

Empirical Evidence of the Connections between Military Family Readiness and Military Readiness, Warfighting Capability, and Lethality: Version 3

As of April 23, 2025

Aim

This brief presents empirical evidence that links military family well-being to military readiness, warfighting capability, and lethality.

Background

The well-being of military families is essential to the Department of Defense (DoD). Years of research have demonstrated a robust connection between family well-being and military readiness. To strengthen readiness, the DoD provides a range of programs and services designed to enhance family well-being.

A 2019 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine¹ highlights that military family members can do the following:

- Provide essential support to Service members throughout their careers.
- Influence whether Service members remain in the military.
- Affect Service members' ability to deploy or remain in theater depending on how Service members and their families cope with challenges.
- Raise a significant number of future military recruits.
- Experience psychological or physical challenges when their Service member struggles, which can create additional costs for the DoD.

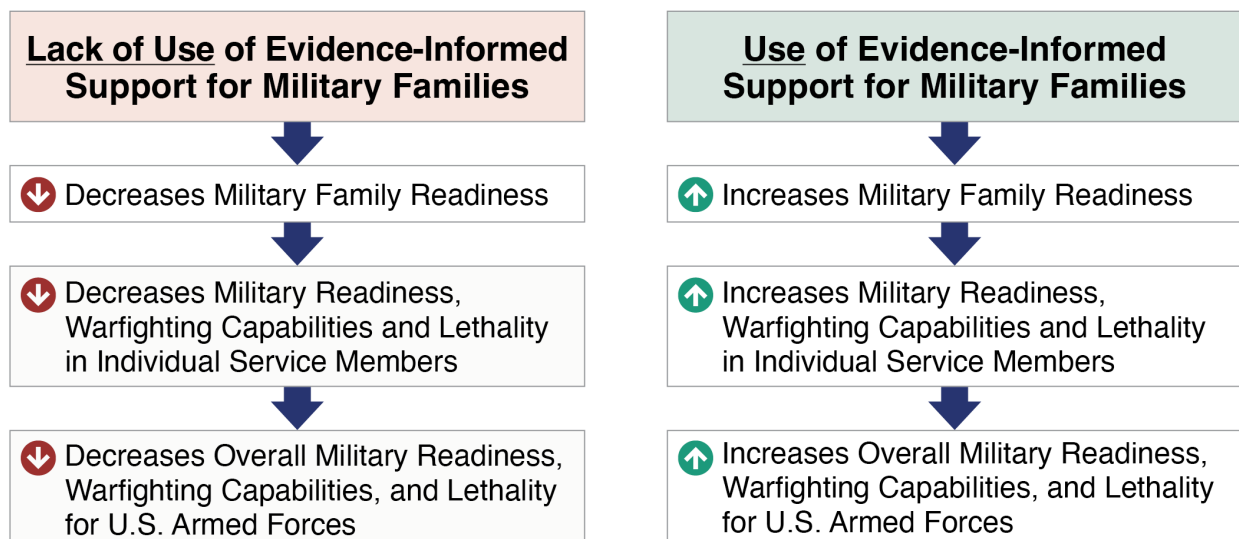
The Military Family Readiness System delivers assistance and services that support individual, couple, family, and community well-being. These efforts improve the quality of life, resilience, and overall functioning of military-connected families. These positive results, then, can directly contribute to warfighters' abilities to focus on their mission, increase the readiness of warfighters' units and installations, and help the U.S. Armed Forces maintain combat effectiveness and lethality.

Approach

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse) researchers conducted a literature review of recent peer-reviewed journal articles and gray literature to examine the connection between and among military family well-being, military readiness, warfighting capability, and lethality.

How Military Family Readiness Connects to Military Readiness, Warfighting Capability, and Lethality

Military family support systems positively impact Service member readiness. These systems enable Service members to train, deploy, and focus on their missions. As individual Service members become better prepared for Service, this increased readiness impacts their unit's performance and ultimately affects the U.S. Armed Forces' ability to fight and win.



