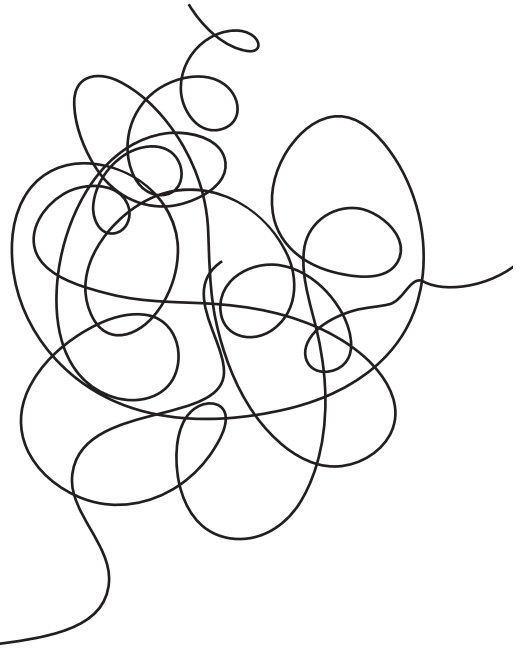


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OSI FAMILY GUIDE

Understanding and Living with
an Operational Stress Injury




For readability, the term 'military member' is used throughout this document. It also includes veterans and their families, who are an important part of this shared reality. This guide is for you as well.

August 2012
By: Nadia Kohler
Social Worker
Valcartier Military Family Resource Centre

UPDATE
March 2026
By: Emmie Beauchesne
Social Worker
Valcartier Military Family Resource Centre



Testimonials



“The OSI came into our lives like a wolf in a sheepfold. Although I saw it coming before it was even diagnosed, I couldn’t do anything about it. I had to cope with it, and felt an overwhelming sense of being alone. It was only after I called the Military Family Resource Centre that I discovered services and an outstanding group of women going through the same things as me. Today, I learned to let go of things I cannot control and focus on what I can change, or at least, have a say in. The road is not always a straight, neatly planned path. There are a few detours, but these help us grow a little taller.”

—Sonya, 2025

“There can be collateral victims of an OSI. Ask for help, listen to those around you. Do not keep what you are going through to yourself... ‘Falling to your knees’ may just help you get up even stronger. Your loved ones can also receive help. Listen to the people who tell you that you have changed and that you should talk to a health professional. Everyone will be stronger for it!”

— I. (Caregiver), 2025

“An OSI can wreak havoc. The training and workshops I took at the Valcartier MFRC allowed me to better understand this condition: what can be seen loud and clear and what is whispered in the darkness of shame. Today, thanks to the tools, services and support I received from the Centre, we—my spouse, my children and myself—no longer carry this burden alone.

Deepening my knowledge in this area and understanding the real impact this condition had on me allowed me to become a pillar of support for my loved ones. In addition to supporting my spouse on his journey to wellness and acceptance, I also helped the community by getting involved as a peer helper in various workshops and with a support group for spouses of injured military members and veterans, and by participating in a podcast on the subject. For me, the Valcartier MFRC is a place where I have been able to put down some of my occasionally overwhelming baggage, a place where I have been welcomed without judgment, where I have been accepted as I am, without a mask: everyone instantly understands my situation, my atypical family dynamics, no need for explanations here. I have used various services offered there over the years, which have allowed me to move forward personally, sometimes in leaps and bounds and other times very slowly, but solidifying what I was learning as I went along.”

