

Military OneSource Podcast — Managing Relationship Stress

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. We're going to talk about managing relationship stress today. Our guest is Michelle Aldana. She's with an office called Military Community Support Programs, better known as the people who bring you Military OneSource. More on that during this discussion, but first, welcome Michelle to the podcast.

Michelle Aldana:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm always excited to be able to share resources and having experienced, as myself being a military spouse, lots of deployments, lots of wonky schedules, and things like that. I'm always happy to be able to connect people with things that help them live their best MilLife.

Bruce Moody:

Good. Let's do it. We're going to talk about managing relationship stress. We're talking about couples; we're offering military couples support. What is a military couple; when we're looking at the support that we provide?

Michelle Aldana:

I would think a military couple is at least one member of the partnership is a service member, whether that's active duty, National Guard, or reserve, regardless of their activation status. And then whoever their romantic partner is would be the part of that couple. So, when we think about relationship support, we're able to provide that support for the service member and their person.

Bruce Moody:

OK, so, not just married couples. If somebody is dating, they're eligible if you have somebody in uniform who is part of the equation. Got it. A service member can call up Military OneSource and request the support — which we're going to talk about in this episode — the support for their relationship. Michelle, why is it important to the DOD that military couples have support for their relationship challenges?

Michelle Aldana:

It's important for us as the DOD and just for humans, knowing other humans, is that we want people to be their best versions of themselves. And when you're in a couple that's possibly part of your family, it's part of who you are. We want to make sure that all areas of your life are as best as they can be, whatever best looks like for you that day. When we are at our best in our personal lives, we're going to be able to execute a mission better, be able to focus at work better if we have all those other strengths also strong. It's really difficult if you are out, if you're deployed, and there's a lot of things going on at home and there's some stressors, and then you have to worry about the mission and a stressor. We want to just make sure wherever we can make improvement and we can make things better and strengthen, we want to be able to do that because it helps the person as a whole, but it helps us as well.

Bruce Moody:

Makes sense. How common is it for military couples to reach out for help with relationship stress?

Michelle Aldana:

One of the top three reasons that people call Military OneSource is for non-medical counseling. And the number one reason people call for non-medical counseling is for relationship support and relationship stressors. Having relationship stress is common no matter what area of life you're coming from or where you work or what you do, it takes work. You have to do things. And most people are in some type of relationship, whether romantic or not, and have some type of social connections, and those are the things that really can help life or it can make things really hard if you're not doing so well. It's important to be able to have that, and it is one of the number one reasons consistently people call for non-medical counseling at Military OneSource.

Bruce Moody:

Makes sense. What would be some of the common sources of stress in relationships for anyone, military or civilian?

Michelle Aldana:

Some of the common ones for just everybody — finances is just being able to, “Hey, are we on the same page with budgeting? Do we know what’s important, where to spend our money at what time and how to save?” Trust is one that is something across all couples. How do we make sure that we trust in all the things, all the little things and the big things? Will I be able to trust like, “Hey, can you take out the trash?” and then you do the trash. Sometimes people think trust is only really big things.

It’s trusting in all the little things. Parenting is a common challenge for couples. People get kids, and you don’t have to pass a class to have a kid. You can have a kid. That can cause stressors, and just how you parent — the styles, making sure we’re aligned, and making sure that we all share the same values. And then if we’re not communicating, communication’s one that’s for all couples and being able to communicate your needs and wants, and what our priorities are, and what our responsibilities are, and what we need to do to help ourselves be our best selves, and to help our partners and those in our family be their best selves as well.

Bruce Moody:

There we go. That’s pretty much the source of stress for relationships that we all experience. Now, what are the additional challenges that military couples often face?

Michelle Aldana:

Military couples, I will say my husband was in the military for 10 years. We went through four deployments together during our marriage, and that’s one of the things that is a challenge for those military couples is frequent separations, like having people leave for deployments, having people leave for TDYs or exercises and then one person is gone and the other person is at home either by themselves or by themselves with kids. And sometimes, because of PCSs, you might be somewhere that you don’t have your people with you, the people you might have been used to or had support from home. You won’t have that built in all the time at every place you go. Those separations, those PCSs, TDYs, even the schedules, it’s not always a steady nine to five. It’s not always steady. It could be a schedule where your three days swings, three days mids and then three days off, and then you just have to catch each other for the hour or two in between for all the time.

That's one that can be challenging. And then just transitioning from place to place, transitioning from those separations, that's an additional one. If you have a spouse that's a service member and they're deployed and you're rocking and rolling, even though it's really tough for, I don't know, nine months, and then they come back after nine months, you're like, "Oh my goodness, I have a schedule, I have a routine." I know this was my experience, and "You were just coming in here and messing up my whole routine." You have to figure out how to reintegrate and get everyone together and on that routine again, and if you have littles, to have the littles be used to having another person that's a part of this group that tells you what to do or supports you.

It's a lot of additional little challenges. And so that's why it's really important for the Department of Defense to be able to offer relationship support through Military OneSource and then just the support that people can receive on the installations as well to make that connection because it's tough, but we can get through it if we do it together and we get help and often.