Family Support Empowers Service Members' Training Efforts and Deployments

- **Implementing supports for Service members and their families, such as financial literacy courses, spouse education-assistance programs, spouse career services, and new parent-support interventions, enables Service members to focus on training and deployment.** When Service members are deployed or are in training, spouses and extended family members manage household responsibilities, child care obligations, and financial matters at home, so Service members can fulfill their mission demands.^{1,2}
- **Military families provide essential care for wounded, ill, or injured Service members (including single Service members), which can ensure continued service or a successful transition to civilian life.** Family caregivers manage medical appointments, rehabilitation, and emotional support, and their assistance can reduce strain on military healthcare systems.³
- **Spousal, family, and community supports significantly increase military retention.** Service members with spouses or partners who are supportive of their service in the military are more likely to remain in service. For example, retention rates increase by up to 1.98 times for senior officers.⁴⁻⁸
- **Service members and family challenges, such as frequent relocations, child care shortages, spousal unemployment, financial strain, marital stress, and social isolation, may negatively impact Service members' readiness to deploy.** Many stressors, including those listed, can affect a Service member's morale, willingness to reenlist, and ability to focus on his or her mission.^{5, 9-12}
- **Marital satisfaction is a key predictor of military retention.** Service members in stable marriages are more likely to remain in the military, while relationship strain can contribute to separation from service.¹³⁻¹⁵

Family Well-Being Protects Service Members' Mental and Physical Fitness

- **Healthy family functioning allows Service members to stay mission focused during deployment.** Establishing and maintaining strong family relationships can reduce stress and distractions for warfighters and can enable them to fully engage in their mission.¹⁶
- **Family stressors, such as relationship conflict, divorce, and caregiving burdens, are significant risk factors that can negatively impact Service members' mental health and suicidal tendencies and, in turn, mission readiness.** Divorce or separation is linked

to approximately 15% of military suicides, while family relationship problems are present in over 25% of military suicides.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

- **Family well-being directly impacts Service members' performance during deployment.** High levels of family tension, communication breakdowns, and unresolved conflicts are associated with Service members' reduced focus and decreased effectiveness in operational environments.^{1,19}
- **Access to quality military child care enhances mission readiness by reducing parental stress.** Having access to reliable child care increases warfighter readiness by allowing warfighters to fully engage in their combat missions because they do not have concerns about their children's well-being.^{1,19,20}
- **SINGLE SERVICE MEMBERS – Social supports tailored to single Service members such as recreational programs, community-involvement opportunities, and social-support networks increase warfighters' mental health and well-being and, consequently, increase overall mission readiness.** Supporting Service members' strong mental health can play a key role in their commitment to remain in service and can directly influence their fitness to serve and their readiness to deploy and the U.S. Armed Forces overall lethality.²¹
- **Opportunities for participation in leisure activities such as fitness and sports, recreation, community events, and travel enhance the mental health, life satisfaction, and overall well-being of Service members (including single Service members) and their families.** These types of recreational programs help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, which, in turn, can improve the quality of life for families and strengthen military family readiness. When Service members experience greater well-being, they are better prepared to deploy, maintain focus under pressure, and perform at their highest level, which will directly enhance mission readiness, warfighting capability, and overall force lethality.²²⁻
- **Educational professionals who help military families navigate school transitions, understand education policies, and access resources to support their children's academic success serve as essential support to military-connected students and their families.** School professionals can directly work with students and families to help reduce academic and social-emotional disruptions, which can occur during school transitions and can impact family stability. Military-connected students and families experience, on average, school transitions three times more often than their civilian peers. The role of educational professionals in fostering military-connected student resilience, academic achievement, and emotional well-being directly supports the overall readiness of military families. This support allows Service members to remain focused on their mission,

26

which will enhance their operational readiness, warfighting effectiveness, and force lethality.²⁷⁻²⁹

- **The programs and supports of the Military Family Readiness System are critical in promoting the mental and physical well-being of Service members (including single Service members) and their families.** Research consistently shows that one's mental and physical health are deeply connected. For example, depression increases the risk of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. Feelings of loneliness in young adults are associated with increased incidences of physical conditions like asthma, migraine headaches, arthritis, hypertension, and back pain. Illness and physical impairments reduce Service members' medical readiness and the number of deployable warfighters. Poor mental health is also linked to decreased physical performance, higher injury risk, and fatigue-related cognitive decline. In fact, sleep deprivation and reduced cognitive function contribute to up to 85% of military accidents. Supporting the mental health of Service members and their families strengthens individuals' physical readiness and helps maintain a force that is deployable, mission-ready, and lethal.³⁰⁻³⁹

