

Animal-Assisted Interventions for Military Families: Current Findings & Future Directions

October 8, 2026

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Agenda

Important things to know about military families

What does the current research say?

What is needed moving forward?

Total Force Fitness (TFF) Framework



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CJCSI 3405.01 - September 1, 2011

"The most valuable resource in our military is our people. "

"TFF is an integrated process *to optimize the well-being and readiness of the individuals and families* of the total force. Success in establishing TFF will enable individuals to sustain optimal well-being and demonstrate the resilience needed to carry out assigned missions."

Total Force Fitness - 8 Domains

CJCSI 3405.01 - September 1, 2011

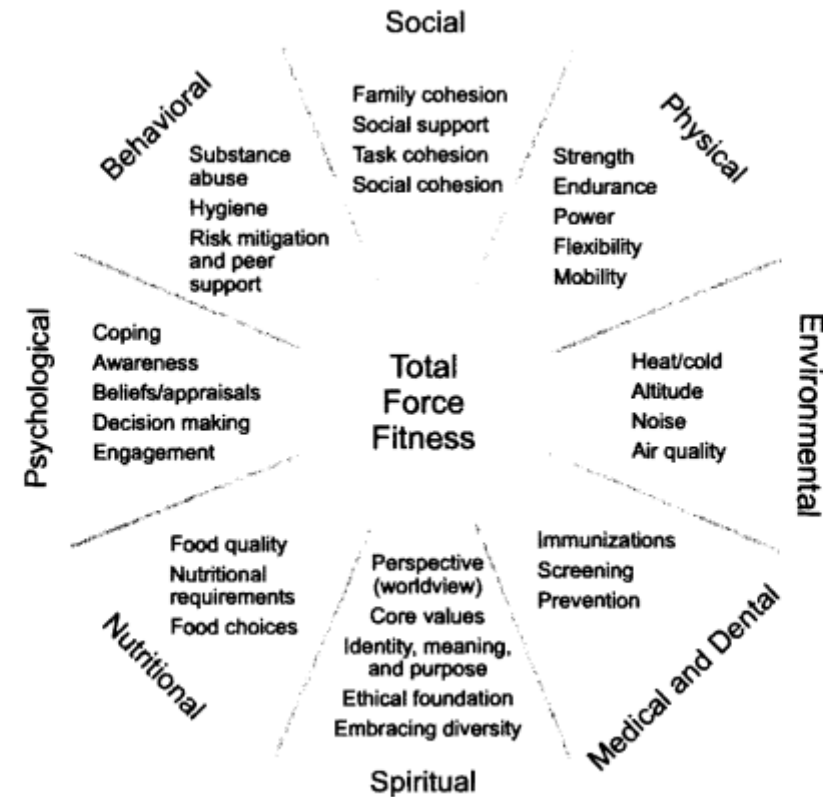


Figure 1. TFF Domains

Total Force Fitness Tenets



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CJCSI 3405.01 - September 1, 2011

- A. Total fitness extends beyond the Service member; total fitness should strengthen resilience in families, communities, and organizations.**
- B. A Service member's family's health plays a key role in sustained success and must be incorporated into any definition of total fitness.**
- C. Total fitness metrics must measure positive and negative outcomes and must show movement toward total fitness.
- D. Total fitness is linked to the fitness of the society from which the Service members are drawn and to which they will return.
- E. Leadership is essential in achieving total fitness

Total Force Fitness

Admiral Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

"Total fitness is a state where mind and body are seen as one. It is a state where people, their families, and the organizations in which they serve are connected and thriving. I see total fitness as a point of balance between readiness and well-being, where each of these two conditions are mutually supporting and in complete balance. A total force that has achieved total fitness is healthy, ready, and resilient; capable of meeting challenges and surviving threats. Achieving that begins with the way we treat our people." *(page 1)*

"Total force fitness is more than a physical fitness. It is the sum total of the many facets of individuals, their families, and the organizations to which they serve. It is not something someone achieves twice a year for a test. It is a state of being." *(page 2)*

Military families experience unique circumstances because of their military service.

It is important to acknowledge that many military families meet these obstacles with corresponding **resilience, flexibility, and bravery**.



Frequent relocation



Long-distance
relationships

Concerns for Military Families



Mental & physical health concerns



Work Instability



Social challenges



Changes to family functioning and interpersonal relationships



Peer relationships



School changes

Important Terminology



Blue Star Family: Family of a military service member who is actively serving.



