Military OneSource Podcast — Tips for Parents to Talk About Mental Health

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 hear today from Cady. She's the daughter of an Army sergeant, and she's going to share her story with us. She'll share her experiences as a military youth and some difficulties she faced with her mental health. She's also going to tell us how she emerged from these difficulties, the lessons she learned and how she's now advocating for others. Cady, thank you for joining us today.

Cady:

Hi, Bruce. Thanks so much for having me.

Bruce:

We're so pleased to have you with us. It is important to note that you do speak quite frequently to groups about your experiences and what you've learned from it. With that, we're just going to step back. I'm going to step back and just ask you to go ahead and share your story.

Cady:

Hello, everyone. I wanted to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in this space and share experiences with you. Today, I'm going to talk with you about mental health and my experience growing up in a military culture.

My mother was in the military. Specifically, she was in the Army in the 1st Lance Missile Battalion. She was a sergeant for that unit and she made sharpshooter. I'm very proud of her and the things she accomplished while in the military and the things she accomplished outside of the military because of her experiences there.

The Army did a lot of good things for my mother. Because of it, she was able to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. She was able to go to college because of it. She's

a first-generation college student and she's had three children who have also gone to college. She tells me all the time that the Army taught her how to enter a room with her chin up.

One of the things she taught her children, including me, her only daughter, is Charlie Mike. This means continue the mission. Essentially, you do what you're supposed to do. Whatever else happens, whatever else you're feeling, you make sure you do what needs to be done. I think there's an incredible strength to that kind of resolve.

I've carried that sentiment with me my entire life, and because of this resolve, I got my black belt at 16, graduated high school a year early, got my bachelor's [degree] in four years. I actually just completed my master's [degree] in December, and I'm a published author. I've never questioned my right to exist and take up space in a room.

This resolve, this discipline, this ability to overcome any obstacle is what Charlie Mike is. However, there's also a darker side to Charlie Mike. Any perceived weakness, any vulnerability, any sign that you can't do what needs to be done, I didn't see any room for that in Charlie Mike.

When I was 16 and working at getting my black belt and also trying to graduate high school at the same time, I started having panic attacks. I remember my first panic attacks so vividly. I was in class filling out some sort of English worksheet, and the next thing I knew I was in the bathroom sweating through my shirt.

My heart was pounding. I was shaking, and I thought I was dying. So I called my mom. She talked me through it, and when I got home, she asked me what it was about. I was honest and I said, "I didn't know." I was stressed, overwhelmed and anxious, but I'd been existing like that ever since I could remember, so I should have been fine. She made it clear to me that panic attacks were a weakness and I shouldn't be having them.

After all, I'd had to leave class and call her in the middle of her workday. I needed a way to do what needed to be done without panic attacks getting in the way like that. But I also knew I was going to have panic attacks; that was unavoidable. I needed a way to have those panic attacks, hide that I was having them and still go to school. In order to accomplish that, I started waking up early and I would purposefully drive myself into a panic attack before school, and then I'd go about my day as if I were fine and not completely emotionally and physically exhausted.

This next part I'm going to share is something that everyone involved in helping me with this presentation has been hesitant about. However, I think it's important to normalize people talking about mental health even or perhaps especially in a more professional setting. I've also been talking about how important being vulnerable is, and it's important to me that I am not asking anyone else to do what I myself am not willing to do.

I was diagnosed with anxiety and bipolar disorder recently, which is a diagnosis I sought out myself. I only went to therapy the first time because I knew it would be paid for by the athletics department I was under and someone offered to go with me. I was so

afraid that acknowledging anything was wrong would mean I had somehow failed. I'd known there was something, "wrong" with me for years, but I couldn't talk to my family about it.

That would be a vulnerability, and I had learned that you don't show vulnerability. My mother had shown me that over and over again my entire life, and admitting I had panic attacks just compounded that. Now, you may be wondering why my mother was so against showing any vulnerability, even in her own home.

In the Army, my mother was one of seven women and the only female sergeant. She faced and continues to face a lot of sexism. She got used to handling it and, as her only daughter, she wanted to make sure I could handle it as well. One of the ways she dealt with sexism was by showing absolutely no behaviors that someone could perceive as a weakness.

If you show weakness, if people are able to tell that you were afraid or nervous, why will they listen to you? So she started watching my behavior from a very young age. "Don't bounce your leg. Don't play with your hair. Get your hands away from your face. Don't bite your lip. Do this. Don't do that. Act like this." I still find myself observing what I'm doing like I'm somehow on the outside of my body. What message am I portraying? Is it the one I want to portray?

How am I sitting? Do I need to change my face? It's unconscious for me now. It's also a cause of stress for me because it's hard for me to just exist somewhere. Yes, I've never questioned my rights to belong in a room, but I have questioned my right to belong in a room if I'm not paying attention to exactly how I'm behaving and how people may perceive me.