Resilience in Families Sustains Force Strength and Retention

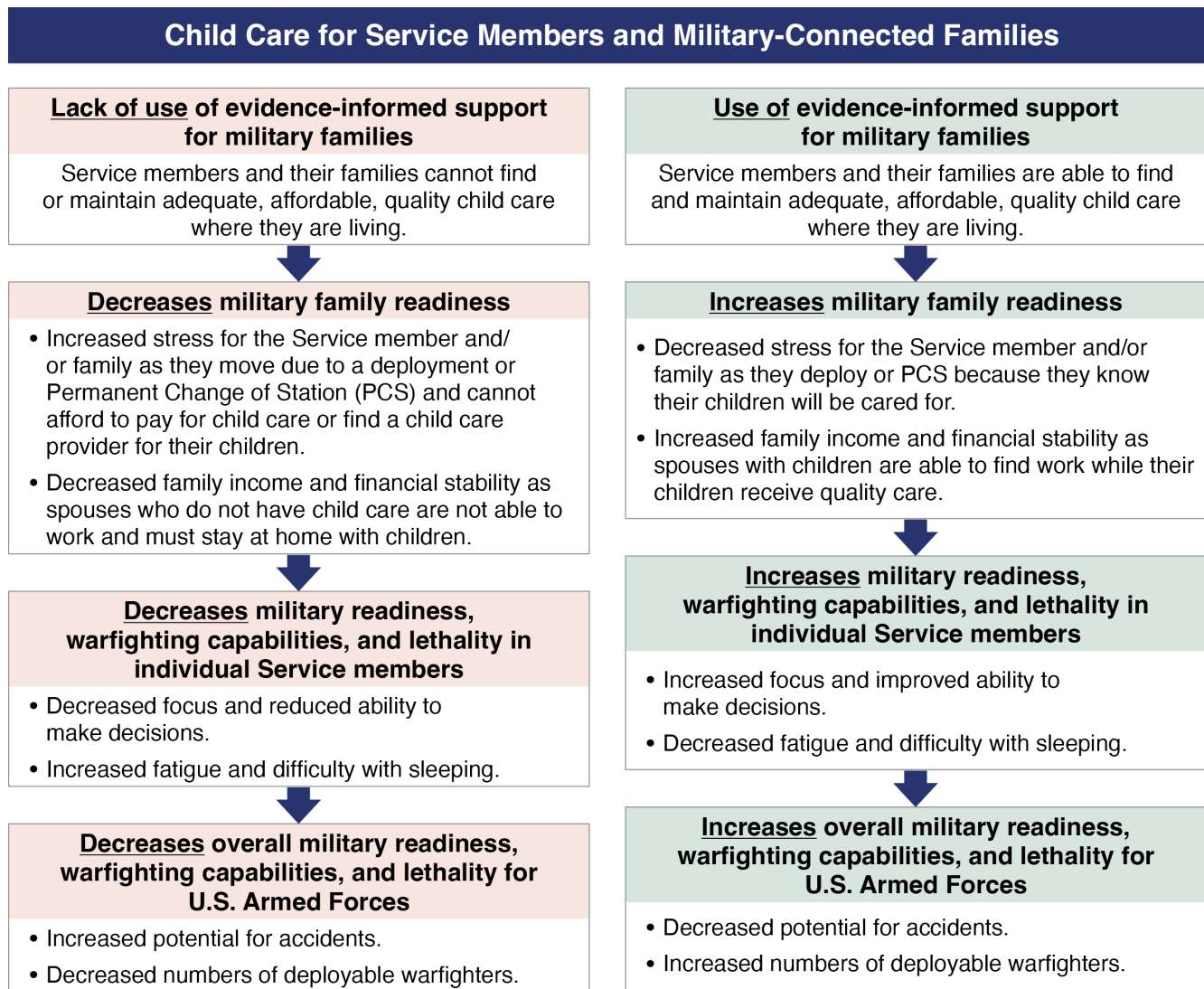
- **Military family well-being is directly linked to mission readiness.** Increased quality of life and improved well-being for Service members and their families help to secure retention of Service members, ensure warfighters can focus on training and their mission, and increase warfighters' readiness for combat.^{1,4,18}
- **Strengthening parenting skills and enhancing positive family communication can help increase military family resilience and Service members' mission readiness.** Implementing programs that disseminate effective parenting and coping strategies can help families manage military-related challenges, such as learning how to decrease stress, increase focus on training and deployment needs, and improve overall mission readiness and effectiveness.^{19,40}
- **When military families develop and maintain a shared understanding of their purpose and values related to military service, this shared family mission can improve families' abilities to adjust and cope more effectively with military life's challenges.** When families' beliefs align with military values and purpose, Service members may feel more supported and experience less conflict between the demands of their military service and their family life.⁴¹
- **Military Service members and their families who have strong support networks experience better mental health and resilience.** Peer connections, base community

resources such as Family Support Centers or Child Development Centers, and social-support systems can mitigate stress and improve family stability.⁴²

