

## Military OneSource Podcast — Beyond the Mission: Supporting Mental Wellness

### Episode transcript

#### Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information visit [militaryonesource.mil](https://militaryonesource.mil).

#### Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today we're going to have a conversation with some folks from an Air Force organization. We're going to talk a little bit about their mission, the demands associated with that mission, and how they take care of their people. Spoiler, one of the ways that they take care of their people is to refer them to Military OneSource, which makes me happy.

But anyway, let's bring our guests into the podcast. We have with us Chief Master Sgt. Chris Howard. That's Air Force chief. I'm a retired Navy chief; you're an Air Force chief. It's good to have you with us. And also, Frances Martinez.

#### Frances Martinez:

Hi. How are you?

#### Bruce Moody:

I'm good. Because I'm Navy and I fail at speaking Air Force, I'm going to ask you to identify your organization and where you fit in the Air Force.

#### Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:

I'm Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard. I am the command chief for the 960th Cyber Wing located on Chapman Annex at Joint Base San Antonio. Our primary mission is cyber defense and cyber operations.

#### Bruce Moody:

Great. Yeah. I'm spending this week in San Antonio and meeting a lot of really interesting people who are doing really good things to take care of people.

Two things I'd like you to do: Explain your job, and also, explain why the hashtag in your email reads "Gladiators Saving Gladiators."

**Frances Martinez:**

Okay. Yeah, that's a fun question. I'm a licensed clinical social worker by trade. My position here at the wing is the director of psychological health — so, providing that medical aspect to our leadership, providing support to our airmen and their families, whether it's short-term counseling, referrals for a higher level of care or referrals to Military OneSource or any other types of organizations.

**Bruce Moody:**

Now this organization obviously [has] a building on Lackland Air Force Base, but your people are spread out. Why don't you give us a sense of how spread out they are?

**Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:**

No problem. We roughly have 1300 airmen spread across 10 different locations, geographically separated basically from coast-to-coast. We have organizations as far south as Robins, Georgia, all the way out to Travis Air Force Base in California. Almost literally coast-to-coast. And we have sprinklings in between with different mission sets. We actually have a wide diversity of different types of mission sets. We have all of the cyber weapon systems inside of the Air Force cyber portfolio and managing all those personnel. Then when we talk about some of those resources, having Ms. Frances on board helps us get after one of those major problems that we have in taking care of our airmen not just physically, but mentally.

**Bruce Moody:**

I want to get into the kind of help that you provide them, but I [also] want to get into the mission.

**Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:**

Sure.

**Bruce Moody:**

And the kind of stresses that that mission puts upon its people. Because there are so many different types of jobs in the military. There are, among them, some very, very stressful jobs and they're all very, very different. This may not be one that people immediately bring to mind when they think of a stressful job. Can you talk a little bit about the nature of the mission and the stress that it creates?

**Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:**

Sure, not a problem. Obviously can't get into a lot of the details about some of the missions.

**Bruce Moody:**

It's highly classified.

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**Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:**

Right. But I think there are a lot of things that people can at least relate to. When we talk about defensive cyber operations specifically, we're talking a number of threats. When we talk about local, whether it's non-nation states to nation state level actors, all trying to gain access to your digital assets. We talk about computers; we talk about database; we're talking about different accesses. Thousands of alerts that happen daily. Each one of our airmen has to sit down, go through that with the help of technology and validate these alerts.

There are a lot of things that are happening daily that are innocuous that they have to sift through, as well as anything that may be malicious. Determine that and then kick it over for advanced research to ensure that we're keeping safe in a very quick manner. Each one of our airmen will come in, sit on console and may have to go through hundreds of these at a time. When you think about doing that every day and it being relentless. Then we talk about the nature of the world today, when we keep on adding more and more touchpoints from an internet perspective or digital perspective, we just add vulnerabilities.

When we're talking about something as unique as a military mission, that puts a lot of stress on individuals. A, because you're trying to take care of the airmen sitting beside you because access could lead to information that can lead to attack. You also have the stressors of coming home every day and then knowing what you're having to protect against at work, then protect your home, home life. Then when you put all of the other added stressors of social media and things like that and digital hygiene has a whole. We put our airmen through a lot on a daily basis that they have to de-conflict and get after with a very finite amount of resources while the threat grows exponentially every day.

