

BLUF: The truth is that there can be occupational implications associated with seeking mental health care, but seeking help does not typically end a military career.



MENTAL HEALTH AND YOUR CAREER

FIGHTING MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

Career impact of seeking mental health care is a concern across the profession of arms. The stigma of seeking help for behavioral health conditions exists in our general population and within our military community. What constitutes ‘career impact’ varies, but the related stigma can cause a person to deny symptoms, delay seeking care or stop them altogether from beginning treatment.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

If I utilize mental health services...

Will I lose or fail to gain a SECURITY clearance just because I sought mental health care?

- “No. Seeking mental health care is a positive course of action and a sign of sound judgment. It is the most common way to mitigate mental health issues and is recognized as a positive step during the personnel vetting process.”¹ *Defense Counter Intelligence & Security Fact Sheet: MENTAL HEALTH AND SECURITY CLEARANCES*

Will I be medically discharged?

- The vast majority utilizing mental health services are not medically discharged. A review of 2019 data showed that 1.2% of Regular Air Force members were medically discharged, of which less than half (0.46%) had a mental health condition. Some diagnosed mental health conditions can lead to fitness for duty determination through the formal disability medical evaluation board process. For the DoD list of disqualifying conditions see DoDI 6130.03-V2.²



Will I be administratively discharged?

- The vast majority utilizing mental health services are not administratively discharged. A review of 2019 data showed that 0.14% of Regular Air Force members were administratively separated related to a mental health condition (excluding BMT discharges). Airmen may be discharged based upon a mental condition which a commander has determined interferes with assignment or duty performance, but which does not make them eligible for disability processing. Prior to initiation of discharge the member must have been formally counseled concerning deficiencies and afforded an opportunity to overcome them.

○ See the following guidance for more information: AFI 36-3206, Administrative Discharge Procedures for Commissioned Officers, AFI 36-3207, Separating Commissioned Officers, AFI 36-3208, Administrative Separation of Airmen, and AFI 36-3209 Separation and Retirement Procedures for Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve Members

“The misinformation surrounding the potential loss of an individual’s security clearance eligibility for receiving or seeking mental health services, is abundant and invalid. Current social stigmas on mental health can have a profound impact on treatment outcomes or hinder effective and efficient recovery, if an individual faces exclusion or discrimination when he/she proactively seeks support services. This self and culturally-imposed silence not only hurts the individual, but his/her chain-of-command’s unit readiness and ultimately, the mission.”³



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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

If I utilize mental health services...

Will I be able to deploy?

- Yes, however you must meet the stability requirements unique to the Area of Operation (AOR) you are traveling to. Each geographic combatant command establishes minimum medical stability guidelines unique to the medical resources available in the region. When indicated, medical waivers can be submitted. From 2012-2020, 85% of AFCENT deployment and permanent change of station general medical waivers were approved, with 6% of waivers denied related to recent mental health conditions.

Will I be disqualified for a special duty status (i.e. AUoF, Flying, PRP, SOD)?

- Not necessarily. Some military occupations and positions have enhanced medical qualification standards related to mission essential tasks. It is useful to read the guidance unique to your special duty status. For some conditions, a duty status may be temporarily suspended pending resolution of the mental health condition. As noted in DAFMAN48-123, members assigned to flight duties or Special Operational Duty (SOD) require administrative and operational controls to certify medical qualifications for duty on a recurring basis. A review of 2019 data showed that 1.5% of AFGSC active duty PRP Airmen were decertified for any reason and 0.39% were decertified for mental health concerns.

- See the following guidance for more information: AFI 31-117 Arming and Use of Force (AUoF); DoDM 5210.42_AFMAN13-501 Nuclear Weapons Personnel Reliability Program (PRP)

Will my Commander know?

- Typically no. Most mental health encounters do not lead to Commander notification. All medical and mental health records are protected by the Privacy Act, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and other applicable laws/regulations. There may be exceptions that require a mental health provider to disclose information to your Commander. Some exceptions include, serious risk of harm to self, others or the mission; if you are admitted to inpatient care, enrolled into substance abuse treatment, under the Personnel Reliability Program (PRP) or referred for a Command Directed Evaluation (CDE). In most cases you and your therapist will discuss the reason and nature of the notification.

Will I be placed on a mobility or duty restricting profile?

- Possibly. Certain serious conditions, like psychotic or bipolar disorders, require a profile to be entered on AF Form 469. Other mental health conditions may require a temporary profile if the condition impairs and/or prevents a member from performing at least some requirements of military service and/or duties expected to be a part of his/her air force specialty code (AFSC) and/or current assignment. The intent of a mobility profile is to ensure the member is able to complete the medical intervention without disruptions in order to return to full duty. An example of a duty restricting profile may be a temporary recommendation to a Commander for Do Not Arm pending stability on a new medication or resolution of distracting mental health symptoms. Once stable on a medication, or symptoms largely resolved, the temporary profile would be removed. However, if a mental health profile extends beyond 365 days the member's record must undergo review by the local airmen medical readiness optimization (AMRO) board, which will determine if the case should be referred for a medical evaluation board.