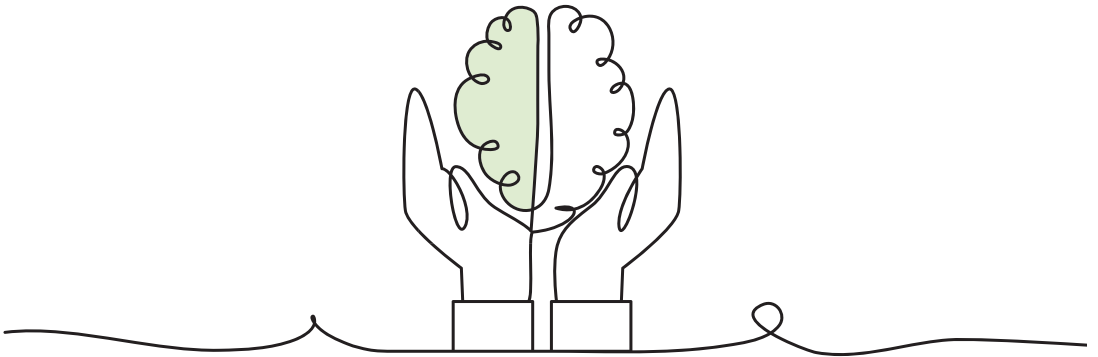
— Joséé F., 2025

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Don't hesitate to reach out to the Military Family Resource Centre in your region to learn more about the local and national resources available to you.



Note. For ease of reading, Operational Stress Injury has been abbreviated to OSI throughout this text.

Introduction

Military life is multi-faceted and occurs in a context influenced by international socio-political realities. The Canadian Armed Forces' involvement may take many forms, from high-intensity combat operations, to training for peacekeeping missions and support to partner forces, to domestic response to emergencies.

During their term, members may be faced with different situations and varying levels of stress that they must deal with. Their coping skills are therefore tested on a daily basis.

Upon returning from military operations, members may show no reaction to stress or may experience some reactions that are considered normal. For some, the psychological symptoms are only temporary, while for others, they can persist over time and even become chronic.

It is not uncommon for the person in question to be the last to notice changes. Often, it is their network (family, friends, colleagues, etc.) that detects changes in behaviour and attitudes and encourages the military member to seek help.

This guide is intended for military members and their loved ones (partners, parents, children, friends, etc.) and aims to address common questions. The following pages discuss the symptoms of OSIs, their possible impacts, and various strategies that can be implemented. Certain key concepts are also introduced, as well as available resources (military and civilian).

This guide does not claim to cover everything there is to know about OSIs, as this knowledge is constantly evolving, as are the practices associated with it. The aim is rather to provide a practical, simple and quick tool for finding as much information as possible. For further information, please do not hesitate to make use of the resources available.

Happy Reading!

