

Family Advocacy Program: Tips for Couples to Strengthen Their Relationships

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. Today, we'll have tips for couples to strengthen their relationships. And just a note before we get started, this podcast obviously is going to be discussing approaches to strengthening relationships. Some of these tactics could be dangerous in an abusive situation. If you or someone you know is in an abusive relationship, you can reach out to the Family Advocacy Program to learn how to get help.

We'll put a link to the Family Advocacy Program in the program notes so you can just click your way through. With that, let's bring in our guests, both of whom are our colleagues. Kelly Smith is a clinical social worker who serves as an associate director of military community support programs, and Shannon Best is a licensed marriage and family therapist, and she serves in the Defense Department's Family Advocacy Program.

Kelly, let's get started with some questions for you. What would be the different dynamics of a healthy relationship?

Kelly Smith:

Hi, Bruce. This is a great question to start off with.

When you think about what a healthy relationship looks like, there are a couple of known things that come to mind for me and what I've seen in my practice, and the first thing is mutual respect, and that respect means that each person within that relationship values who the other person is and strives to understand that person's boundaries.

Another staple or dynamic within a healthy relationship is compromise. This, for me personally, can be challenging, but when you think about being in a relationship or a healthy relationship, each partner doesn't have to always get his or her way. Each person should be able to acknowledge their different points of view and then be willing to give and take throughout the journey of their relationship together.

Another staple or dynamic of a healthy relationship is individuality. We each come to a relationship as our own person, and so it's important that we maintain that individuality throughout the life of that relationship. Neither partner should have to compromise

completely who they are. They shouldn't have to compromise their identities. It shouldn't be based on their partner's identity. Each person should continue to seek his or her own friends, doing things that he or she may love to do, and then they should also be supportive of each other wanting to pursue new things, making new friends or exploring new hobbies.

And then lastly, and you know, Bruce, there are several different dynamics, but the last one that I want to touch on is problem-solving; learning together how to solve problems and identify new solutions or ways to work through those problems. Possibly breaking them into smaller bits and talking through them can be key to ensuring that your relationship is healthy, and on top of that problem-solving, I also think of fighting fair. And we know that within relationships, people are going to have disagreements. They're going to have arguments, but those arguments and discussions that might be challenging, that are fair, that stick to the subject, that avoids insults are more likely to come up with a solution that both parties can agree on. Those are just some of the staple things or dynamics that I think of when I think of a healthy relationship.

Bruce:

So, how does self-care relate to healthy relationships?

Kelly:

Self-care, that is a buzzword that has been thrown around and used quite often here lately. I want to say probably once we got into the middle of the pandemic, people really pushed this whole concept of self-care. But self-care in a relationship is truly critical. When you think about the whole piece that I mentioned around individuality, how are you able to bring your best self to your relationship if you don't nurture yourself outside of the context of your relationship? It's just as important to take care of yourself while you're in that relationship as it is that you're tending to the relationship as a whole as itself. And the same thing goes for friendships, family and other people that are within your circle. To be the best self that you can be for any of them, in particular your partner, you need to be good at knowing when it's time to switch gears and put a little bit of focus on yourself.

Bruce:

So, how can military family life counselors help, and how can military couples get in touch with one?

Kelly:

Our military and family life counselors are such a great resource for individuals, as well as couples, who are looking to improve their self, do a little bit of that self-care or work on some different things within their relationship. We have our military and family life counselors, better known as MFLCs, positioned around the world to provide face-to-face support to service members and their families. And if you are at an installation or near an installation, you can likely go to your Family Service Center. There may be an MFLC

there. At some locations, they're embedded within a unit, so right outside the door of where your command may be, you can go and connect with an MFLC there.

But then also, you can easily find your MFLC by calling Military OneSource or initiating a live chat with a Military OneSource consultant on the militaryonesource.mil website. And you can just simply ask, like, "Hey, I am at such and such installation and I want to find out, do I have MFLC there?" And they have a comprehensive list of the MFLCs and they will provide you that information right there on the spot. You can call 24/7/365 and get that connection to that MFLC that you might be looking for.

Bruce:

Staying on Military OneSource for a moment, what sorts of resources, talking apps and such, are available via Military OneSource?

Kelly:

We have truly expanded our offerings of support around relationships for service members and spouses and couples because we know that relationship challenges of the top reason that people ask for MFLC support are asked for non-medical counseling through Military OneSource. And so, there are just a couple of services or resources that I want to highlight under the Military OneSource umbrella, and I kind of think of it on a continuum of support.