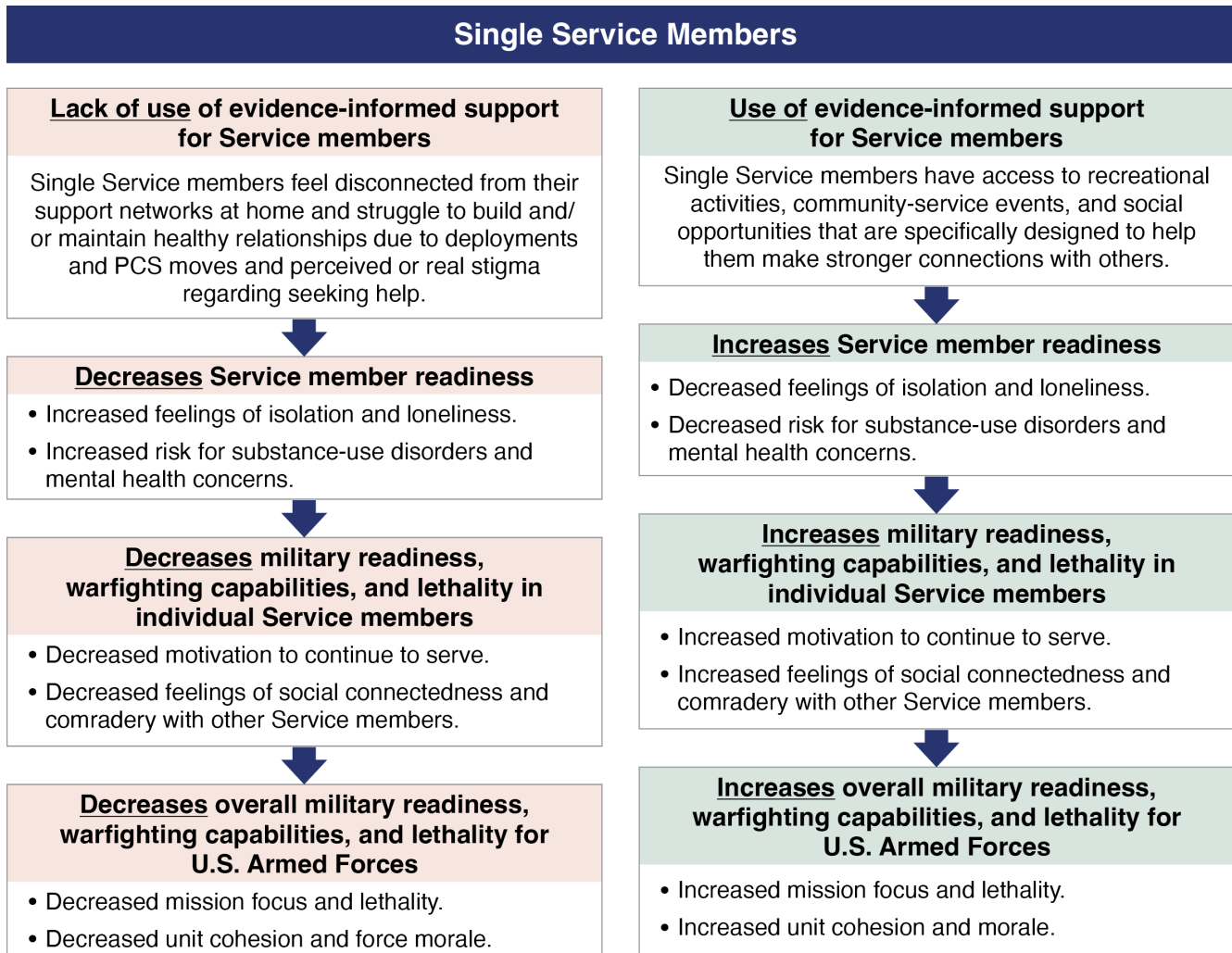
- **Resilient families are knowledgeable, resourceful, and proactive in managing military-life challenges.** Being aware of and using available resources, being financially prepared, and learning about and using problem-solving skills can contribute to overall family and mission readiness.⁴³
- **Family-military role conflicts such as frequent relocations, which can cause disruptions in education for children and employment for spouses, can be major stressors for Service members and negatively affect mission readiness.** Experiencing struggles with balancing military duties and family responsibilities can lead to increased stress, lower job performance, and retention challenges for Service members. These concerns can result in a decrease in warfighters' capabilities and the general mission readiness of the military.^{1,44}
- **Strong family communication improves Service member focus and performance.** Understanding and using open and effective communication can reduce stress and enhance coping strategies for all family members and can help deployed Service members concentrate on their mission and be more lethal.¹⁶
- **Programs that promote positive youth development in the family, school, and community help protect military-connected children and families from the challenges they face, including increased stress, depression, and anxiety.** Youth who have consistent, supportive relationships with caring adults and meaningful opportunities to engage in personal growth report experiencing fewer depressive symptoms, greater confidence, and stronger resilience. Military children often face ongoing difficulties, and the stressors these difficulties create can disrupt family stability and affect the Service member's emotional well-being, focus, and ability to train and complete his or her mission. Youth programs strengthen family readiness by supporting youth well-being and contribute directly to overall mission readiness and warfighter effectiveness.⁴⁵⁻⁵⁰

