

## Military OneSource Podcast — How to Cope with Holiday Stress and Loneliness

### **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](https://militaryonesource.mil).

#### **Bruce Moody:**

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. It's the holiday season, the, hope, most wonderful time of the year. It can also be stressful and lonely, and we want to talk about that and maybe some of the tips and tricks to get around that. So with that, let's bring in our guest. Today joining us, we have Captain Meghan Corso, who is with the Defense Health Agency. Ma'am, welcome to the podcast.

#### **Meghan Corso:**

Absolutely. Thank you so much, Bruce, for inviting me. I'm excited to be here and to chat with everyone, and talk about what can sometimes be a stressful time, but also a happy time for folks as well, the holidays, and they're coming up quick.

#### **Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, definitely. I mean, when your local radio station switches over to all holiday-themed music, you know that's the season that you're in, so.

#### **Meghan Corso:**

Absolutely.

#### **Bruce Moody:**

And that's very much a stateside experience. Now, I'm a retired Navy chief, and I've been overseas. I've been deployed. I've been all over the place. It's a little different though, when you're in the military, for family members. And just to kind of get us started, if you could kind of talk about some of the specific challenges that our service members and our families face, and how these can lead to stress and loneliness over the holidays.

#### **Meghan Corso:**

Certainly. I think it's not uncommon for active-duty service members, for our family members to experience stress during the holidays, and a lot of times they're in a unique situation. It's really different than you might run into somebody that's not affiliated with

the military. Many times, we're not located close to family, so we might be living in a different state, a different country, different part of the world, really, from what would typically be your support system, which is your family of origin, cousins, aunts, uncles. You know, when we think about the holidays, many times, we're thinking about what it was to grow up and where we spent those holidays, at grandma's house or a friend's house, and really, those become less of an option when you're in the military, because many times, you find yourself not close by.

So now the holidays take on a whole different experience, really, so what you've done in the past may not be what's possible today, and it may look and feel very different. So sometimes when it feels different, it can make us kind of feel negative or potentially a little bit sad, because we're missing out on what we've always done as part of the holidays. So it can definitely, to your point, be a stressful time. Military holidays are different than nonmilitary holidays for most of us, right?

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, totally. You and I get it, and we're going to talk a little bit about some of the things that families and service members can do. And we're having that conversation with you specifically because of your background. Your title is the chief of behavioral health, Defense Agency. What does that really mean, and what does that bring to our conversation today?

**Meghan Corso:**

Yes, thank you. I serve as the Defense Health Agency's chief of behavioral health. I'm actually a clinical psychologist, so I work within the behavioral health field. Personally, I've kind of been all over the map when it comes to military. I've served in the Air Force. I was dual-military, so I was also the family member whose spouse deployed and spent those holidays alone, and so have had all of kind of the different experiences. But my expertise is as a behavioral health provider, and so that's why I'm really passionate about this discussion and about the opportunity to talk with everyone about what you can do ahead of time to try to help kind of prevent some of the potentially stress that surrounds the holidays. And then if you do start to feel some of that stress creeping in and things are starting to impact you negatively, what could you do then. So I'm excited to jump into that with y'all.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, let's definitely jump in. What would you say to folks listening who may be feeling stressed or lonely?

**Meghan Corso:**

Sure. When I think about starting to feel stressed or lonely, I always start with a deep breath. I know that kind of sounds simple, but I always remind myself, "Oh, Meghan, deep breath now." It's just a reset that kind of helps me clear my mind and start to kind of problem-solve what it is that's going on. I think there's a couple of things we can do

ahead of the holidays — so we're still kind of in that time leading up to them — is how do we start to prepare for that time.

One of the biggest things that we can do, whether it's the holidays or other stressful life events, is just practicing healthy living. The better you are in terms of healthy living, the easier it is to tolerate stress, so there is something to, no kidding, exercise. Physical activity is really important, nutrition, getting good sleep. There's that old saying that everything kind of looks different in the morning, right? But I mean, good sleep is really valuable for helping us tolerate whatever stressful events are coming our way.

**Bruce Moody:**

You know, it's interesting you say this, because the simplest, most basic steps are the most important and most impactful. And I can already tell that you and I could have a whole conversation on the importance of just taking a deep breath, but we're going to move along here. What I would like to talk about, maybe you have a scenario where a service member or a spouse is dealing with holiday stress, and maybe those individuals reached out for support. What did that look like? How did it come about?

**Meghan Corso:**

Yeah. I remember we were stationed in Florida, and I had an active-duty service member, female, who came in to see me, I was working in a primary care clinic at the time, who was just feeling really down, feeling really sad about the holidays. A couple things were really happening for her. Number one, first time away from family, and so was feeling pretty isolated and missing home, so homesickness. And then also just finances. Sometimes, we find that folks are feeling really stressed about the finances, and making sure that this dream holiday, whether it's the dream holiday meal or it's presents under the Christmas tree, are just picture perfect. So the finances tend to be something that cause folks a lot of stress as well around the holidays.