Silver Star Family: Family of a military service member who was wounded, ill or injured.



White Star Family: Family of a military service member who died by suicide.



Gold Star Family: Family of a military service member who died during military service.

We are drawn to help people with animals.



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June 21, 2023

New policy enabling military families to submit pet expenses resulting from a permanent move



PODCAST EPISODE

What You Need to Know About PCSing With Pets

Episode By: [MilitaryOneSource Series](#)

13 Minutes • May 31, 2024



From 2011-2015, the number of VA systems offering animal-assisted interventions as a complementary option rose from 25% to 52% (Rindflesich, 2018)

2024 revised VHA Directive 1178



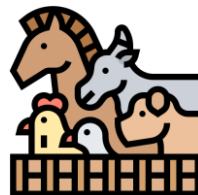
GUIDESTAR®

Search for 'military families animals' brings up more than 1000 different organizations whose mission is focused on supporting military members and their families with animal-assisted interventions.

Animal-Assisted Interventions



Complementary & integrative option



Highly **individualized**



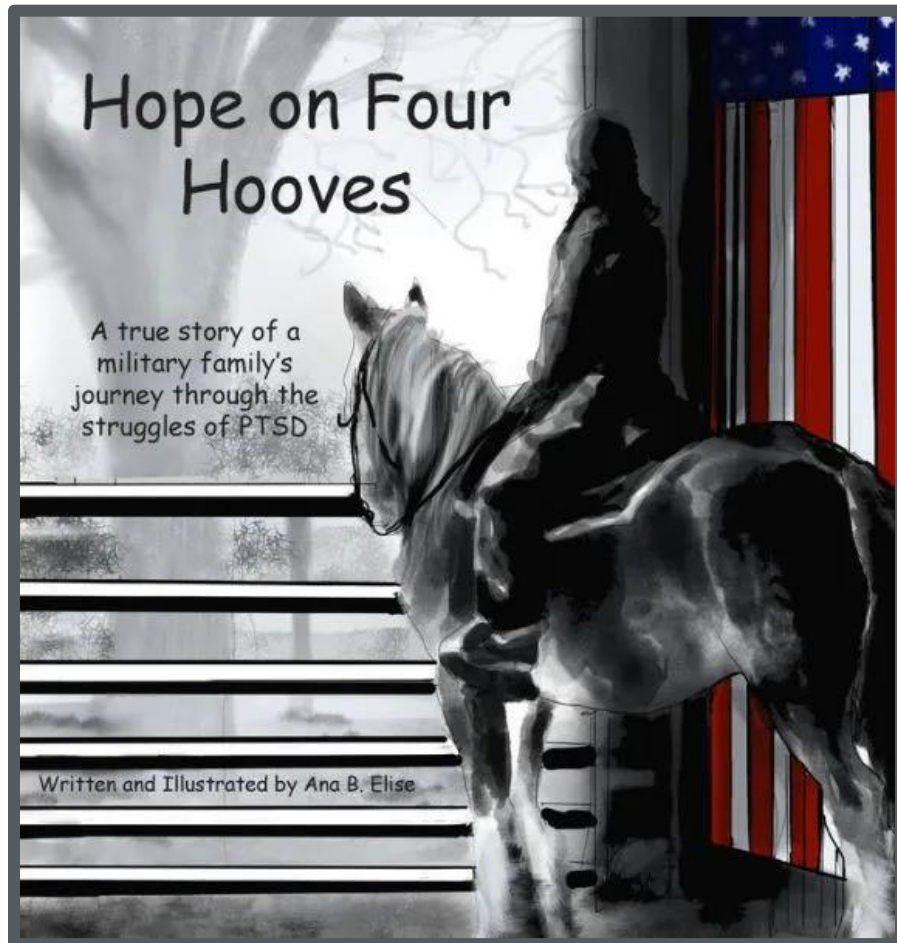
Growing evidence

A Family Focus



Military service often results in **family-wide** impacts, therefore requiring **family-wide** interventions.

Powerful Anecdotes



"Why use horses for therapy? While horses can be comforting friends, there is an even more interesting reason. Did you know that horses can sense your emotions? ... Through working with horses, people can learn to recognize and deal with their own emotions. "

" When you have experienced scary things like Papa did, they do not leave you, " writes Ana. "They stick on our head like burrs in a tail. Freedom isn't free, and it was costing our family dearly. "

- Ana B. Elise

Agenda

Important things to know about military families

What does the current research say?