The following section provides three real-life examples that highlight issues surrounding child care, relationships, and single Service members. These scenarios illustrate how providing support for Service members and military families can directly impact military readiness, warfighting capabilities, and lethality.

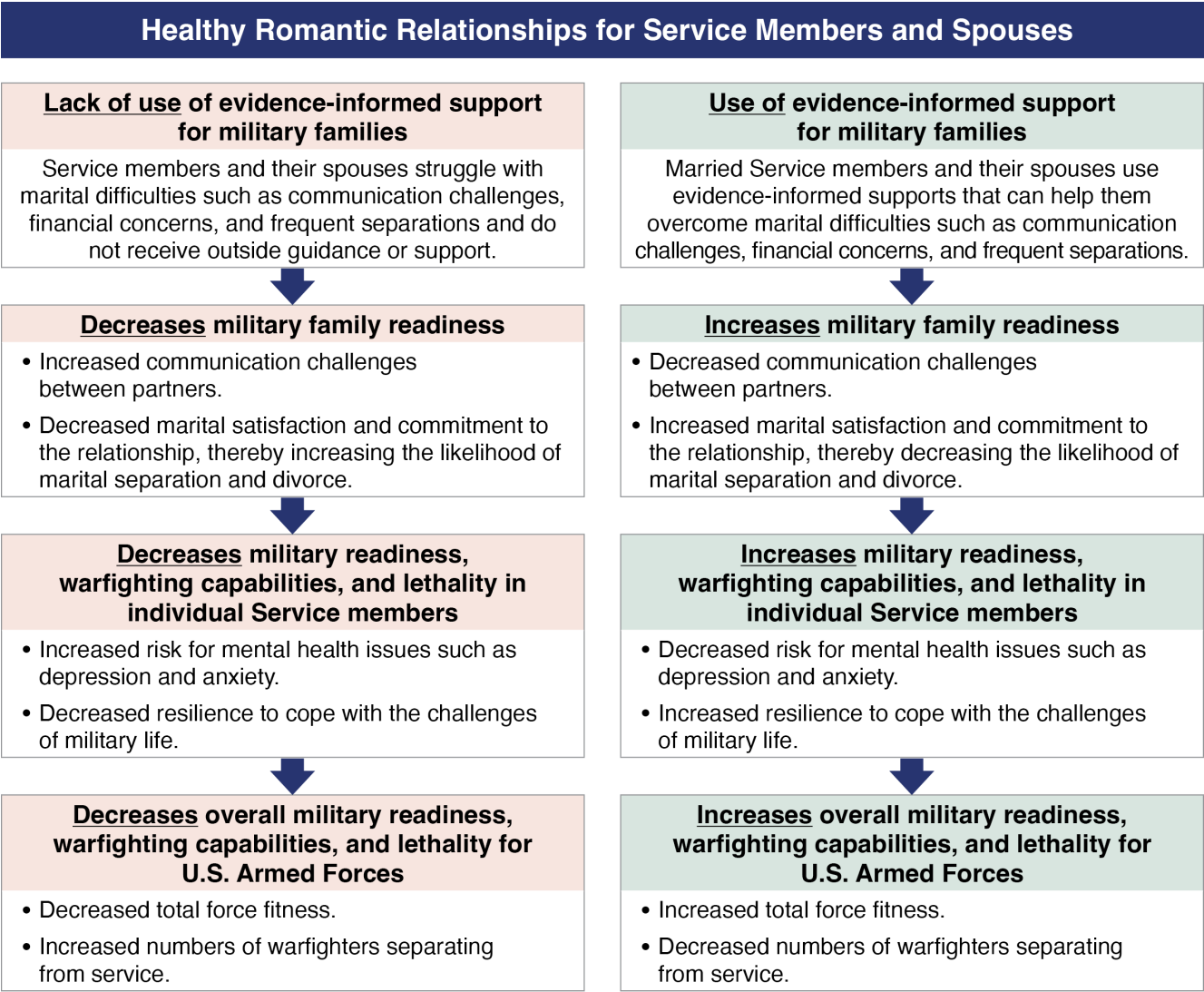
Example 1: Child Care for Service Members and Military-Connected Families