So, we have our building healthy relationships specialty consultations, so you are able to connect with one of our master level providers that are able to walk you through a variety of different curriculums, so this is like a motivational interviewing type of support, and it's a format that you follow on a weekly or biweekly, however often you need to meet, basis, to talk through, whether it's if you're new in a relationship, whether you're a new military spouse, whether you are trying to navigate deployment or reintegration or improve your communication. This is more of a structured exchange with that master level professional and they can connect with you over the phone or via secure video conferencing. So, that's our building healthy relationship specialty consultations, and there are a variety of different topics that you can explore within that consultation.

Our other support that I want to highlight is our Our Relationship Program. It's the Our Relationship Program. It recently ... Well, not recently. It's been out for a little bit of time, but I love this tool because it's a web-based offering so you can do it on your phone or via your tablet, your computer, however is convenient for you, and you identify a key concern or issue that you want to work with your partner on and you both complete different parts of the program virtually. You have the option to do this independently of a coach or you can request to have a coach support you, and that coach will meet with you three or four times throughout the process of completing the program and will help coach you and guide you through different things that may come up as you are working through that problem that you identified.

And so, we like the Our Relationship Program because it's evidence-based. You can work it at your own pace and research shows that it's helped to improve communication and to strengthen relationships. And then lastly, I want to highlight our non-medical counseling. I know I mentioned it earlier, but you can take advantage of non-medical counseling through Military OneSource. We have a network of providers around the United States that are able to offer counseling support to address the different dynamics within your relationship. They can do that individually or with you and your partner, and it's really convenient because you can either do it face-to-face in an office with that licensed professional or you can do it over the phone. You can connect with them via secure video conferencing such as a zoom.gov platform, and in some cases, people like to do text-based counseling. There are many different options when it comes to connecting with a licensed professional to talk through some of the things you may be experiencing in your relationship.

Bruce:

Excellent. And I know you're passionate about this and there's a whole lot that we can unpack. We should probably have dedicated episodes, but I want to bring in Shannon. Let's just at this point say that we've got links in the program notes about most of the things that you're referring to, and I want to bring Shannon into the conversation. Shannon, how can the Family Advocacy Program support service members and their families when it comes to relationships?

Shannon Best:

Well, the Family Advocacy Program is the Defense Department's program that is designed to address both the prevention and response to child abuse, neglect and domestic abuse or intimate partner abuse. In this case, I think some people in the military community really think of Family Advocacy Program, or it's also known as FAP, as that response that after abuse is already occurring in a relationship, that FAP is involved. In reality, there's a lot of help and support available through FAP even before it crosses that threshold, and that's really where we want to focus. Whether it be through groups or classes that are available at various installations, or even individual or couples counseling available through FAP, that after utilizing some of the resources on Military OneSource or through the non-medical counseling, that in some cases, some relationship dynamics have just gotten further down the path that maybe having somebody who's a little bit more specialized in this area to do that work together may be more useful.

Bruce:

So, Shannon, what are some of the early signs of an unhealthy relationship, and who can couples contact at the Family Advocacy Program as a preventative measure?

Shannon:

Well, I like to think of relationships and the dynamics of relationships on a spectrum of varying from healthy to unhealthy, and unfortunately, even crossing the threshold into

abusive. And I think it's important for everyone to know and recognize that that area on the spectrum isn't necessarily stagnant. That there might be various stressors in our life that could move us from healthy to unhealthy for a period of time, and we get support and still be in a healthy relationship, that regardless of where someone is at in the current moment doesn't mean they have to stay there.

Things that might cross the threshold of healthy to unhealthy is when fighting has just gotten out of hand, so frequently. We can't communicate without fighting with each other or bringing up things from the past without having any sort of resolve, that there isn't that communication with respect or attempt to see things from the other person's point of view, having empathy and, in some cases, even using, so like what Kelly had mentioned, some of those fighting fair techniques, but using them to hurt the other person.

I think a common example of this is like a timeout or a break to say, "Hey, I'm not ready to have this conversation right now. Can we talk about it tomorrow night?" Or setting a time, but instead, using that withdrawal to hurt the other person. That's where it would be unhealthy. Again, it doesn't have to stay there. By contacting the Family Advocacy Program, anybody could speak to a counselor or even a domestic abuse victim advocate and just talk about what's going on, your situation. In many cases, I think what we forget is that, as Kelly mentioned, we bring our own selves and our own history into our relationships. And in some cases, there might be something from our own childhood, either from seeing our parents' relationship or even what we experienced as a child, that can be triggering in a relationship, either while dating or in a marriage. And sometimes, we just need to work with an individual counselor to process that and work through that so that we can be our best selves in a relationship. And in other cases, again, it's just needing to work through things together.