What is needed moving forward?

Why is research important?



Recent literature calls attention to **the importance of family focused interventions** for military families post deployment.



But very **few studies have explored** the influence of AAI on military families as a unit.

Pets in Military Families



Pets are considered family members. Multiple barriers prohibit relocating pets. Leaving animals behind was emotionally painful.



Stronger positive attachment associated with positive development and adaptive coping strategies.



The bond between a pet and a veteran's partner was demonstrated to have a therapeutic role.

Animal-Assisted Intervention & Trauma

Review > [Front Psychol.](#) 2015 Aug 7;6:1121. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01121. eCollection 2015.

Animal-Assisted Intervention for trauma: a systematic literature review

Marguerite E O'Haire ¹, Noémie A Guérin ¹, Alison C Kirkham ¹

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 26300817 PMCID: [PMC4528099](#) DOI: [10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01121](#)



- 10 articles (2 veteran-focused)
- Short term improvement to **depression, PTSD and anxiety**

Review > [Eur J Psychotraumatol.](#) 2021 Mar 23;12(1):1879713.

doi: 10.1080/20008198.2021.1879713. eCollection 2021.

Effectiveness of animal-assisted interventions for children and adults with post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms: a systematic review and meta-analysis

Karin Hediger ^{1 2 3 4}, Julia Wagner ¹, Pascale Kunzi ², Anna Haefeli ¹, Felicitas Theis ¹, Carmina Grob ¹, Elena Pauli ¹, Heike Gerger ^{1 5}

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 34377357 PMCID: [PMC8330800](#) DOI: [10.1080/20008198.2021.1879713](#)

Meta-Analysis > [J Equine Vet Sci.](#) 2023 Sep;128:104871. doi: 10.1016/j.jevs.2023.104871.

Epub 2023 Jun 22.

Equine-Assisted Therapy in Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

Nora Palomar-Ciria ¹, Hugo J Bello ²

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 37355148 DOI: [10.1016/j.jevs.2023.104871](#)

Results continue to suggest that AAls have the **potential** to reduce symptoms of trauma and co-occurring conditions.

Most studies of AAI and trauma have focused on military veterans.



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Journal of Health and Social Sciences (JHSS)
The Italian Journal for Interdisciplinary Health and Social Development EDIZIONI FS Publishers

Systematic Review in Occupational Health Psychology

Animal-assisted interventions and post-traumatic stress disorder of military workers and veterans: A systematic review

Francesco CHIRICO¹, Ilaria CAPITANELLI², Behdin NOWROUZI-KIA³, Aaron HOWE⁴, Kavita BATRA⁵, Manoj SHARMA⁶, Lukasz SZARPAK⁷, Michal PRUC⁸, Gabriella NUCERA⁹, Giuseppe FERRARI¹⁰, Claudio Giovanni CORTESE¹¹, Maria Michela GIANINO¹², Daniela ACQUADRO-MARAN¹³

People and Animals: The International Journal of Research and Practice

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 12

2022

The Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy on the Health and Well-Being of Military Veterans: A Systematic Scoping Review and Recommendations for Future Research

Brooke Fonseca
University of Nottingham, mzybf1@nottingham.ac.uk

Fiona Marshall
University of Nottingham, fiona.marshall2@nottingham.ac.uk

Laura J. Edwards
The University of Nottingham; University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS Foundation Trust,
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SYSTEMATIC REVIEW article

Front. Psychiatry, 02 November 2023

Sec. Anxiety and Stress Disorders

Volume 14 - 2023 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1277338>

Equine-assisted interventions for veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder: a systematic review

Jiaxin Li^{*} Raúl Sánchez-García

Facultad de Ciencias de la Actividad Física y del Deporte (INEF), Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

Research Article | | 18 August 2026

Investigating the influence of animal-assisted services and service dogs on moral injury in military veterans: A scoping review

Authors: [Matthew P. Knight](#), [Zenithson Ng](#), [Jeanine Fletcher](#) | [AUTHORS INFO & AFFILIATIONS](#)

Publication: [Human-Animal Interactions](#) • 14:1 • 0034 • <https://doi.org/10.1079/hai.2026.0034>

Meta-Analysis > [PLoS One](#). 2022 Sep 21;17(9):e0274960. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0274960. eCollection 2022.

