing moral dilemmas, distress, or injury. For example, they may be:

- worrying about the long-term effects on the people of Afghanistan,
- worrying about the safety of Afghan Nationals who provided them with invaluable assistance during their time in the country,
- feeling distressed to learn that a former Area Of Responsibility (AOR) has now been taken by the Taliban,
- questioning the meaning of their service and whether it was worth the sacrifices they and their fellow service members made.

It is normal for current and former CAF and RCMP members to feel any of the following reactions that can change from day-to-day:

- Frustration, anger, or betrayal
- Worry, distress, or concern
- Helplessness
- Fear
- Sadness or grief
- Panic or anxiety
- Isolation or loneliness
- Moral dilemmas or moral distress
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased alcohol or substance use, and/or relapse
- Avoidance of all reminders, including media and social media
- Pre-occupation with information related to Afghanistan
- Avoidance of social situations
- Memories of military or deployment experiences
- Flashbacks
- Increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and/or other mental health conditions

They may also feel like they need to expect or prepare for the worst. For example, they may:

- Become overly protective, vigilant, and/or guarded,
- Become preoccupied by danger,
- Become preoccupied with mentally preparing for what might happen in the future.

Although these are normal reactions to negative events, for some individuals these reactions may be overwhelming, continue for an extended period of time, or negatively affect functioning to the extent that intervention is indicated. Refer to the supportive strategies below to help you better understand individuals' reactions and how to support them through this challenging time.

* Common Reactions among Families and Friends of current and former CAF and RCMP members

Family members or Friends of a service member who died as a result of service in Afghanistan may be experiencing an especially challenging time. The grieving process endures and can be lengthy, and moments like this can re-trigger and complicate their journey. They may be experiencing increased feelings of sadness, grief, anxiety, or anger.

Family members or Friends of a service member who has returned home from service in Afghanistan may be witnessing the difficulty and pain that their loved one is experiencing. Although they may be pre-occupied with supporting their loved one, it is important to be aware that these events can have a direct impact on them as well.

Family members and Friends may experience many of the reactions listed above, as well as:

- Increased stress levels,
- Apathy as they take time to process,
- Physical symptoms (increased pain, headaches, stomach issues, inflammation, etc.),
- Changes to their life that shift their usual roles, responsibilities, and ability to participate in activities,
- Tension or strain in their relationship, family, and/or friendships,
- Feelings of hopelessness or inability to support their Family member or Friend due to a belief that only those who served are able to support them,
- Burnout or compassion fatigue as a result of supporting their Family member or Friend.

It is normal for Family members and Friends to feel distress in response to negative events. It is also common for them to feel stressed or burnt out when supporting someone who is feeling distressed. However, for some Family members and Friends, these reactions may be overwhelming, continue for an extended period of time, or negatively affect functioning to the extent that intervention is indicated. Refer to the supportive strategies below to help you better understand individuals' reactions and how to support them through this challenging time.

* Supportive Strategies

✓ Check in

Ask questions to help you recognize and understand what each individual is thinking about and feeling. Each person impacted by events in Afghanistan may differ in their reaction. Start from a place of making no assumptions about what they may be feeling or thinking. Consider using the following strategies and prompts:

Begin your conversation broadly

"There has been much media coverage and national conversation about what is happening in Afghanistan. How is this sitting with you?"

Normalize reactions to events in Afghanistan and begin a conversation focused on emotional reactions

"Many people have been experiencing strong feelings about current events in Afghanistan. I wanted to check in and see how you have been doing during these very stressful times. How have you been feeling?" or "The news about Afghanistan can impact mental health in many ways. Have you noticed changes in how you are feeling?"

Ask if they have engaged in conversations with others and about their support system (or lack thereof)

"Have you been having conversations about your reactions to events in Afghanistan with others? In what ways have the conversations been helpful? Are there ways in which the conversations have been less helpful?"

Consider the role of difficult anniversaries

On the anniversary of traumatic events, individuals may experience an increase in distressing memories of the event. Consider the role of difficult global and personal anniversaries on their well-being, and how it may exacerbate reactions to events in Afghanistan.

Check in on peer support groups

If you support or organize a peer support group, check in with the group as a whole. Be sure also to check in with lead peer facilitators, or individuals who peers rely on most often. These individuals may be experiencing increased difficulties during this time as they support many others.

✓ Support meaning-making

Current and former CAF and RCMP members may be questioning the meaning of their service and whether it was worth the sacrifices they and their fellow service members made. They may also be worrying about the long-term effects on the people of Afghanistan. Support them in making meaning of their experiences by inviting them to consider the ways that their service made a difference. Consider using the following strategies:

Ask about the impact their service had on the lives of Afghan Nationals, their fellow service members, or their own life

Some individuals may be thinking, *"I am questioning the impact of my service in Afghanistan."* Have a collaborative discussion to encourage them to come to less painful or extreme conclusions about their service, such as, *"I am very sad about what is happening now, but when I was there, I helped keep Afghanistan safe."* Support them in differentiating what they knew and did then, from what they know now.