Contacting FAP and speaking to a counselor about the situation and they can let you know what's available there, what they might recommend, where to start individual or couples work, or maybe again, attending a group or a class that might be available at that installation. And in some instances, and it may be better for someone to contact one of our domestic abuse victim advocates. We'll have links in the podcast notes for our Military Installations Locator on Military OneSource, as well as the Domestic Abuse Victim Advocate Locator that you could search by installation or ZIP code to speak to someone about, again, what's going on in your situation and they can advise you of any safety concerns that might need to be addressed, what reporting options are available to you, other resources, etc.

Bruce:

Thanks, Shannon. My next question, there's a lot of concern about what happens when you reach out to the Family Advocacy Program. So just really clarify for us, what happens when a person in the military community reaches out to the Family Advocacy Program to get help with their relationship?

Shannon:

Sure. How the various services and where Family Advocacy Program is located on the installation does vary, whether it be within the medical treatment facility or as part of the non-medical counseling programs available on the installation. But when contacting FAP, regardless, it's confidential, the conversation either with a counselor or clinician or a domestic abuse victim advocate. And again, anybody can call to just share about what's going on in their relationship, and depending on the situation and any safety concerns, the provider at FAP can share with them the reporting options available, assess for any immediate risk if that's the situation, and again, make referrals to resources or provide that information, but it really is going to be tailored to each individual or couple who may be calling in.

Bruce:

Thanks Shannon. Kelly, same question, a variation, I guess. What happens when a person in the military community reaches out for non-medical counseling services to get help in their relationship?

Kelly:

Bruce, that's such a good question because a lot of times, people may be hesitant to reach out for help because they just don't know what's going to happen next. And with Military OneSource, as well as with our military and family life counseling program, we really strive to make that process seamless and easy and to walk people through the steps of being connected with that non-medical counselor. With Military OneSource, if you call Military OneSource at our 1-800 number, or if you initiate a live chat on the website or via the mobile app, you're asked just a couple of basic questions about what type of support you're looking for. There are some very basic screening questions that we ask and we ask what type of modality that you're wanting to receive that relationship support in, so if you're wanting to do it just virtually and you're not wanting to come into an office, that lets our triage consultants know which direction or let you know what options are available to you.

If you know off the bat that you just want to talk with a military and a family life counselor, our team will look in our database to see where an MFLC is closest to your location. However, if you're wanting to talk with a provider right there in your community that provides that traditional office setting, we have a network of providers that we can connect you to. We also have the availability to connect you over the phone, so having counseling via the telephone or secure video conferencing. And so, we just ask those basic questions about what type of challenges you're experiencing or what are you looking to get help with? We do ask a couple of questions around safety to ensure that nonmedical counseling is a good fit for you, and then we actually call that provider on the phone with you there to confirm their availability and to get that first appointment scheduled.

Now, some people don't want to go through the process of calling the counselor right there on the phone. We can absolutely send you a list via email and you can call the

people yourself, but we want to give people options when it comes to connecting for that non-medical counseling.

Bruce:

So, a question for the both of you, and maybe we'll start with Kelly. How would you suggest couples go about tackling difficult issues? And in what ways can couples improve their communication with each other?

Kelly:

So, Bruce, right off the bat, when I think about in my own situation, because I like to put myself in the shoes of others just to create a space for empathy. When there are difficult conversations or difficult issues that I need to address with my partner, I'm a little bit biased but I instantly think of I need to get the support of someone else in this process, a licensed professional to be able to help me navigate this, to help me remove any of my biases, to keep both of us on track at the goal at hand. To me, when you're having to tackle difficult issues, I always suggest, and especially for our military families, there are tons of resources out there. It might be a little bit overwhelming but, knowing that you can get support for free at your installation within the Family Advocacy Program, or if you want to call Military OneSource and connect with a provider that way, there is that free counseling preventative support that's available to you.

Now, when I think of tangible, actionable steps that you can do yourself to improve your relationship, some things that I have practiced, saying thank you and creating space for gratitude. I feel like sometimes, things are taken for granted within relationships, especially when you're going through the daily routine of life and you're on that same path every single day, but acknowledging your partner, thanking them for them being there and showing up every day to me goes a very long way.

Something else that's helpful that you could do to improve your relationship is to schedule a time to check in. So, if that's once a week, if that's the first thing in the morning, wouldn't be for me, but a time that works for both of you just to say, "Hey, how are you doing? How are things going?" Or, "This is how I'm feeling," just that you both can be on the same wavelength or stay connected. To me, that helps to strengthen your relationship, knowing that that's a safe space for you and your partner. And this can be done even when your partner is not in the same country as you, on the same side of the world as you. You can still connect just to check in and make sure each other are doing OK.