So really, it was taking that step back and saying, "OK, let's break down the problem. Let's set small, realistic baby steps in how we can start to solve that problem." It's really taking the problem, and dissecting it, and saying, "Okay, now that it's broken down into smaller pieces, it feels a little more manageable." So we talk about taking baby steps in that right direction and trying to solve those issues, and getting those around us involved and supporting us.

**Bruce Moody:**

It's interesting you say that. One of the lessons that I learned when I was very, very young was that all the big problems in this world are actually a whole bunch of little, tiny problems, and to take them one by one. But in order to take them one by one, or even to have the mindset to know to do that, let's get back to some of the things that we were talking about before, preventive measures that people can take against feeling overwhelmed, and stressed, and lonely.

**Meghan Corso:**

Yeah, Bruce. And I think one of the things that you're kind of starting to highlight for me is some of these things, they sound so simple, right? Exercise, nutrition, sleep, we all know that those are important, but how do we start to actually do those healthy things? How do we prioritize sleep, for an example, or our nutrition? Nutrition, we find folks are making poor choices in nutrition because of convenience, right? A lot of times... No one goes through a fast food drive through thinking necessarily that that's a great meal nutrition-wise, but it's one of convenience, and it's one that helps us feed ourselves. So how do we start to make those adjustments to practice healthy living? That, I think, is where folks find the challenge, is actually doing it, right?

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, doing it and getting started.

**Meghan Corso:**

Yes.

**Bruce Moody:**

Once you're up and running, great. But that first step, how do you take that first step?

**Meghan Corso:**

Sure. I think it depends on the individual and what they're comfortable with. I think that there's a lot of support services that are available on many military installations, whether... If it's finances that you're struggling with, there's financial counselors available. If it is something that the chaplain could help with... I think reaching out early, before it becomes overwhelming, is helpful. And you're right, that person can kind of help you break down what might feel like a huge problem into smaller problems. Sometimes it's another person. It's too difficult for us to see because we're inside that box so to speak, but having somebody outside help us approach the problem in a practical way can be helpful.

**Bruce Moody:**

A lot of this is very, very simple and very, very basic, but it's both important and sometimes, the simplest stuff is not the easiest stuff. For example, you can really get in a negative emotional spiral without even really knowing it, so how do you get ahead of that?

**Meghan Corso:**

Absolutely. Really, our thinking is so incredibly powerful, and in my field, we really break it down into how our thinking impacts how we feel, so the emotions we actually feel. And guess what. That also impacts, then, our behavior, so what we do about it. A lot of things, to your point, really start with how we think about it. If you're thinking negatively, that would then lead to negative emotions or positive emotions? Probably going to be feeling pretty down, which then leads to, for many folks, negative behaviors.

And when I say negative behaviors, I don't mean that in a critical way, but we stop doing things that bring us joy, whether that means connecting with others, whether that means a hobby that you love to do, whether it means physical activity, which then makes us feel and think what? Makes us think and feel negatively. So there's this vicious negative cycle and spiral that we can get into, that happens without maybe even us, to your point, being aware that it's happening until someone may comment on, "Hey, you're really kind of being negative these days," or, "What's going on with you?" So sometimes, it's somebody outside, and you're like, "Oh, geez, I didn't realize."

**Bruce Moody:**

Maybe an example of this that's not tied to the holidays, but sometimes when you're driving, there are other people who get on your nerves, and before you know it, you are thinking and behaving in a way that is not your best self, but you just allowed yourself to very, very quickly slip into that mindset. It is very interesting to kind of look and go, "Wow, that was me. That was me."

**Meghan Corso:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Bruce Moody:**

"Not really my best time."

**Meghan Corso:**

Yeah. I always think our children are great at pointing out those times. They're like, "Wow." Then you're like, "Thanks." I realized I was not ...

**Bruce Moody:**

Yep, spouses too.

**Meghan Corso:**

... my best version of myself. Yes, absolutely.

**Bruce Moody:**

Also friends. Also friends, and that's incredibly important, looking out for each other.

**Meghan Corso:**

Absolutely. And the power of thinking. One example I'll often share with folks when I'm talking with them is us in the military, we love a good physical fitness test, right? So as we're running and doing the cardio portion, our thoughts can go one of two ways. They can go, "Gosh, I've got this. I'm almost done," at which point you kind of kick it in, right? And you cross the finish line. Or, you could be thinking, "Gosh, I really should have practiced more. I'm going to die before I even cross this finish line," you know? And you start breathing. And what happens in that scenario? You start to kind of pull back. Maybe you give up. Maybe you start walking. So you can see the connection really

quickly, of how that thinking was so powerful in what you felt and what you did next, right? So yeah, another similar scenario that kind of illustrates the power of thinking.

