

Chapter 2 – Effects of a Career Change

You have been in the military for a number of years, and you are now making the transition back to civilian life. Understanding stress, and coping with it, are essential skills you will need to get through this difficult time. The following information and resources will help you prepare for a successful transition.

A. Leaving the Military Challenges Your Identity

You have worked hard to become a Captain, Sergeant, or Petty Officer. When asked what you do, you probably replied, "I'm in the Army (Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard, or Marines)." Now you must start over as a civilian. Now you are just another civilian.

Changing careers is a stressful undertaking, perhaps even more so for those leaving military service after many years. A service member may have worked for 30 years to achieve a rank or grade, but upon leaving the Armed Forces, he or she leaves this rank behind—and with it, a large portion of his or her identity.

Some people find it easier than others to adopt new identities. Transition is traumatic and stressful, but it also opens up a whole range of possibilities. If you approach your transition as an opportunity to grow, you will have already taken a giant step toward reestablishing your identity.

B. What Is Stress?

Everybody knows what stress feels like. But what is it really? The experts tell us that stress is a state of being. It is not an attitude; it is not a sign of being unable to handle things. Stress is a physical response, which, left unchecked, can lead to mental and physical exhaustion and illness.

Natural stress in our lives is considered good. It allows our bodies to respond to danger. You know the expression, "Fight or flight." *Unnatural* stress comes from continued threats or dangers over which we have no control. The body is alert for long periods of time with no chance to relax. It is important to remember that the body, like any good machine, begins to wear out if it runs in high gear for too long.

Life's Most Stressful Events

In his book, *Winning Life's Toughest Battles*, Dr. Julius Segal outlines three broad categories of very stressful events. These include the following:

- Events that lead to the loss of a special relationship, such as divorce
- Events you cannot control that make you feel helpless, such as an accident
- Events with lasting consequences, such as a terminal illness or the loss of your job

Transitioning from the military can have aspects of all three categories. In a sense, you lose many special relationships by losing the daily interaction with your co-workers. If you are transitioning involuntarily, you may be in a situation that is beyond your control. Transition, obviously, has permanent consequences and being involuntarily separated may bring on some unforeseen stresses. When you change jobs, your life changes.

The Stress-Health Connection

It is important to look for signs of stress overload. Here are some of the symptoms:

- Constant fatigue
- Headaches

- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Stomach problems
- More frequent colds or other illnesses
- Smoking or drinking more than usual
- Feeling nervous
- Being irritable or angrier than you want to be
- Desire to be alone, away from other people
- Inability to eat or eating more than usual

If you are suffering from any of these symptoms, it is likely they are stress related.

C. The "Grieving Process" Is Normal

Research has shown that most people go through major life changes in stages. These stages are present in a wide variety of major life traumas:

- **Denial:** "This is not really happening," or "This is not happening to me."
- **Anger:** Directed either at yourself or at others.
- **Depression:** Often accompanied by a sense of helplessness.
- **Acceptance:** The turning point, when you begin to accept your situation.
- **Resolution:** Begin to take the steps necessary to return to a normal state.

Proceeding through each step is normal, and the process should not be rushed. Often however, people may progress out of a stage and then drop back into it. If uncontrolled, the bouncing back and forth between stages can continue for a long time. As you make your transition to civilian life, look for these stages in yourself and acknowledge your movements from one step to the next.

D. Coping With Transition-Related Stress

The experiences of thousands of service members who have recently separated suggest that this transition is likely to be stressful for you and your family. Those that have transitioned in the past have found several tactics extremely important in dealing with the stress related to separation from the military:

- **Get going:** It is your transition; no one can do it for you. Work through the transition process and do not procrastinate. Put your situation in perspective and get on with your life. After all, you are not the first person to go through transition, and you will not be the last. You'll do okay too.
- **Sell yourself:** You have a great product—YOU! So sell yourself! Now is not the time to be modest about your accomplishments. No one will come looking for you unless they know you are available. Once you let them know, you will find many people who will help you.
- **Work at it:** Work at planning your transition as if it were a job. However, if you spend every waking hour working on it, you will burn out. Take time for yourself and your family.
- **Lighten up:** This is probably the most important piece of advice. Do not lose your sense of humor. An upbeat disposition will see you through.
- **Keep your family involved:** Your family has a large stake in your transition. They are experiencing many of the same feelings, worries, and uncertainties as you are. Do not keep your plans to yourself; get your family involved in this process. Let them in on your plans and ask for their input throughout the process. It's their life too.
- **Volunteer:** Consider doing volunteer work. Your charitable actions will help others and assist you in getting to know the community beyond the military installations and enhance your networking.
- **Take a change management course:** Consider taking a change management course before stress appears, or at the first signs of stress.

E. Where to Go for Help

We all deal with stress everyday. However, during a major life transition stress can manifest itself in unforeseen and undesirable ways. Fortunately, help is only a phone call away. Various agencies on and off base provide counseling for personal issues, marital issues, parent-child conflicts, stress-related concerns, and alcohol and drug abuse. Remember, while you are on active duty, these services are free on military installations.

For information, assistance, and referrals, contact any of the following:

- Local Assistance at:
Family Center, Chaplain's Office, and Military mental health care facility.
Which can be found online at: <http://www.nvti.cudenver.edu/resources/militarybasestap.htm>
- The Dept. of Veterans Affairs at 1-800-827-1000
(VA locator website: <http://www1.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp?isFlash=1>)
- Military OneSource 24/7 Support at 1-800-342-9647
<http://www.militaryonesource.com>
- Marine for Life at <http://www.mfl.usmc.mil>
- Military Family Network at <http://www.emilitary.org>