Shannon:

Well, holy cow, those are some great suggestions and I echo it entirely. I think it's also really important to keep in mind in relationships, again, that we are our own selves and we're bringing our own history to that relationship, so with that, to assume the best in each other. That in every relationship, whether it be in a romantic relationship, friendship, anywhere, it's inevitable that we might hurt each other, we might make mistakes, and to come to your partner from a place of love in that sense and to have

open communication about that when things are hurtful, and to get help when you need it.

Just like driving a car, it's an overused cliché but it's really applicable here in relationship. Like taking care of a car, that you need to get an oil change, you need to get tune-ups in order for it to run smoothly, and relationships are no different. Getting help when you need it. Sometimes it can be really hard when you're hurt or dealing with a lot of things within a relationship to see things clearly and having that unbiased person to help sort out what might be going on is really, really useful.

Bruce:

Shannon, staying with you for a moment. In your work, how have the Family Advocacy Program, military and family life counselors and Military OneSource helped couples get their relationships back on track?

Shannon:

Well, I can speak from FAP, but again, I think it's in a variety depending on what's going on in the relationship to begin with. Even when things have crossed the threshold to being extremely unhealthy or abusive, sometimes, that doesn't mean that the relationship itself needs to end and that people just need help to learn the right way to treat their partner, to deal with their own trauma or their own history so that they're not bringing it into their relationship. And that whether or not those individuals stay together or not, even for healthier relationships in the future, the Family Advocacy Program and working with the counselors there, attending groups and classes, having that education and support can be really useful, as well as, again, for a couple that maybe hasn't quite crossed that threshold of being abusive but it is unhealthy. Everybody agrees, this isn't working for us but we want to stay together and we need some more help, that the Family Advocacy Program is a great resource.

Kelly:

I know I've spoken quite a bit about Military OneSource, but what we have seen for the Military and Family Life Counseling program, and we've received quite a bit of positive feedback from leadership, as well as from couples themselves, is their experiences have been utilizing our military and family life counselors through the relationship checkup. This is another resource that's offered within our wheelhouse, and couples really like the relationship checkup because it's similar to that of your annual wellness check or your annual appointment that you have. It's like a tune-up. And how it works is that you go to see your MFLC, you complete an assessment. Independent of that MFLC, you complete it. It gives you an opportunity, both you and your partner, to rate how things are going within your relationship, and it helps to spit out these results that give you a roadmap of how you can work through things within your relationship.

And it's very short. These sessions may take up to 30 minutes, and you get a printout or you can get a text or an email. You can receive that feedback directly and it helps you to guide where you guys may want to go in improving your relationship. And a lot of times,

couples will see, like, “Hey, we’re doing pretty good.” But then, if you find things that you could work on, you have that MFLC there to extend those sessions past doing that relationship checkup. And again, you can find an MFLC at your installation or call Military OneSource to get connected with an MFLC to have that relationship checkup completed.

Bruce:

Well, we’ve covered a lot of ground and I’m really grateful for both of you for being on the podcast with us today. As we wrap up, I just want to offer any final thoughts. So, Shannon, why don’t we begin with you?

Shannon:

Well, thank you again for the opportunity. I really appreciate being able to share about the Family Advocacy Program and how it can help couples and individuals in relationships regardless of the state of their relationship, and to keep in mind that you can use the Military Installations Locator or the Domestic Abuse Victim Advocate Locator that will be linked in the notes to contact someone, because safety is key and having someone else to talk to about what’s going on in your relationship and seeing what resources are available, what options are available, is really, really important. So, thank you for the opportunity to share this.

Kelly:

One of the main tips or strategies I’d like to leave with our listeners today is that if you are hesitant to reach out for help or if you’re in a space of just wanting to look for more information or be connected with resources, the militaryonesource.mil website is a great place to start. And I say that because within the last two years or so, we had a campaign called the Re the We, and in that campaign, it really focused on relationships, particularly romantic relationships. And there are all kinds of different articles. There are links to resources at the installation. There are links to ways to improve your communication, how to be connected with the military and family life counselor, and it’s all there at your fingertips. And so, if you’re just wanting to get your feet wet and see what’s out there, I recommend starting there at the militaryonesource.mil website.

Bruce:

Well, excellent, and we’ll leave it there but I’m sure we’ll have you back to talk more. Kelly Smith is a clinical social worker who serves as associate director of Military Community Support programs, and Shannon Best is a licensed marriage and family therapist who serves in the Defense Department’s Family Advocacy Program.

And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we want to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. Send us your comments, your questions, ideas for future episodes, and go ahead and 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 so much for listening. Have a great day. Bye-bye.