Assistance dogs for military veterans with PTSD: A systematic review, meta-analysis, and meta-synthesis

Sarah C Leighton¹, Leanne O Nieforth², Marguerite E O'Haire²

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 36129950 PMCID: [PMC9491613](#) DOI: [10.1371/journal.pone.0274960](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0274960)

Most studies of AAI and trauma have focused on military veterans.



Equine-assisted services **may be beneficial** for improving PTSD symptoms. However, methodological concerns (e.g., small sample sizes, high attrition rates, lack of control for co-occurring PTSD treatment) **highlight the need** for additional research.



Service dog placements were found to be **associated with significant and clinically meaningful improvements** in PTSD symptoms along with improvements in other areas of social and emotional well-being, although **no causality can be determined** without additional randomized controlled trials.

**What about studies that consider other members of
the military family within AAI?**

2024 Systematic Literature Review

Purpose: To investigate the effects of animal-assisted interventions on the biopsychosocial wellbeing of military family members, beyond the veteran themselves.

Aims:

1. Describe the characteristics of animal-assisted interventions for military families currently described within the scientific literature.
2. Evaluate the quality of the methodology present within the current scientific literature.
3. Synthesize the findings reported to date.



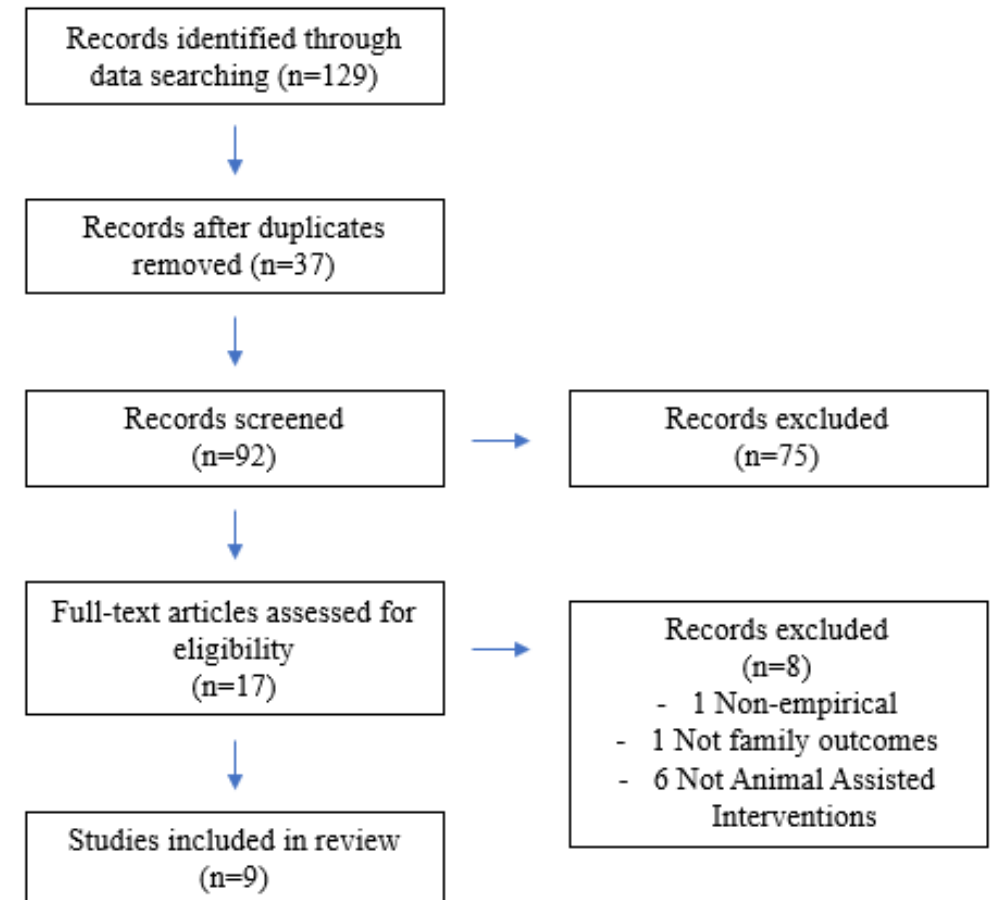
Methodology

5 databases were searched

Search terms included terms for military families + terms for animal-assisted interventions

Inclusion criteria:

- publication in English in a peer-reviewed journal or as a dissertation
 - collection of empirical data on AAls
- reporting of outcome results for military families, including directly from family members other than the service member or veteran



