



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)  
info@cancercaare.org  
www.cancercaare.org

# fact sheet

## CARING FOR A VETERAN WITH CANCER

**The way your loved one copes with cancer may be influenced by their time in military service. As a caregiver, you may wonder how to give them the care they need. Greater awareness and understanding of their experiences may help.**

### MILITARY CAREER

The armed forces place value on traits that strengthen the whole unit. This includes enduring pain without complaint and strictly following orders. It also includes sacrifice for the greater good and stripping oneself of personal needs. These behaviors are enforced from the beginning of their training. However, when they face their own struggles, they may have trouble expressing themselves. They may not know what to do. This can be especially true when they face serious health concerns. What once were benefits can make finding the proper care a challenge.

### INFLUENCE ON VETERANS

A veteran may struggle to depart from what they previously knew as strengths. Hiding pain is an unspoken practice in the military. It may take time for a veteran to admit that they need help. Veterans are expected to conform to a preconceived role. They may fear speaking out or displaying uneasy thoughts or emotions.

A veteran may have difficulty acknowledging their concerns. They may use humor as a defense against showing parts of themselves that feel vulnerable.

They may view their cancer as not important in relation to the needs of others. They may attempt to disregard their own concerns out of fear of disturbing others.

Some veterans may have experienced wartime trauma, leaving them with enduring anxiety and depression.



Another trauma in the form of cancer can only further aggravate these underlying emotions.

Veterans may view themselves as unable to be helped. They may feel embarrassed or feel humiliation. They may now feel as if their weakness has been exposed. Your loved one may rather suffer in silence than admit they need help.

### WAYS TO OFFER SUPPORT TO VETERANS

As a caregiver, not knowing what is going on with your loved one may lead you to feel left out. Seeing them be distant may make it hard to know how to support their needs. You might best assist your loved one by keeping the following suggestions in mind:

- Avoid questioning how your loved one feels. Remain available for them in your life to come to you when they feel ready.
- Make time to listen to what they are trying to express when they approach you. Try not to dismiss or reject their attempts to communicate how they feel.

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- Be open to signs that your loved one may be trying to send. Understand that a person may express their emotions in unexpected ways. This may include tone of voice, hesitation or refusal to speak. They may also communicate in nonverbal ways, such as crossing the arms, turning their back or making hand gestures.
- Express empathy and understanding. Reinforce the idea that receiving mental or physical help does not mean that they are “weak.” Instead, it requires strength to seek ways to improve their overall well-being.

Encourage your veteran to find outside support, when possible. It is often good to know that others share their experience. CancerCare offers counseling in New York and New Jersey, case management and support groups throughout the country and more. The support groups include diagnosis-specific groups and those for veterans. We also have fact sheets “Coping With Cancer as a Veteran” and “Veterans Living With Cancer: Resources and Support.”

## CARING FOR YOURSELF AS A CAREGIVER

Caregiving for anyone with cancer can leave you feeling drained. It is important to keep up your spirits and take care of yourself. This will help you provide for your loved one. Consider asking for support from family and friends. Try to find ways to replenish your own energies. Your spirits and personal resources are not infinite. Acknowledging your own needs is also important.

An oncology social worker can help you process some of the specific emotions that you may feel. They may also direct you to support groups to help share your experience. Call CancerCare’s Hopeline at 800-813-HOPE (4673) for further assistance. Our publications, such as the fact sheet “Advice for Caregivers: How Can You Help Yourself,” may also help.

## RESOURCES FOR CAREGIVERS

These veteran-related organizations provide peer-based support programs to connect caregivers in similar circumstances to form bonds, share knowledge, devotion and experiences.

### **American Red Cross Military Veteran Caregiver Network (MVCN)**

800-733-2767

[www.redcross.org/military-veteran-caregiver-network.html](http://www.redcross.org/military-veteran-caregiver-network.html)

### **Veterans Affairs Caregiver Support Program**

855-260-3274

[www.caregiver.va.gov/index.asp](http://www.caregiver.va.gov/index.asp)

## CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include case management, counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by master’s-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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*Edited by Sarah Paul, LCSW, OSW-C  
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National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

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