Consider bringing events into context by referring to how other military tasks may end. For example, serving members are often ordered to return to base in Canada before an event is fully resolved, as in the case of earthquakes.

Invite them to think in less extreme terms

They may be judging their experience as completely negative. Invite them to think in less extreme terms. For example, if they express that *"Going to Afghanistan was a failure,"* or *"I knew something like this would happen,"* prompt them to consider a less distressing thought, such as *"I did my job to the best of my ability and supported my fellow service members to the best of my ability" or "I worked within the rules of engagement, did my best to get the mission done, and served with honour."*

Invite them to consider how supporting the safety and health of a generation of Afghan citizens may have much longer-term positive impacts that will only become clearer over time.

Remind them that things will continue to change

They may be thinking of what is happening now as the end point. Remind them that now is just one moment in time and that things will continue to change.

✓ Encourage positive coping strategies

It is important to assess the coping strategies (adaptive and maladaptive), current resources and supports, and ongoing stressors of each individual impacted by events in Afghanistan. Consider how existing coping strategies may be applied in this current situation, or if they could be adapted to meet current needs. Support them in making a plan for putting their positive coping strategies into action to manage their negative reactions. Consider the following strategies:

Encourage connection with Family, Friends, and/or other current or former CAF and RCMP members

- **For current and former CAF and RCMP members:**
Encourage them to talk to other service members or Veterans who may be experiencing similar reactions and difficulties. This can help them process their feelings and thoughts better.
- **For Families and Friends:**
Encourage them to talk with trusted Friends and Family who give them a sense of security, calm, or happiness.

Encourage engagement in meaningful activities

Encourage them to engage in activities they find meaningful, even if they are small, simple actions. Doing things that are rewarding or meaningful can help them focus on their lives in the present, reduce stress, and help them feel better. For example, listening to music, exercising, practising breathing routines, spending time in nature and with animals, journaling, or reading inspirational texts are some simple ways to help manage overwhelming or distressing emotions.

Invite them to set achievable goals

Explore what matters most to them across the domains of their life. Once they identify important values, help them set realistic short and long-term goals consistent with these values. Guide them in planning concrete activities to work toward achieving these goals. Although these activities will not change the past or the things they cannot control, they can help reduce stress and add meaning to their life.

Suggest they stick to their routines

Remind them that sticking to a schedule for when they sleep, eat, work, and do other day-to-day activities can be helpful during this challenging time.

Suggest they limit media and social media exposure

They may be exposed to a larger amount of media or social media coverage than normal during this time. If this coverage is overwhelming them and increasing their distress, suggest they limit their exposure.

Encourage them to seek immediate support if needed

Encourage them to connect with immediate 24/7 mental health and well-being support if they need it. Refer to the list of available resources and supports below.

* If you feel impacted, seek out mental health support

As a service provider, you may also be experiencing moral distress connected to the events unfolding in Afghanistan. These events may be exacerbating existing difficulties due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Please seek professional mental health support.

For Military and/or Veteran medical officers and civilian physicians in **Saskatchewan, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, and Nunavut**: You can access free, immediate counselling available 24/7 through the Canadian Medical Association's Wellness Support Line. [Find the appropriate support line for your province or territory »](#)



* Additional Resources and Supports

Veterans Affairs Canada Assistance Service

 1-800-268-7708

The VAC Assistance Service is for Canadian Armed Forces Veterans, former RCMP members, and their Families and caregivers. You can reach them 24/7 by phone. They can provide you with confidential, immediate, free mental health counselling. They can also provide a referral to a longer-term counsellor.

Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services Crisis Text Line for Kids

 1-800-668-6868

 CAFKIDS to 686868

The Crisis Text Line for Kids is for children, youth, and young adults from military Families. You can reach them 24/7 by text or phone. They offer confidential, immediate, free mental health counselling.

Canadian Armed Forces Member Assistance Program

 1-800-268-7708

The Member Assistance Program is for Canadian Armed Forces Members and their Families. You can reach them 24/7 by phone. They offer confidential, voluntary, short-term counselling. They can also provide a referral to a longer-term counsellor.

Hope for Wellness Help Line

 1-855-242-3310

The Hope for Wellness Help Line is for all Indigenous Peoples across Canada. You can reach them 24/7 by phone. They offer confidential, immediate, free counselling support.

Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services Family Information Line

 1-800-866-4546

The Family Information Line is for Canadian Armed Forces Members, Veterans, and their Families. You can reach them 24/7 by phone for a confidential, immediate, free counselling support, crisis management, information, and referrals.

Canada Suicide Prevention Service

 1-833-456-4566

 1-866-277-3553
(For residents of Quebec)

The Canadian Suicide Prevention Service is for all Canadians. You can reach them 24/7 by phone. They offer confidential, immediate, free counselling support.