

VETERAN FAMILY VIRTUAL SUMMIT 2023: SUMMARY REPORT

January 26–27, 2023

SUMMARY

Veteran Families have unique experiences and needs that are often unheard and unaddressed. To start a discussion about these needs, the Atlas Institute hosted the Veteran Family Summit on January 26 and 27, 2023. The Summit was held virtually and attendance was free, which allowed Veterans, Veteran Family members, researchers, and service providers to come together and discuss compassion fatigue, impacts of operational stress injuries (OSI) on adult children, couples' therapy for trauma recovery and resilience. The Summit was the first national event to focus on the experiences of Canadian Veteran Families. The high level of interest and positive feedback from our audience underscores the need for more information and discussion about the mental health and well-being of Veteran Families.

FROM OUR ATTENDEES

"Thank you for taking the time to put together such an important initiative that highlights gaps in Canadian services and supports, what is currently out there, and where we can step up and do better for our families."

"I am already looking forward to the next one. This one was extremely powerful."

"Grateful that this event happened!"

REGISTRANTS

Note: All Summit presentations were recorded. Individuals who registered for the event gained access to recordings.



442 people registered for the event

OF THOSE WHO REGISTERED



Geographic location

- 193 from Ontario
- 64 from Quebec
- 48 from Alberta
- 39 from Nova Scotia
- 19 from British Columbia
- 18 from Manitoba
- 18 from Prince Edward Island
- 12 from New Brunswick
- 11 from Saskatchewan
- 5 from Newfoundland and Labrador
- 13 from outside of Canada



Age

- 11% – 18-34 years
- 53% – 35-54 years
- 36% – 55-74 years



Who registered

- 188 Family members of a serving member of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), or Reserve Force, or of a CAF or RCMP Veteran.
- 149 service providers
- 69 CAF Veterans
- 31 researchers (i.e., at an academic institution, hospital, or non-profit organization)
- 27 staff from Military Family Resource Centres
- 24 Veterans Affairs Canada staff
- 13 serving members of the CAF
- 5 serving members of the RCMP



Community type

- 47% of registrants live in urban communities
- 30% of registrants live in suburban communities
- 22% of registrants live in rural/remote communities

DAY ONE – 27 JANUARY 2023

GUY DALLAIRE – BREAKING THE FAMILY MOLD

Guy Dallaire is a Veteran and multigenerational military Family member. His presentation discussed the impacts on children of having a parent with an operational stress injury (OSI).



Key messages:

1. It is important for parents with an OSI to maintain open and age-appropriate conversations about their injury with Family members, including children, and to reach out for supports from professionals.
2. Parents should attempt to stay emotionally and physically present at home, and maintain their role as parent to their children. This is an important element of stability for children.
3. Look out for children “performing,” or behaving in an inauthentic way, not wanting to “make waves,” being over-attentive to surroundings or taking on a parent-like role. These behaviours can have short- and long-term negative effects on children’s mental health.

CANDICE MONSON, PHD – COUPLE/FAMILY THERAPY TRAUMA RECOVERY

Candice Monson is a professor of Psychology at Toronto Metropolitan University. Her research focuses on traumatic stress and different approaches for treating posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Dr. Monson’s presentation highlighted results from her lab’s research on treatments for PTSD that engage Family members of the individual with PTSD.



Key messages:

1. Including Family members in the treatment of PTSD can improve short- and long-term treatment outcomes for the individual with an OSI. It can also strengthen bonds within the Family.
2. Some treatments for PTSD take longer and include more frequent sessions than others. Some are more suited to Family involvement than others. When exploring treatment options, the individual should consider what they are ready for and what works best to achieve the lifestyle and outcomes they want.
3. Several PTSD treatment programs that include Families have been tested successfully in research studies.

HEIDI CRAMM, PHD – FAMILIES MATTER – A FAMILY-CENTRED PERSPECTIVE

Heidi Cramm is an Professor in the School of Rehabilitation Therapy at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. She is also an occupational therapist and a Family member of first responders. Dr. Cramm's research focuses on posttraumatic stress, operational stress and resilience. Her presentation provided an overview of evidence about the impacts of PTSD on Families.



1. Research evidence suggests that bonds between Family members can be negatively affected by symptoms of PTSD from military service. These symptoms can also disrupt communication between Family members as well as parental activities and roles.
2. Research suggests that the mental health and well-being of children of individuals with an OSI may be protected by talking with children about the injury and its consequences in developmentally appropriate ways.
3. PTSD happens to Families, not just individuals.

MAUDE ARSENAULT – WHEN COMPASSION IS EXHAUSTING

Maude Arsenault is a Veteran Family Coordinator at the Valcartier Military Family Resource Centre. Her presentation provided an overview of compassion fatigue, including symptoms and ways to manage its effects.



1. Compassion fatigue can occur when someone witnesses suffering and pain over a long period of time. People can develop a hypersensitivity to the suffering and pain of others and feel uncomfortable themselves. The burden can feel impossible to bear.
2. Some signs of compassion fatigue include: fatigue or feeling very tired, trouble sleeping or sleeping a lot, trouble managing emotions (for example, experiencing mood swings), weight gain or loss, eating too much or too little; and not feeling a sense of achievement or accomplishment after giving care.
3. Ways to protect against and/or manage compassion fatigue include: engaging in activities and relationships that make us feel good, avoiding negative activities and messages, and making time for self-care activities that help recovery after stress. In addition, planning ahead as much as possible – so that caregivers have what they need, when they need it, learning and practicing self-compassion and asking for help and support can protect against compassion fatigue.