It's not going to slow down anytime soon. When we talk about AI, we talk about all these other things that we interact with. I saw not too long ago a toaster that was connected to the Wi-Fi. That's one more thing that you have to worry about, but all these things just load down on our airmen. I think a lot of people can relate when they have those regular types of jobs — that it's just nonstop. Then you throw on the added stressors of the security piece of it — the need of the mission — and as we get after some of the problem sets that our higher-level leaders are getting us after.

**Bruce Moody:**

Then adding to that the stress of the job rising to a level that becomes difficult for a person to manage or a person bringing in stress from outside. If a person has a family life, has concerns, has difficulties and they're going to bring that into the mission, they can't perform the job the way that they need to.

**Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:**

No. I fully agree. There's going to be a number of stressors that happen just being a husband, a wife, a father or even being a child yourself with your parents that are going to add to that. You throw all these other stressors.

That's one of the beauties of having DPH aligned with our organization. Having Ms. Frances here helps us get after some of those things. We're putting these people through a lot of different stress. Having that resource locally, as well as some of the resources that we talk about with Military OneSource and being able to drive that, then that helps our airmen at least find one if not multiple avenues to get the kind of supports necessary for them to be able to perform at the level that we expect them to perform at.

**Bruce Moody:**

Frances, over to you. I guess my thought is, Chief [Master Sgt. Howard] brings up an interesting point, which is that the challenges that people have in their personal lives are varied. There are so many different variations that individuals have in their own personal lives. But are there commonalities among them, and are there stressors that you see? How are people handling them? When do you see a need to step in, and what does that look like?

**Frances Martinez:**

Sure, absolutely. We've seen trends for the last couple of years since I've been here. Relationships are generally the No. 1 stressor. You think about most of our folks have some sort of job where they can't talk about what they do, and what they're doing at work. They can't generally have a phone on them or anything else. So, that lack of communication during the day is sometimes stressful for the spouses. You're coming home, you might have had a rough day, and you can't talk to anyone about what your day looked like. Sometimes that is that stressful piece.

Then isolation kicks in. I just want to go home, maybe I have a couple drinks, disengage. Don't really want to deal with the wife or the kids or things like that. Then that causes additional strain. Maybe an argument happens. Now I'm taking that to the next day at work. It cycles.

We see that a lot. That happens with military families in general, not just cyber. Especially when it comes to deployment cycles, people are separated for long periods of time. When a deployed member is gone and whomever is left behind, husband or wife and maybe they have kids. They form their own family relationship. Then when that member gets back, sometimes they feel like they don't fit back with that family. It's sometimes really difficult to reintegrate. A lot of those are those challenges.

**Bruce Moody:**

We talk about deployment a lot in military life. I think everybody rallies around individuals and units when they go to deploy. I think it has an effect on the people who are not deploying but still find themselves in very stressful situations. What does that look like to you? Because you have a service member who goes home at night. There are a lot of jobs out there where people have extremely stressful jobs and when they come home sometimes it's classified, they can't talk about it, or they don't want to talk about it, or they just want to disengage. When we look at families who are saying, "Gosh. Well, they're deployed. They're dealing with a deployment. [When] my service member comes home, it's different." But to what degree is it not? And to what degree are their needs just as valid as a couple who are dealing with a deployment?

**Frances Martinez:**

Even if you're home, there are still sometimes large challenges that you face, especially when you can't talk about certain things. Or just that dynamic of being in a relationship — my husband or my wife don't understand what I do, how I do it, and then you add other layers of stress on top of that. Maybe it's financial stress, maybe drug or alcohol, maybe it's other things that are compiling. Then it's just a melting pot for disaster.

That's where I come in and talk about how can we work through that? How can we communicate healthily and effectively in order to decrease the stressors at home, resolve some conflict? We've done that through different types of couples' workshops, different types of trainings and things like that. It's been a lot of that preventative piece and engagement on the front end, so we don't get to that blowup end.

**Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:**

Right.

**Bruce Moody:**

We offer Military OneSource knowing that there are people like you. When are you referring people to Military OneSource? What are the things that you're trying to do on your own, and what are the things that you hope to achieve by putting them in touch with Military OneSource?

**Frances Martinez:**

I'm not a personal financial counselor. We know finances play a big role in marital stress or discord. Anytime there's anything of that nature I say, "Hey, why don't we go ahead and refer you to either the personal financial counselors or Military OneSource for assistance?"