Covering up things that could be perceived as weaknesses became second nature to me. Even in conversations with people, if I was feeling uncomfortable or I like I needed to reveal some weakness for any reason, I would throw out a small one, one small vulnerability that I was comfortable with so no one could hurt me with it even if they tried. It wouldn't affect me, and therefore it wouldn't interfere with me doing what I needed to do.

If somebody asked me if I was OK, I would give a separate smaller reason — I was upset or tired — a reason that I wasn't insecure about. So it wasn't really a weakness because I had it handled and it wouldn't bother me if they tried to use it against me somehow.

Starting therapy and getting my mental health diagnosis were my first steps to untangling myself from the person I thought I had to be. I had to learn who I was rather than trying to fit myself into the mold of a stereotypical strength.

It's been hard. It's one of the most difficult things I've ever done. It would be easier for me and for my family if I would revert back to that person who made herself have hidden panic attacks just so she could get through the school day. But I don't want to do that, and my mom doesn't want me to do that. I want to know who I am and isn't there a different sort of strength in forging your own path?

With all these messages surrounding vulnerability, how can we talk to kids who have grown up in this culture? Something you have to understand about helping these children is that we are raised to pretend there's nothing wrong, and we get very, very good at it. If you're looking for something wrong, some marker you can identify, you're not going to help anyone.

You need to pay attention to what kids aren't talking about rather than what they are. Sometimes, if a kid wants to know how someone might react to something that's bothering them, they'll throw out one small reason they're upset. I've done it, and I continue to do it to this day. They'll tell you a small, easily fixed issue to test if you can be trusted. How you react to that will determine whether or not they come to you with anything else.

Bearing all of this in mind, how can we encourage adults who are or were in the military to talk to their children about things that are deemed vulnerabilities, but really aren't? We appeal to another facet of military culture — no man left behind. If you aren't talking to your children about mental health, sexual health, physical health, etc., you are making a decision that leaves them behind. You are leaving them without the tools they need to successfully overcome the hard challenges they will face in regard to their bodies and their minds.

Even with the difficulties I faced with the message Charlie Mike, I wouldn't change it. I've taken that message, that strength, that resolve, that resiliency with me into every single day. My entire master's cohort knew about Charlie Mike and what it means, because I told them about it. They quoted it back to me sometimes and told me that they've told their own families about it.

Recently, because of the work that I do, I was asked to speak at a national conference in front of people I'd never met before. I was so nervous. I felt the anxiety building up in me like I was 16 again, just considering the idea of it. And then, of course, came all the preparation and then the actual presentation.

I was chanting "Charlie Mike" to myself throughout the entire preparation process, and when it came time to present, I was able to do it. I was able to get up in front of all of those people and do what I needed to do and help them understand what they needed to look at. This is what the military did for me, and I love that. Just because I have a diagnosis, a perceived weakness or a perceived defect, it doesn't mean that I am weak. Look at everything that I've accomplished.

I have my master's [degree]. I've presented in a national capacity. I've narrated modules that have won national awards. I've been published. I've accomplished things that I never thought I could have, and Charlie Mike, the unwavering resolve to do what needs to be done, has gotten me through it.

Just because the children and young people that you care about have mental health problems or whatever personal silent struggle they may be dealing with, it doesn't mean that they can't overcome it with the tools that they already have. You can help

them accomplish great things by giving them the tools to acknowledge, understand and navigate the challenges they're struggling with.

One of those tools could be therapy, but it could also be telling parents, caregivers and really any adult that talking about vulnerabilities or perceived weaknesses doesn't make you weak, but is in fact the key to building resilient and healthy and capable children.

It's a part of the mission. I've been in therapy for years and going has given me a place to talk where I don't have to worry about trying to hide anything that I feel is wrong or that may be perceived as a weakness. That's what therapy is for. I've gotten so many coping skills from going, as well as an understanding of why my mind works the way it does.

In so doing, I've managed to stop making myself have panic attacks. I go several days, if not weeks and months without a panic attack now, which is something that I didn't think would ever happen. If you want the kids you care about to open up to you, you need to open up to them. Share some of your own perceived weaknesses with them.

Share what you're struggling with. Be present with them. Pay attention both to what they're saying and what they're not saying. Make it clear that they are not weak or stupid or needy for asking for help. Make it clear that asking for help is extremely brave, and doing so will only ensure that you can Charlie Mike in a healthy and rewarding way. Thank you for listening.

Bruce:

Thank you, Cady, for sharing your story, your journey and your insights. I know that what you've shared with us today will really resonate with military families, and on behalf of all of us, we are just so grateful for you joining us today.

Cady:

Of course. Thank you so much.

Bruce:

Thank you. And I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We'd love to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. Send us a comment, a question or an idea for a future episode.

And be sure to subscribe to our podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because we cover a wide range of issues to help military families as they navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for joining us today. Take care. Bye-bye.