Bruce Moody:

And you bring up some really great points. Getting help and just learning to figure it out. There are skills, there are things you need to know how to do in order to be in a relationship. Couples can overcome challenges more easily if they work on strengthening certain foundational skills. What are these skills, and how can developing them help couples grow closer?

Michelle Aldana:

I think one of the most important ones is to be able to communicate and communicate in a way that's respectful, and that you can listen to it and take that feedback and be able to communicate how you're feeling so that all persons are heard. That's something that everyone can work on. Everyone can improve on that whether you're in a relationship or not. But having check-ins — a lot of small connections often that make a really big impact. And that's especially true in relationships when you do that little check-in with feelings often or check-in with what's going on in life or what our goals are and see how they're going. But it's those small connections often that make a really big impact. And I know sometimes it takes a minute to realize, "Oh, I don't have to just remember my anniversary and the person's birthday. I need to do lots of little things."

Bruce Moody:

This is all great advice, but I think that advice — all those tips and guides — are in products that you guys offer through Military OneSource. I'd really like you to talk about, you've got a bunch of tools and resources through Military OneSource, things like

Love Every Day, and others, and I really want you to talk about all that advice that you're giving and how that's delivered to families in these tools.

Michelle Aldana:

We have a suite of relationship tools, which is on our website; it's Military OneSource, Re the We, and it's like a continuum of relationship care. We want people to get help early and often and figure out things before things get really, really big. If you just happen to notice that, "Man, the way my partner chews their crackers or just breathes out of one nose hole drives me crazy," you can talk to someone and say, "Let's figure out why this is making me so mad." And you don't have to wait for the explosion. You can be proactive and preventative, and get in early, and be able to figure all that stuff out so you don't have all that other stuff. One of the things I really liked that we have and was actually one of the first things I used when I came here and started working here, was the Love Every Day that we have on Military OneSource. I would say that the easiest way for me to find it is to just type it in the search bar.

But you type in Love Every Day, in there it takes you to the Love Every Day program and then you type in your name and phone number, text for cell phone and then your partner's, and then every day for 21 days they send you questions for connections. This is especially helpful when you get in those ruts in your relationship where someone comes home, you both come home, "Hey, how was your day?" "It was good. How about yours?" "Mine was fine. What's for dinner? What do we have to do with kids? What's tomorrow's plan? Alright, good night, thanks." And you get into that rut every day. But Love Every Day provides those moments to create connections that isn't part of that rut. It will ask you things that are like, "What's your first memory of me?" Or, when I had my husband because I said, "Hey, we have to do this because it's part of my job."

We signed up and did it. And I think one of the questions was like, "How do you like to be taken care of when you're sick?" And by having that question, we had a moment to laugh and connect, but I thought he was a straight jerkopotamus because when I was sick, he would just close the door and ignore me all day. But that was really how he likes to be taken care of. He'd rather just be sick alone in the room with a door closed and no one bothering him. But then I got to say, "No, that is not the way I like to be taken care of. I prefer to have you bring me food in bed, and pet my head, and watch a movie and say how you can't wait till I feel better because we miss you." We had just two different styles, and having that little Love Every Day question allowed us to reconnect, laugh about something, learn about something, and now he's just the sweetest. He's not a jerkopotamus at all when I'm sick. So, that's really good.

We also have OurRelationship, and this is good for people who don't feel super ready to talk to someone yet, but they still know they want to do something. It's a self-paced program online, and it takes however long your self-pace is, but usually it's 4-6 weeks and it targets two areas that you might want to improve, and then you and your partner go through it and go through little activities. But one of the great things about

OurRelationship is even if you decide, “I want to do this by myself,” you can call an audible and be like, “Hey, I would like a coach.” And you can call Military OneSource and say, “Hey, I’m doing OurRelationship. I want to be able to have a coach now.” And they’ll have someone come on and help guide you through it.

Because sometimes you might get to a little point where, “We are just not getting ahead. We don’t know how to overcome this little hurdle.” And just having a third person could be super helpful. It’s really nice having a separate party or third person who’s unbiased and really has no connection to you to be able to provide that support and provide that outside view, and you’re like, “Okay, I get it, I get it.” Which is also nice about our non-medical counseling.

I always tell people, “Non-medical counseling is great. You can talk to someone, and their whole job is to help you be your best version of yourself, listen to what you have to say, and that you have this just wonderful third party who’s there to hear what you have to say, help you get through it so that you can be better.” That’s a really great thing to have, and we all deserve to be able to be our best version of ourselves. If we aren’t our best version of ourselves, we certainly cannot be a best we version of together person. You have to make sure you’re doing all right so that everyone’s all right.

Bruce Moody:

And the best version of oneself is probably not a jerkopotamus — thank you for teaching me a new word — but that’s a really, really good point, and I would like you to talk to this because what you’re offering is help for a couple who just want to make things a little easier and more meaningful around the house. People don’t need to wait until it’s a crisis or they’re thinking about divorce. This is honestly to make people happier and better partners and to just have a more meaningful life. And I really want you to talk about the importance of people jumping in and taking advantage of what you have to offer at that point in a relationship.