Results

9

articles published to date



All articles published in
the **last 5 years**



5 articles about
service dogs



4 articles about equine-
assisted services

Service Dog Article Findings

- Partners with service dogs in the home may experience **higher positive emotions** and may participate in **more activities** outside the home (Nieforth, Abdul Wahab, et al., 2022; Nieforth, Miller et al., 2022)
- Qualitatively, service dogs may promote a **resilience process** within military families (Nieforth et al., 2021; Whitworth et al., 2020)
- Partners with service dogs report **less anger, social isolation and work impairment** and **greater resilience, companionship and relationship satisfaction** (McCall et al., 2020)
- Challenges are apparent as well:
 - Increased unwanted **public attention** (McCall et al., 2020)
 - Adjusting to **new family roles** (McCall et al., 2020)
 - Increased **caregiver burden** for partners (Nieforth, Miller et al., 2022)
 - Decreased **caregiver satisfaction** for partners (Nieforth, Miller et al., 2022)

Service Dog Article Findings

BRIEF RESEARCH REPORT article

Front. Psychol., 29 July 2025

Sec. Health Psychology

Volume 16 - 2025 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1574445>

An exploratory investigation of psychosocial effects of service dogs on veterans' families from the perspective of family members



Linzi Williamson ^{1*}



Grace Rath ¹



Colleen Dell ²

1. Department of Psychology and Health Studies, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada

2. Department of Sociology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada

 **OPEN ACCESS** | Research Article | 14 February 2026



“I have my partner back”: Partners' perspectives of PTSD assistance dogs for military and emergency service personnel

Authors: [Chelsea Weatherill](#), [Em Bould](#), [Marie Iannos](#), [Libby Callaway](#), and [Miranda Van Hooff](#) | [AUTHOR INFORMATION AND AFFILIATIONS](#)

Publication: Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health • Volume 12, Number 4 • <https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2024-0084>

Service Dog Article Findings

ANTHROZOÖS

2026, VOL. 39, NO. 3, 407-438

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2026.2629112>

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group



The Influence of Service Dogs on Families of Veterans With PTSD: A Systematic Literature Review

Elisabeth L. de Lange^a, T. Bas Rodenburg^a, Paul A. Boelen^b, and Nienke Endenburg^a

^a Animals in Science and Society, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands ^b Department of Clinical Psychology, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands

• Partners w
activities

• Qualitative
Whitworth

• Partners w
companio

• Challenges

• Increa

• Adjust

• Increased caregiver burden for partners (Nieforth, Miller et al., 2022)

• Decreased caregiver satisfaction for partners (Nieforth, Miller et al., 2022)

participate in more

., 2021;

resilience,

Equine-Assisted Services Article Findings



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- Improved interpersonal **relationships**, reduced relationship problems and improved **communication** (Willmund et al., 2021)
- **Potential mental health benefits**: reduction of depressive symptoms, somatic symptoms and PTSD symptoms (Romaniuk et al., 2018; Willmund et al., 2021)
- Qualitatively, horses may be **catalysts** for emotional healing (Skidmore, 2018)
- **No** negative findings presented.

Conclusions

Preliminary results suggest that AAls **may be an effective complementary intervention** for military families.

More **research is needed** to draw conclusions regarding the efficacy.

Agenda

Important things to know about military families

What does the current research say?

What is needed moving forward?

What might AAI look like for military families?



Serving the entire family **together**.



Serving all **individual** members of the family.



Providing **activities** for the family to experience together.

Recommendations for Practice

Recognize the family system

Acknowledge the “ripple effect”