If it's something that's going to be ongoing. When we talk about short, brief counseling, problem-solving focused and things like that, I generally keep those members and see them through. But if it's something that's going to be, "Well, this is going to take a really long time to get through," maybe my hours aren't available to them, and they need some different hours or things like that, I will generally refer to Military OneSource on those types of cases.

**Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:**

To be completely fair, we are a reserve organization. We talked about how we have 10 different locations. We have airmen who live across the United States and some even overseas. When you think about small pockets or different places, there's not a base that's always close. When we look at resources, how do we take care of airmen at the time of need, sometimes that means that it's through that 1-800 number that's provided in Military OneSource or the counseling or some of the procedures and help aids that Military OneSource has there. From financial counseling to marital counseling to tax help, all these different things that are on that splash page that gets them to these different resources.

We also throw it out there for pre-deployment and post-deployment support as well. Because again, you want to get to your family or stay as much in contact with your family prior to deployment. "Here are some opportunities to get after some of these resources, to sit down with your spouse, sit down with your family, look through these things, add to that question list. So that when you're here, locally or at your base that actually has additional resources, now you're prepared to get in more detail." Our first sergeants and Ms. Martinez will leverage that out and say, "Here's one of the many resources that you have, as well as us in these roles."

### **Bruce Moody:**

I want to get back to the comparison of people who leave for a deployment versus people who have a job that has them coming home, the difference in stressors, the difference in opportunities to build and maintain your wellness.

### **Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:**

Right. When we talk about this type of mission set employee deploy in place mission set compared to deploying out to a location, there's a lot of correlation to some of the mission stressors. Without getting into the deployment piece of being away from your family and the threat that you live in with a deployment.

When we talk about the mission piece alone, the employee, deploy mission set, we have correlations with our PAs and some other missions that require you to work from a distance. In a lot of cases, physically safer, but stressful nonetheless, if not just as stressful as being in contact with troops. When we talk about our PAs and we talk about cyber, we're engaging with the enemy from our home location. We're reaching out. Our airmen get into locations where they're still engaging with the enemy, just from a safe location, but the stressful portion of the mission is that I have to be focused 100% all the time on that mission to ensure that we have mission success.

That stressor on top of, "Okay, I'm hoping this mission gets done at 4 p.m. so I can get out the door, get home, see my children, see my wife, maybe have dinner. Oh and deal with all the things that come with that. Just to know that I need to probably get about six hours of sleep tonight, so I can get back in here and get right back on console. And get after this mission set knowing that here's the list of missions coming up for this week and that being a consistent piece."

One of the great things with Ms. Frances is that she gets a little bit more proactive and helps with self-care and some of the programs that we've built leveraging Military OneSource and some of the local resources. It's how do we help you disconnect — From mindfulness to relaxation tips to the engagement. Because the other piece about this mission set is we have a lot more introverted individuals in our mission set and they tend to be a lot more enclosed. We're putting them into a situation that exudes a lot of mental and emotional energy and then have to go home and then do that. We have to be very mindful ourselves about what we're doing to those airmen and then providing different resource.

I think Ms. Frances could talk a little bit more about that.

**Frances Martinez:**

Yeah. There are self-care plans I generally will help people establish to ensure that they are decompressing from the time they leave work to the time they get home because we know that the demands are going to start at home. Soccer games, dinner, whatever the case may be. It's really important for them to have these outlets, healthy outlets, in order to be prepared to get the next day started.

Some of those things might be like, "Hey, I'm just going to go soak in the bathtub for an hour or read a book." Or a lot of introverts, I hear a lot of "Dungeons and Dragons" and fun video games and stuff. You would think they'd be tired of being on the computer all day and wanting to play video games, but they do. It's just finding something that works for them.

Another thing is meditation is a big part of that. We teach meditation classes and things of that nature, in order to not only build that emotional wellness, but that spiritual wellness as well.

**Bruce Moody:**

I want to just say thank you to the both of you for the work you do to take care of your people. And also, thank you for using Military OneSource, but mostly, thank you for taking care of the people and of course taking care of their families as well. I appreciate the time with you today.

**Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard:**

Thank you.

**Frances Martinez:**

Thank you for inviting us.

**Bruce Moody:**

Absolutely. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Department of Defense. We always like to hear from you. There's a link in the program notes. You can send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future podcast. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.