**Bruce Moody:**

You know, I can relate to being on the run.

**Meghan Corso:**

Yeah.

**Bruce Moody:**

And I can relate to having thoughts about, this is not going the way I thought it was going to be going.

**Meghan Corso:**

Yes.

**Bruce Moody:**

But I'll tell you what I see every single time when I'm on these runs, is I see two things. I see somebody legitimately struggling and I see a gaggle of people around that person motivating them, talking to them, you know? That's what you need, that outside stimulus. What does that look like to you when you're thinking about the holidays and when people are sort of getting into their own minds and going into a bit of a spiral? What is the power of that outside community?

**Meghan Corso:**

Absolutely. So support. We don't live on an island, right? So surrounding ourselves with individuals that we enjoy their company, that are going to be supportive, is absolutely important. And that's one of the challenges that we're talking about with service members and family members around the holidays, because oftentimes they find themselves not near their family. So making sure that they are talking and connected to their unit, to other service members, leadership.

This is where good leadership really comes into play as well, right? Recognizing who do I have in my unit that is alone during the holidays? And let's make sure they're not alone. I don't know about you, but I remember in holidays, especially Thanksgiving, having a bunch of young enlisted folks who were on their own for the first time around our table. They weren't going to have a meal alone, right? So who you surround yourself with and just being around others is important during the holidays. And you're right. They can have an impact on your mood, your thinking. They can encourage you. I think those are all important things to consider.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yep. My personal way of viewing the holidays evolved, I would say rather quickly, because it went from, "Oh, the holidays are here. I'm not doing this. I'm not doing that because I'm deployed," or whatever to, "Wow, I wonder what's going to happen this

holiday.” And when you embrace the possibility that your holiday may be nothing that you had anticipated, it opens you up to experiences that will put you in touch with amazing people and to make it a new and very special occasion.

**Meghan Corso:**

Right. Right.

**Bruce Moody:**

Which is what the holidays are all about.

**Meghan Corso:**

Absolutely. New is not necessarily bad, right? There’s an opportunity there that you’re highlighting. You may meet new people. You may have a different experience that you really truly enjoy. Just being open to different experiences, and that flexibility, which we all know military service requires flexibility, doesn’t it? So it’s kind of hand-in-hand, and being flexible will allow you potentially to have some experiences you weren’t thinking about, didn’t anticipate, and they could be good.

**Bruce Moody:**

Really valuable conversation here today. I do want to ask you one last question, which is for people who are in crisis, need an immediate intervention. So someone is clearly beyond needing to be cheered up, beyond what you as a buddy can do. What should that individual who sees another person at that level of need, in potentially crisis, what should they do?

**Meghan Corso:**

Sure. I think as things get worse for someone, and the way that I teach people to start to notice that is when it’s starting to impact the relationships the person has, whether at work or home. You’re starting to see an impact on work performance. They’re not making it to work on time. Perhaps they’re just not up to their usual caliber of work. Those are times where you’re starting to think, “You know what? We probably need a professional to help us now.” So that’s when we start to encourage folks to actually seek medical care for what it is that’s going on with them, for whatever their concerns are.

Now, you’re highlighting an individual too, that potentially let’s say it’s even escalating, getting worse from there. So not only is there impairment at work and relationships, but now we’re starting to think we’re reaching a crisis point. When we start to think about a crisis, there’s some immediate things that we want to happen, whether that is bringing the person to the local emergency room for evaluation, whether it’s calling 988, which is our National Crisis Line. We also have the Veterans Crisis Line. Those are the three immediate interventions or actions that one should be considering if they’re on the verge of a crisis.

**Bruce Moody:**

Wonderful to speak with you today. Thank you so much. We're going to put a bunch of links in the program notes: help that's available, guides, Chill Drills. Go check out the Chill Drills. You'll love those. So Captain Meghan Corso, I just invite any final thoughts as we wrap up today's conversation.

**Meghan Corso:**

Yeah. I think just acknowledge. Give yourself grace. It can be difficult sometimes in the military when we head into the holidays. Just make sure that you're not isolating yourself. Get involved. Get around other people. Start to exercise. Just get physically active. Really take good care of yourself. Give yourself grace again, and do things that you enjoy. Don't forget to get good sleep, eat well, exercise. All those simple things that are hard to do, challenge yourself to get back to those basics.

**Bruce Moody:**

And deep breaths.

**Meghan Corso:**

Yes, deep breaths. They go a long way.

**Bruce Moody:**

Thank you so very much for joining us today. We appreciate it.

**Meghan Corso:**

Absolutely. Thanks so much for having me.

**Bruce Moody:**

Our pleasure. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you, so if you have any questions or comments, maybe ideas for a future episode, we will have a link in the program notes, and you can go ahead and get in touch with us. 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.