Focus on individualization

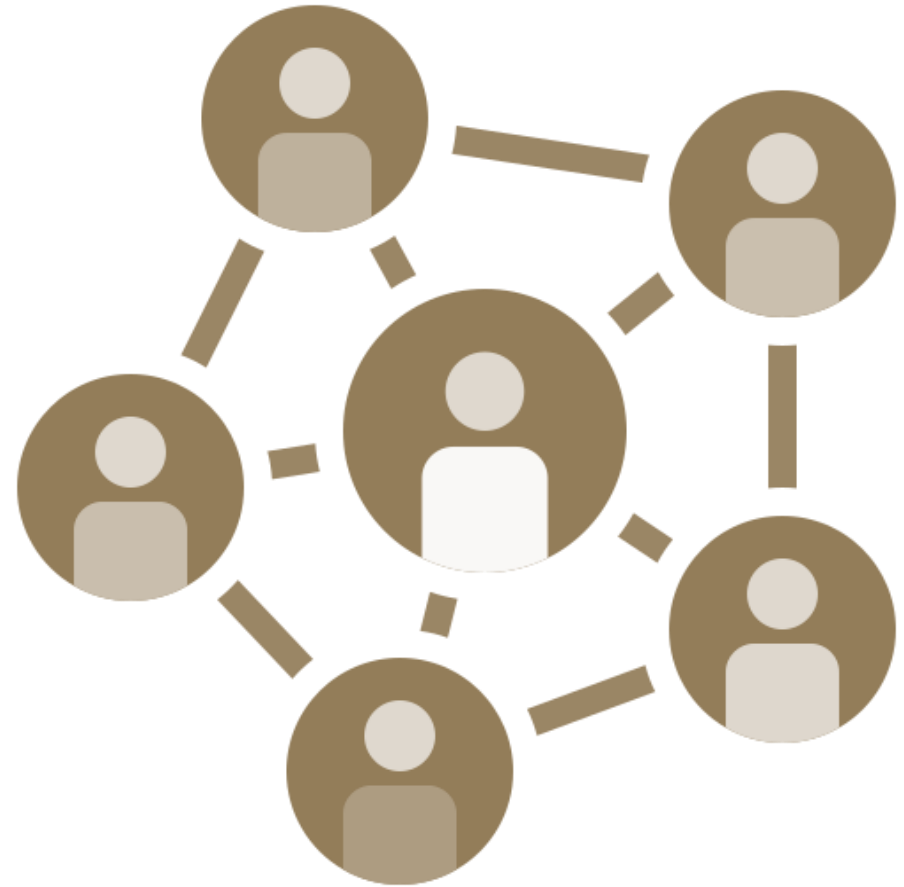
Incorporate the data

Remember Resilience

Recognize the Family System

From beginning of services to the end of services, acknowledge that your clients exist within **relationships** and **larger communities**.

Include the families (in ways appropriate to your services).



Acknowledge the Ripple Effect

What effects one family member will likely affect all members of the family.



Focus on Individualization

Be **curious**.

Work with the individual and the individual family that is there with you, while recognizing they have **intersecting identities and experiences** that make them who they are.



Incorporate the Data

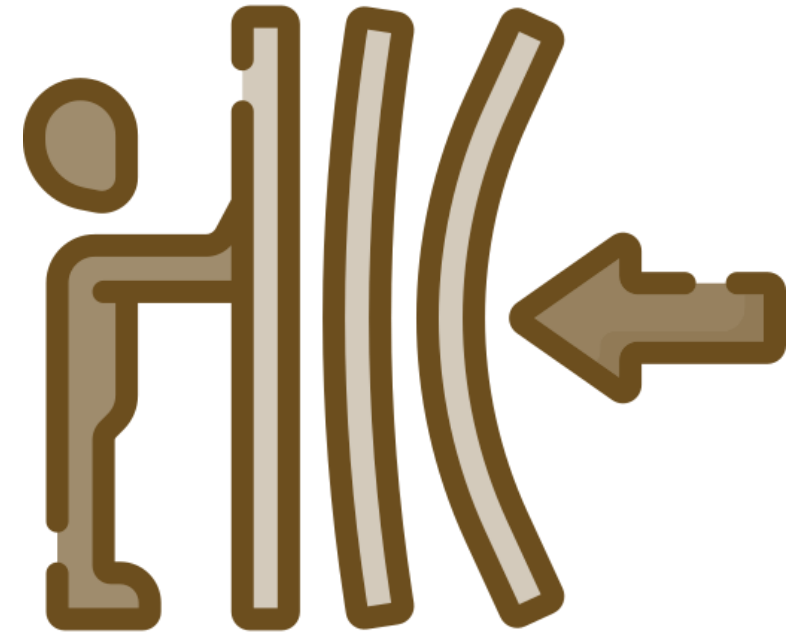
If within your scope of practice, consider incorporating an evidence-based family-focused framework.



Remember Resilience

Have a **strengths-based** approach.

Military families are some of the
strongest, bravest, and resilient
people you will ever meet.



Recommendations for Research

"TFF research must also be holistic in nature. This is vital for moving the health, wellness, and readiness spear forward and helping address population needs for a strong and resilient fighting force."



Any Questions?



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