Michelle Aldana:

It’s so great to be able to have all these resources. We do want people to take advantage of it and we have all these resources, but really, we care that you’re your best version of yourself. We have Military OneSource thing says, “Re the We.” You have to be your best me before you become a we. And when you do become a we, when you’re your best me, it’s going to be a much stronger and more fulfilling relationship and you’ll be able to have those connections and being proactive and learning before it becomes big, like you said, before you’re like, “This was so hard. This is too much.” It is a lot if you are, let’s say we want to keep you at center and you move way to the left or right. The further you get away from center, the longer it takes to get back and the harder it is to get back to center.

We just want people to be okay and at the center and being their best selves. And if you go a little bit in one direction, you go get the help and use our resources, use whatever resources on the installation and get you back to center because earlier you're able to use it, and the closer you can stay in that center part, the easier it's going to be for you and those around you. And it just will help you be that great you because when you're at your best, people get to just really enjoy you when you're at your best.

Bruce Moody:

Now up until this point, we've been talking about tips and tools for couples. What is available for individuals who want to work on their own health and their own well-being?

Michelle Aldana:

We have a lot of things that I am always super excited about, and I was really surprised about before I got here to this job and I was like, "Oh my goodness, we offer this?" And all of our things that we offer through Military OneSource is free, which I love free. But one of the things that we offer is health and wellness coaching. If you have whatever health goals or wellness goals you have, you can connect with Military OneSource, which we'll talk about in a second, how to do that, and just say, "Hey, I have goals to run a marathon." That's not my goal. It's not what I want to do. But if your goal is to run a marathon, you can connect with that wellness coach. They will help come up with a plan. If you want to have some help with some weight management or you find out you're pre-diabetic or have high cholesterol, they will come up with a plan with you and help hold you accountable and call you like every week or however many times you need.

There's no limits to those number of sessions you can have for health and wellness. Unlike non-medical counseling, you can also do it by yourself. You don't have to do it with another person, and you get 12 sessions per issue, per person and are able to see that person. But for health and wellness coaching, it's unlimited sessions and they will help you with so many things. They can help you as you transition to a new installation or a new base, which is important to have because as you move from one place to another, it's always hard — at least for me — I think as adults, to just make friends. Adulting is weird, you don't have places like school where you see everyone every day all the time. Making sure when you get to your new location to have someone help you with maybe that transition, our health and wellness can help you with that.

And if you are moving to a new place, you can call Military OneSource and say, whatever your hobby or club is, you say, "Can you find me some pickleball groups that I can connect with?" That way you are helping that social connection and at least if you are part of these groups, everyone in that little court, whatever hobby you have, you have at least one thing in common with them. And that really helps that social connection

piece, not only for yourself or with your partner when you go to new places, you have to get new support systems.

How can we do this? You can connect and ask for those groups, ask for those hobbies. It might be for your kids, asking them for some groups as well. You can do that, which is a great thing for yourself. I talked about non-medical counseling. You can talk and chat with someone and just have that unbiased third party just there to help you work anything out or figure things out ahead of time, and it doesn't cost you anything. We also have the Chill Drill's app. Anyone can download that, and that's just guided relaxation and guided breathing to help you with stress. Our health and wellness coaching will help you with stress management and help you figure out ways to manage your stress.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you so much for this. I want to wrap up by just making two points. You've already pretty much mentioned this, but people can contact if they're hearing any of this and all they remember is, "There's good stuff out for me, but I don't remember any of it." They can contact Military Onesource and just say, "Hey, I'm looking for stuff for me for my couple." And the other thing I'd really like you to just mention as we wrap up here is the confidentiality, so, so important.

Michelle Aldana:

You can contact us anytime. The people who answer the phone all have a master's level of a social science, they're counselors or therapists or have psychology as a background. You're not just getting any old buddy answering the phone. It's people who are trained and know how to listen for whatever your spoken and unspoken needs are. If you're just like, "I'm really stressed," or, "I'm just in a rut," and they can connect you to all the resources, but when you call us, we are confidential. We don't report it to command, we don't tell anyone, and I want to be clear except for to keep you safe. We care about you. If you express harm to yourself or harm to someone else, we have to keep those people safe, and we have to keep you safe. But everything else we don't report.

It is confidential. It is for you and for you alone. It's a great resource to have. You can call us through our (800) 342-9647 number. You can go online and do chatting because sometimes people don't like to talk to humans on the phone. I get it. And you can use our Military OneSource app and press the connect to us and contact us, and you can connect that way too. And our website is militaryonesource.mil. We have tons of stuff on our site, you can just type in relationship, and it will get you to where you need to go. And we have a relationship tool where you can just answer a few questions, and it'll get you to the tool that might best be suited for you. But if it feels too much, you can just pick up a phone and call us or just do a chat online, and we'll make sure you get what you need to be your best you, whatever that looks like.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent. Michelle, thank you so much. We'll be happy to have you back on the podcast.

Michelle Aldana:

Thank you so much for having me. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent. Michelle Aldana with Military Community Support Programs. That is the office that brings you Military OneSource. And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. Click on the link in the program notes, you can send us a question, a comment or an idea for a future podcast. And 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.