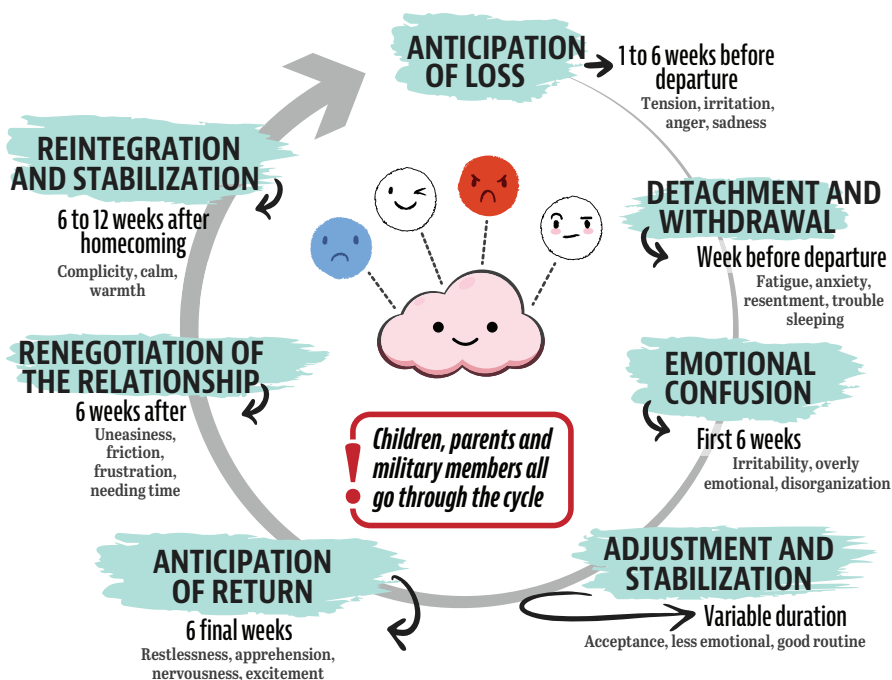


The Role of Absence in the Development of an OSI

While a military member's absence does not systematically result in an OSI, these absences, which may be frequent during a member's career, may have direct consequences (fatigue, stress, increased mental load, etc.) and indirect consequences (strained relationships, feelings of guilt, etc.) both for the member and those around them.

Emotional Cycle of Absence

Going through a period of absence is never simple, for the member or for their loved ones. Each departure and return comes with a multitude of emotions—tension, sadness, anxiety, but also pride and the joy of being reunited. The emotional cycle of an absence helps understand these normal stages of a separation and helps provide a reminder that they are part of an adjustment period experienced by the whole family.



Source: Vestal Logan, K. (1987). *The Emotional Cycle of Deployment*. Department of Defense.

Emotions are part of our lives, and everybody feels them in their own way. It is important to remember that there is not just one "good" way to feel an emotion. Their intensity—meaning how strong they are—and their duration—how long they're felt—vary from person to person.

What deeply upsets one person may seem less upsetting to someone else. Some emotions pass quickly, while others take longer to work through. All of these reactions are normal.

Recognizing this diversity helps us better understand others... and lets us be kinder to ourselves.

Transition

A transition period lasts from a few weeks to a few months following the member's return home, during which you can see some psychological and/or physical symptoms in the military member. As explained by Germain and Vaillancourt (2016), "[translation] it's a transient state of adjustment" (p. 47).

If, after a few weeks, you observe that what is being felt more or less matches the cycle of absence, one can expect a so-called "normal" transition. In some cases, during a so-called "difficult" transition, physical and/or psychological symptoms are significant, persistent and limiting. This is when you may start contemplating a possible OSI.

When to Worry

Questions for assessing the transition:

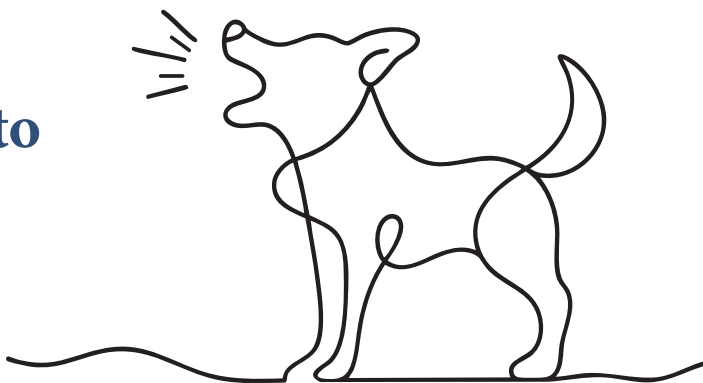
- How were they before pre-deployment training?
- Are the symptoms getting better or worse?
- Are the symptoms persistent?
- Are they interfering with life (individual, family, social, couple and/or work)?

If you notice:

- Symptoms lasting beyond 5 to 7 months or symptoms that are worsening
- Symptoms that get better for a while before getting even worse
- The member not being able to function as well in one or more areas of their life (family, work, etc.)
- The member showing concerning signs (significant mood swings, alcohol abuse, symptoms of depression, signs of distress, impulsivity, violence, etc.)

Don't hesitate to reach out to the resources available to assist and support you.

Possible Reactions to Potential Threats



When confronted with stress, the body may react in two ways. The first is immediate, almost reflexive and automatic, moving the body without you even thinking. The second is slower; it involves reflection and conscious choices, allowing you to assess the situation and act appropriately. These two responses show why some reactions may seem instinctive, while others take time to control.

