

Engaging in Conversation and Assessing Financial Well-Being

As you begin engaging in conversation and assessing a service member's current financial well-being, recognize that everyone has questions on finances — no matter their level of well-being, and no one person knows everything about achieving financial well-being. The key is to start the conversation, perhaps at a morning stand-up, during a feedback session or anytime you may meet with your service members.

Below, find key questions that, based on the responses, provide insights into one's financial well-being, as well as resources designed to assist you and your service members. Before asking others these questions, ask yourself, record your answers and then see how you might rate your own financial well-being.

Well-being area

Present/financial security: Control over day-to-day, month-to-month finances

Challenges to control one's expenses may, for some, result in individuals or families experiencing barriers to financial well-being. This question screens for that potential condition.

Question

Do you control your money, or do you feel like your money controls you from day to day or month to month?

- If a service member indicates their money is in control, encourage them to use a spending plan or visit a personal financial manager or personal financial counselor to begin shifting the balance of power.
- If a service member indicates they are in control of their money, provide praise and encouragement to continue on this track. Help is available to provide periodic checkups to provide assistance in goal setting.



RESOURCES: *Installation Military and Family Support Centers* provide a number of support programs and can assist with identifying local resources. Military OneSource provides *specialty consultations* through professionally trained consultants by phone on a broad range of issues for service members, families and survivors. A personal financial manager and personal financial counselor can assist with financial resources, education and planning. In addition, military emergency relief societies may be able to provide emergency financial assistance through interest-free loans or grants.

- Air Force Aid Society: <https://afas.org/>
- Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society: <https://www.nmcrs.org/>
- Army Emergency Relief: <https://www.armyemergencyrelief.org/>
- Coast Guard Mutual Assistance: <https://www.cgmahq.org/>

- American Red Cross:

<https://www.redcross.org/find-your-local-chapter.html>

**The American Red Cross can assist when a service member or family member is not located near a military installation.*

Well-being area

Future/security: Capacity to absorb a financial shock

One way to assess financial well-being is to think about the ability to absorb a financial shock or unexpected expense. What would you do if you were in the following situations? Consider discussing with your service members to get them thinking about unexpected expenses and developing a plan to better prepare for financial shock and increase financial well-being.

Question

If you had an unexpected expense of \$400, such as a vehicle repair/maintenance or medical bill, how would you cover the expense?

- If the service member indicates they would be able to pay cash or cash equivalent (savings or credit card paid fully at next statement), provide praise and encourage them to stay on this track. Include in the discussion repaying themselves to keep emergency savings available in the future.
- If the service member indicates they would need to use a credit card but they could not pay it off at the next statement or would need to use some other form of credit in order to cover the expense, make them aware of resources such as the military aid societies. The aid societies can provide interest-free emergency assistance to help lessen the burden of repayment. Encourage service members to meet with a personal financial manager or personal financial counselor to develop a spending plan and start an emergency fund to better prepare for future financial shocks.

Question

Consider another financial shock, such as needing major vehicle repairs of \$1,500. How would you pay for it?

- If the service member does not have an emergency fund, share [resources for establishing an emergency fund](#). Any amount can help, but experts typically recommend three to six months of living expenses to cover a significant disruption to income, such as job loss. Additionally, remind service members of the assistance available through the military aid societies.
- If the service member does have an emergency fund, encourage the positive steps they are taking and talk to them about [additional savings strategies to address the unexpected](#).
- If the service member does have an emergency fund, discuss the amount of savings the service member needs to feel confident in that situation.



RESOURCE: For more information on financial planning, visit the [Managing Your Money page](#) on the Office of Financial Readiness website.

Question

If you deploy, does your spouse/partner or trusted individual have the tools needed to manage your family finances and make decisions?

- Discuss what tools may need to be established or updated. For example, establishing [legal authority/power of attorney](#) to make financial decisions on their behalf or [credit alerts](#) and [credit freezes](#) to ensure the protection of personal financial information.
- Remind service members to review and update information such as spending plans, wills, insurance policies and personal information such as [DEERS](#) at major events including marriage, divorce or birth of a child. Personal financial managers and [personal financial counselors](#) can assist with reviewing and updating financial information and [installation legal services](#) can assist with legal documents.



RESOURCES: For more information on financial planning, visit the FINRED website section, [Planning for the Future](#). Spouses can find helpful information, tips and a community of resources on [MilSpouse Money Mission](#).