DAY TWO: 28 JANUARY, 2023

KATHLEEN MILLS – CHASING FREEDOM – COMBAT INJURIES DON'T JUST HAPPEN ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Kathleen Mills is an executive coach, spouse of a Veteran and author of *Chasing Freedom: My Story of Service, Sacrifice and Redemption*. Her presentation discussed the personal and familial challenges she experienced as the spouse of a former member of the CAF. Throughout her presentation, Kathleen highlighted opportunities for improvements to support services for Family members of Veterans, and provided words of wisdom for Families of currently serving CAF members.



Key messages:

1. Family members of Veterans and serving members of the military can sustain injuries (OSIs, moral injuries, etc.) These injuries can be independent of the Veteran/military member's activity when deployed, or related to it.
2. Family members need more formalized supports to navigate the stresses of military lifestyle and sustain well-being. They should also be supported in forming communities with other military Families.
3. It is important for Family members to be aware of the stresses of military life for Family members, and find supports to help them navigate these stresses.

DEBORAH NORRIS, PHD – RESILIENCE(Y) IN MILITARY-CONNECTED FAMILIES

Deborah Norris is a military and Veteran Family researcher and a professor at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her research work to date has focused on topics ranging from military parenting, adult children of Veterans, and the impacts of deployment and operational stress on the Family.



Key messages:

1. Family resilience is a path a Family follows, using individual and shared strengths and capacities, to resist, recover, and reconfigure after stress and adversity. In the process of cultivating resilience, Veteran Families can move forward together, stronger than before.
2. Family resilience can be supported by cultivating intuition and improved awareness of other Family members' behaviours and needs, as well as by accessing social supports and resources to meet those needs.
3. Resilience is a process that can be nurtured, partially by individual factors, but in large part by external, social supports

HELENA HAWRYLUK, PHD AND JERRIS POPIK – LET’S TALK ABOUT IT: STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE’S UNDERSTANDING OF A PARENTAL OPERATIONAL STRESS INJURY

Helena and Jerris are clinical social workers and co-founders of Shoulder to Shoulder, an organization that supports mental health literacy among first responders and youth. They are also directors of the Wounded Warriors’ “Warrior Kids” program, which aims to cultivate community and resilience among the children of CAF members, Veterans, and first responders who have been impacted by an OSI.

Helena and Jerris’ presentation provided tips for CAF, Veteran and first responder parents to maintain communication about parental psychological injuries – such as an OSI or PTSD – with their children and teens.



Key messages:

1. Families play an essential role in the health and well-being of an injured member. All members of a Family are impacted by an OSI, especially children.
2. Teaching children in age-appropriate ways about mental health and mental illness, especially OSIs, can boost Family resilience and connection.
3. It isn’t necessary to talk directly about a trauma to have a conversation about impacts of an OSI. Focus on teaching children about the impacts of the “invisible injury” on a parent’s behaviour, with the goal of helping them understand that it is not their fault, that they are not responsible for fixing it, and that they are loved.

PANEL PRESENTATION: KNOWLEDGE, COMMUNITY AND HOPE THROUGH THE VOICE OF VETERAN FAMILY MEMBERS

Moderators: Laryssa Lamrock and Polliann Maher (Atlas Institute)

Panellists:

- Diane Welburn – CAF Veteran
- Lorraine Brown – Veteran Family member, sibling of a Veteran
- Bethany Easterbrook – Veteran Family member, adult child of a Veteran
- Tim Jeliff – Veteran Family member, spouse of a Veteran
- Jason Anderson – RCMP Veteran

This panel presentation discussed challenges each of the panellists have navigated as members of a military Family impacted by an OSI. Challenges discussed included the personal and interpersonal barriers they have overcome or are overcoming, and misconceptions about military and/or Veteran Families that they or others have had to unlearn.

Key messages:

1. Operational stress injuries affect everyone in a military and/or Veteran Family, not just the service member with an OSI.
2. Community is essential to healing from the impacts of an OSI – for the service member as well as their Family members. All panellists shared that reaching out to like-minded members of the Veteran community was a crucial step in their healing journey.
3. Communicate safely and transparently with Family members – spouses, children and others in the familial network – about the impacts of an OSI, and let them know how they can help. This can boost familial resilience and connection.



Diane Welburn – CAF Veteran



Lorraine Brown – Veteran Family member, sibling of a Veteran



Bethany Easterbrook – Veteran Family member, adult child of a Veteran



Tim Jeliff – Veteran Family member, spouse of a Veteran



Jason Anderson – RCMP Veteran

WHAT WE HEARD

This section briefly summarizes feedback received through our post-event survey. A total of 75 attendees responded to the survey.

KEY FEEDBACK

Q: What was the most important thing you learned from the event?

A (Day 1):

1. Availability of service providers/resources/support
2. Importance of military and Veteran Families
3. Impacts of OSIs on military and Veteran Families

A (Day 2):

1. Availability of service providers/resources/support
2. We are not alone
3. Impacts on Families

Q: What did you enjoy most about the Summit?

A (Day 1):

1. Presenters
2. Resources/information presented
3. Lived Experience stories

A (Day 2):

1. Lived Experience stories
2. Variety of topics
3. Presenters



92% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that the Summit improved their understanding of Veteran Family mental health.



96% of respondents strongly agreed that they would like to learn more about Veteran Family mental health and well-being.

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Disclaimer: Views and opinions expressed are solely those of the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families and may not reflect the views and opinions of the Government of Canada.