The following is an example illustrating this concept

Imagine that you are taking a walk and a barking dog comes toward you:

- Have you been bitten before?
- Could this be a potential threat?
- How will you react?
- Will you flee, fight or freeze?
- Is it really possible to control or anticipate your reaction?

If the dog bites you, what will happen the next time you come across a dog?

In a stressful situation, your response is immediate (automatic and physiological reaction, such as an accelerated heartbeat) or more measured based on reflection.

When faced with a threat, there are essentially three defensive reactions:

FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE.

For some, running away (flight) or standing still (freeze) is interpreted as a form of cowardice or weakness. But it is important to understand that it is a defence mechanism, activated by the brain, that occurs immediately and instinctively. It is entirely out of our control.

The slower reaction is like hitting the pause button to think:
"Have I been through this before?"
"How did I react?"
"What can I learn from this situation?"

Highly emotional events remain burned into our memories and can change the way we see the world. For example, being bitten by a dog may lead us to question whether "the world is a safe place" or "nothing bad can happen to me."

To learn more about stress reactions, see Korzine (2024).

Definitions

What Is a Traumatic Event?

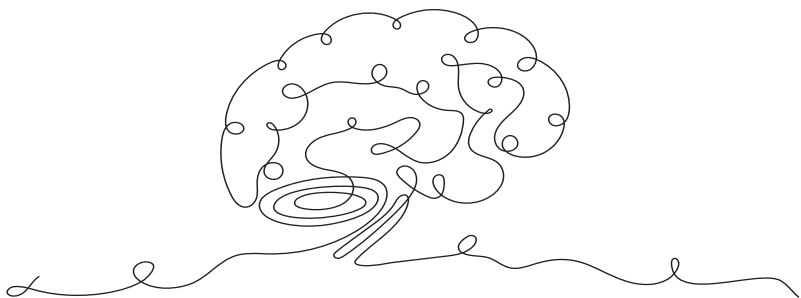
A "traumatic" event involves the following two elements:

- The person has been confronted with death or the fear of death or has sustained serious injuries or has had their or another person's physical integrity threatened.
- The event has caused intense fear or a feeling of powerlessness or horror.

What Is Operational Stress?

It is intense and continuous stress experienced in the theatre of operations or on exercise that is common to all participants. Examples include a build-up of daily frustrations, conflict with a colleague, lengthy separation from family and friends, family troubles, long hours and fast pace at work, adjusting to living in a community, change in culture, climate, food, etc. (Valcartier Health Services Centre, 2010).

When the different signs or symptoms resulting from intense, continuous stress undermine coping abilities, it may be worth considering whether an OSI could be present.



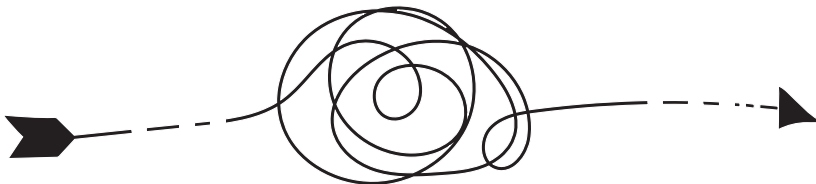
What Is an Operational Stress Injury (OSI)?

An OSI is not a “true” diagnosis. It is not currently listed in the DSM-5-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) or ICD-11 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases). Rather, its definition has been developed by the Canadian Armed Forces.