- See the following guidance for more information: AFI 48-133 Duty Limiting Conditions



MENTAL HEALTH AND YOUR CAREER

REAL PEOPLE - DISPELLING THE MYTHS

*Shift Back to Normal: How Master Sgt. Michael Myers Found Resilience through Humility and Helping Others*⁴

“Today, Myers still holds his security clearance and believes he made the right decision because he is still serving, and he was able to get the necessary tools to continue a successful career. “The stigma still remains today in a lot of career fields though and what people need to know is that you need to just reach out and ask for help,” he says. He continues, “Allow yourself to put your pride aside to get the care you need and the tools necessary for the short-term so that you can continue on with the mission for the long-term.”

*How Resilience Training Changed a Life*⁵

“TSgt Williamson recently completed another cross-training opportunity at Keesler Air Force Base, Mississippi to become a Manpower Analyst, his third career path in the Air Force. He is scheduled to move to Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado in December and he is happy to report that this new career transition has not had a negative impact on his mental health. He feels this is the direct result of the resilience skills he learned to help him handle life’s challenges.”

*Capt. Casey Ross: “I Owe my Life to my Commanders”*⁶

“She thought sharing her full story would end her career—she was wrong. “I saw them, warriors to the core, be empathetic and not push me away,” says Ross. “They fought to get me back in the airplane.”

*The Journey to Seeking Help for Multiple Traumas*⁷

“This support system saved Boccher’s life, gave him hope and strength, and allowed him to continue to work, maintain his clearance, and then retire with dignity.”

Choosing to seek professional help to overcome life challenges and address your mental health can be a difficult decision due to concern about career implications. Some career impacts are clearly described, whereas other impacts may be indirect and related to cultural and systemic perceptions about those seeking mental health treatment. It takes courage to seek help. Many who seek help overcome life challenges and find better ways to manage their mental health symptoms. If you have questions about the potential impact of seeking mental health services seek answers thru reviewing published guidance, candid conversations with your mentor, your Primary Care Provider or a trusted supervisor or peer. It is important that you access mental health care when needed. If you are unsure where to start, consider a consult with a Military One Source (800-342-9647) provider or your local Military and Family Life Consultant who can provide education on care options. If you are ready to initiate specialty mental health care, contact your local military treatment facility to schedule a mental health assessment.

End Notes

1. Defense Counter Intelligence & Security Fact Sheet: MENTAL HEALTH AND SECURITY CLEARANCES - https://www.dcsa.mil/Portals/91/Documents/DODCAF/resources/DCSA-FactSheet_Mental-Health_SecurityClearances.pdf
2. DoDI 6130.03-V2 Medical Standards for Military Service - <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/613003v2p.pdf?ver=2020-09-04-120013-383>
3. SAF/AAZ 19 Jan 2021 Memo For Distribution - Department of the Air Force Invisible Wounds Initiative and Personnel Security [https://www.acc.af.mil/Portals/92/Docs/ACC%20Bridge/Quick%20Tips/\(U\)%20FINAL%20SAF-AAZ%20Memorandum%20for%20Final%20IWI%20Task%20-%2019%20Jan%202021%20signed.pdf?ver=B9IT8xLfrpNDpV5H23q7JA%3D%3D](https://www.acc.af.mil/Portals/92/Docs/ACC%20Bridge/Quick%20Tips/(U)%20FINAL%20SAF-AAZ%20Memorandum%20for%20Final%20IWI%20Task%20-%2019%20Jan%202021%20signed.pdf?ver=B9IT8xLfrpNDpV5H23q7JA%3D%3D)
4. 4 Feb 2021: Shift Back to Normal: How Master Sgt. Michael Myers Found Resilience through Humility and Helping Others - <https://go.usa.gov/xsxqr>
5. 14 Dec 2020: How Resilience Training Changed a Life - <https://www.woundedwarrior.af.mil/Media/Article-Display/Article/2445967/how-resilience-training-changed-a-life/>
6. 26 Aug 2020: Capt. Casey Ross: “I Owe my Life to my Commanders” - <https://www.woundedwarrior.af.mil/Media/Article-Display/Article/2326145/capt-casey-ross-i-owe-my-life-to-my-commanders/>
7. 18 Sep 2020: The Journey to Seeking Help for Multiple Traumas - <https://www.woundedwarrior.af.mil/Media/Article-Display/Article/2353321/the-journey-to-seeking-help-for-multiple-traumas/>