Example 2: Single Service Members



Example 3: Healthy Romantic Relationships for Service Members and Spouses



Appendix A

Definitions of Terms

Lethality is the military's capacity and ability to effectively neutralize or destroy an enemy target.⁵⁴ Critical to the military's lethality is the size of its force, and the size of the force can improve the military's capacity to deploy forces quickly and increase its ability to identify and interpret uncertainty. In addition, lethality requires that warfighters be able to perform under pressure and in extreme situations.

Military family is a term that includes the individual Service member, his or her spouse, and/or children. In some cases, the Department of Defense (DoD) may also recognize a Service member's parents as part of the military family. The DoD's definition of "military family" is important because it determines which individuals associated with a Service member currently qualify for programs and services.¹

Medical readiness refers to the overall medical, dental, and mental health status required for Service members to deploy and complete their assigned missions.⁵¹ Medical readiness is determined through various assessments, including an annual periodic health assessment (PHA). Examples of the standards required for medical readiness include being updated on immunizations; being free of medical, dental, and mental/behavioral conditions that could interfere with performance; and having completed and passed the PHA and other necessary screenings and assessments.^{52,53}

Military family support includes the programs, policies, practices, and procedures that are designed to assist Service members and their families in navigating the challenges and demands of military life. These supports are offered at various levels within the military, including at the DoD, the service branch, the installation, and the unit level, and they promote well-being and readiness for Service members and families. Implementing evidence-informed support based on research and data enhances the effectiveness of the military family-support system, which, consequently, leads to a positive and greater impact on military family readiness and warfighter mission readiness.¹

Military readiness is the overall capability of the military to fight and meet the demands of all assigned missions.⁵⁶ This readiness is generated through a complex, ongoing process that includes building initial readiness, increasing readiness through advanced training, and sustaining readiness through continual training and resourcing. Military readiness includes the availability and preparedness of personnel, equipment, training, and infrastructure (e.g., installation facilities such as barracks and training ranges). The ultimate focus of the military readiness process is to produce and sustain prepared military units that emphasize and center on the warfighter.⁵⁵

Mission readiness is a Service member's or unit's ability to perform a specific assigned mission effectively, safely, and on time. Whereas military readiness focuses on a general preparedness, *mission readiness* focuses on whether the force is ready to execute a particular task, operation, or deployment. The term *mission readiness* may be used interchangeably with ***operational readiness***.⁵⁷

Physical Readiness is “the ability to meet the physical demands of any duty or combat position, accomplish the mission, and come home healthy” (United States Department of the Army, 2020, p. 3).

Total Force Fitness is a framework developed by the DoD to evaluate, support, and maintain a Service member's health, performance, and readiness to complete his or her mission. The framework includes eight domains of fitness: physical, environmental, nutritional, financial, spiritual, medical and dental, psychological, and social. Increased levels of health across all domains result in increased Service member readiness to deploy and successfully accomplish mission-essential tasks.⁵⁸⁻⁶¹

Warfighters are Service members who are directly involved in combat or military operations.

Warfighting capability refers to the skills, equipment, and technologies that enable Service members to complete tasks or carry out missions under various conditions while meeting operational requirements.⁵⁷ These capabilities ensure warfighters can effectively adapt to challenges and achieve mission success in modern warfare.

Appendix B

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