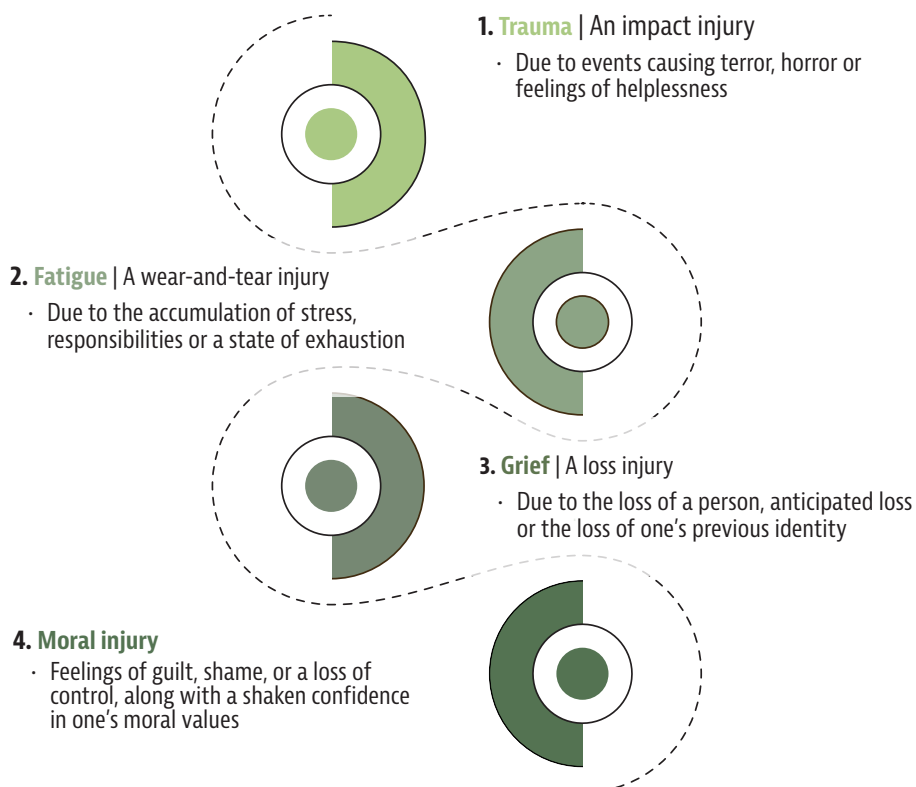
*“An operational stress injury is any persistent psychological difficulty resulting from operations in the military. Those operational duties can include training incidents, domestic operations and international operations” (CIPSRT, n.d.)
resulting in a person’s diminished ability to cope.*

Among the most common persistent psychological difficulties are the following:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Sleep disorders
- Addiction (substance abuse or addictive behaviours)
- Anger management issues



Four Potential Sources of an OSI



Good to Know

Being exposed to operational stress or being involved in a critical incident does not necessarily lead to an OSI.

Similarly, exhibiting normal coping behaviours or experiencing an adjustment disorder does not mean that a military member will develop an OSI.

Finally, it is important to remember that an OSI does not automatically equate to PTSD.

For additional information, please consult the official Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services website: www.cfmws.ca

Possible Signs of an OSI

Each person reacts differently to difficult experiences, and signs may vary in intensity and duration. Here are some common reactions that can be observed in members with an OSI. Additional help could be beneficial if a member is exhibiting these signs. Stay vigilant, show kindness when engaging in discussion and consider appropriate support.

Fatigue

- Persistent fatigue
- Problems sleeping (trouble falling asleep, nightmares, restless sleep, night sweats, sleep apnea, etc.)

Mood

- Mood swings
- Feelings of shame or guilt
- Irritability or impulsivity (“short fuse”)
- Frequent frustration, particularly when facing failure or the incompetence of others
- Symptoms of anxiety or depression

Thoughts and concentration

- Difficulty managing stress
- Problems concentrating or memory loss
- Greater difficulty connecting to one’s emotions, feeling them or expressing them
- Changes in core beliefs (e.g., belief that the world is less safe, seeing danger when there is none)

Communication and relationships

- Difficulty communicating (withdrawn, uses an authoritative tone, finds it hard to be told what to do/receive criticism, etc.)
- Withdrawal from others or avoidance behaviours (avoids crowds, lines, conversations or films associated with their memories, etc.)
- Emotional distancing (a certain coldness, withdrawal or lack of emotional investment, etc.)
- Reduced interest in activities they used to enjoy
- Problems with intimacy or sex life