Well-being area

Present/freedom of choice: Financial freedom to make choices and enjoy life

Question

Do you always/often, sometimes/rarely or never have extra money at the end of the month?

- If the service member indicates they never have income at the end of the month, encourage them to meet with a personal financial manager or personal financial counselor to discuss factors that affect their cash flow and develop a monthly spending plan.
- For service members that indicate they sometimes have extra income, they may just need to make a few adjustments to have more flexibility or freedom. Encourage them to develop a monthly [spending plan](#) and take action to track their money.
- If the service member always or often has extra income at the end of the month, encourage continued positive actions and ask them to assess how they are financially [planning for their future](#).

Question

When is the last time you reviewed your credit report? Do you know where to find it?

- If the service member has never reviewed their credit report or hasn't done so recently, point them to AnnualCreditReport.com and encourage them to make it a yearly practice.
- Reviewing a credit report is a step in the right direction, but service members need to understand that a credit report contains payment history, amount of loans and other financial information such as bankruptcies or recent applications for credit, which is then used to compute their [credit score](#). Their credit score predicts how likely they are to repay a loan. A personal financial manager or personal financial counselor can assist in the service member's understanding of what the report says about their credit worthiness.
 - Regularly reviewing their credit report helps ensure the reported information is accurate and decreases the potential of credit score impacts or [identity theft](#).
- Further, encourage your service members to be aware of [consumer credit protections](#) available to them, such as the [Servicemembers Civil Relief Act](#) or the [Military Lending Act](#). A service member can speak with their [installation legal office](#) for more information.

Well-being Area

Future/freedom of choice: On track to meet financial goals

Question

Have you established any financial goals? If so, what steps are you taking to meet them?

- If the service member has not established financial goals or is unsure how to begin, encourage them to take the first step by creating a spending plan with goals. A personal financial manager or personal financial counselor can assist with this. If the service member has established financial goals, invite them to share their strategies.



RESOURCE: FINRED website article on financial goal planning, [Don't Just Plan for the Future — Plan for Your Future](#).

Question

What is your experience working or meeting with an installation personal financial manager or counselor?

- If the service member has never worked with a PFM or PFC, inform them of the no-cost available resource through their [Military and Family Support Center](#) or virtually through [Military OneSource](#). Or, offer to help them schedule an appointment with an installation PFM or PFC. Meeting periodically to set, review or reassess goals will further financial well-being, BEFORE a financial shock or stressor arises.



RESOURCE: To locate a personal financial manager, visit [MilitaryINSTALLATIONS](#). Or, find an installation [personal financial counselor](#) worldwide.

Question

What areas of personal finance do you feel most confident in applying to your financial situation (e.g. investing for your future, maximizing credit, managing debts, etc.)?

- If the service member indicates a lack of confidence in one or more areas, reassure them that they are not alone and there are many resources immediately available to help them get started and on the road to future financial success. For example, a service member may want or need to purchase a vehicle, but doesn't know where to begin. As a leader, you can refer them to the FINRED [Car Buying Basics video series](#).



RESOURCES: [Office of Financial Readiness](#), [MilLife Learning courses](#) and installation personal financial managers or counselors.

- If the service member indicates a high level of confidence with personal finance, ask which areas of financial knowledge they feel most comfortable handling — [budgeting](#), [credit](#), [savings](#), etc. Consider encouraging the service member to share their experiences and outreach to their peers. These are your future leaders that will pave the way ahead for your unit.

Question

Do you maximize matching your Thrift Savings contributions each pay period or consider increasing contributions?

- If the service member doesn't know how much money they put into their TSP account each pay period, encourage them to take control of their long-term savings, visit [TSP.gov](#) and explain that the contribution amount is listed on their LES.
- Remind service members how [small savings now can make a big difference](#) in the future.
- Ask a service member if they have considered increasing TSP contributions at various career milestones, such as at promotions or annual pay increases. This is a quick way to increase savings without an impact to current spending habits.



RESOURCE: To encourage increased TSP savings contributions, read [Simple Tips to Save More for Retirement](#) on the FINRED website.

As you work to remove the stigma of discussing finances, encourage positive financial actions and acknowledge any steps towards progress.

- Creating measurable financial goals, such as paying off their lowest credit balance within the next six months, and taking steps to achieve that goal through additional payments each month.

- Creating an emergency fund separate from savings that helps to absorb a financial shock, such as emergency travel, car or home repair.
- Smart car-buying practices through self-directed learning, whether through a video, article or a well-informed peer.