Physical reactions and behavioural responses

- Jumpy or hypervigilant (carries around an object for self-defence, is startled by sudden noises, scans the environment, etc.)
- Greater feeling of vulnerability and puts safety plans in place (constantly surveying the environment, considers their position in a location, etc.)
- Flashbacks (auditory, olfactory, visual memories, etc.)
- Adrenaline-seeking (action movies, intense video games, extreme sports, etc.)
- Hyperactivity or an inability to sit still (constantly needing to be doing something, always something to repair around the house, exhausting themselves to be able to sleep, etc.)
- Sexual dysfunction (low libido, erectile dysfunction, etc.)

Risky behaviour

- Dangerous driving (drives in the middle of the road, accelerates suddenly, impatient behind the wheel or road rage)
- Excessive use of alcohol or other substances
- Gambling addiction

Warning signs

- Suicidal thoughts or actions
- Any other signs that raise concern

Keep in Mind

Keep in mind that symptoms and their impacts may vary from one person to another, both in terms of frequency and intensity. They may be temporary or long-lasting (see the Mental Health Continuum in annex).

These signs are not a checklist for determining the presence of an OSI. Context and other factors must always be considered.

As previously mentioned, it is common for a member and their family to go through a normal period of transition and adjustment upon a return from an absence (around 5 to 7 months), due to the following:

- Returning to multiple roles (personal, marital, family, professional and social)
- Adapting to a different pace of life and reality that differs from what was experienced during the military operation
- Learning that certain survival behaviours are no longer appropriate or necessary

Factors That May Affect Progress

- The length of time between the onset of the injury and reaching out for help
- The member's involvement in their treatment (psychological, physical, etc.)
- Support from their social network and family
- The member's internal resources (e.g., personal baggage, mental makeup, methods absorbed over the years to cope with different challenges, capacity for self-reflection, resiliency, coping skills, etc.)
- Existence of external resources (e.g., social and professional help, community resources, access to services, etc.)
- Support from the chain of command (flexibility, importance given to health care, openness, implementation of accommodations, etc.)
- Life history prior to the injury (what the person has faced since birth)
- The accumulation of additional sources of stress (e.g., marital issues, financial troubles, family conflict, etc.)

These factors vary from person to person

Remember

Unlike a physical injury, signs of an OSI are sometimes difficult to clearly identify, both for the person affected and for those around them.

The member is not always aware of their behaviour. It is sometimes through comments from their social network and family that they realize that "something's off."

The intensity of emotions exhibited by the member does not necessarily reflect reality. These may be temporary impacts rather than true signs of an OSI. It is important not to draw hasty conclusions.

In addition, OSIs do not necessarily mean that the member is no longer fit for duty or able to function in the different areas of their life. The intensity of the signs and degree of psychological injuries must be considered. In some cases, one can learn to cope with the symptoms of an OSI day-to-day in order to find balance in life and continue to function properly.

Keep in mind that violence is never acceptable and should never be tolerated. OSI symptoms do not justify such behaviour.

Impact on the Family and Family Coping

First of all, it is important to remember that we all have different ways of reacting and coping with situations. Some tend to externalize their feelings, while others will do the opposite. With an OSI, everyone's coping abilities are put to the test (partner, children, parents, family, friends, etc.). It is important to listen to yourself, to be gentle with one another, and to respect your own limits.

Primary Impacts of OSIs on Family Members

In adults

Emotions experienced

It is normal to experience a wide variety of emotions in this kind of situation. People may feel:

- Sadness, fear or anger about the changes they observe
- Frustration, irritation or a sense of unfairness ("Why us?")
- Discouraged, overwhelmed or overrun
- Guilt during moments of joy
- Rejected or not truly appreciated
- Emotionally detached from their partner
- Anxiety or uncertainty about the future
- A desire for things to "go back to the way they were"
- Fluctuating emotions (ups and downs)
- Powerlessness

Relationships and communication

Relationship dynamics may be shaken up.

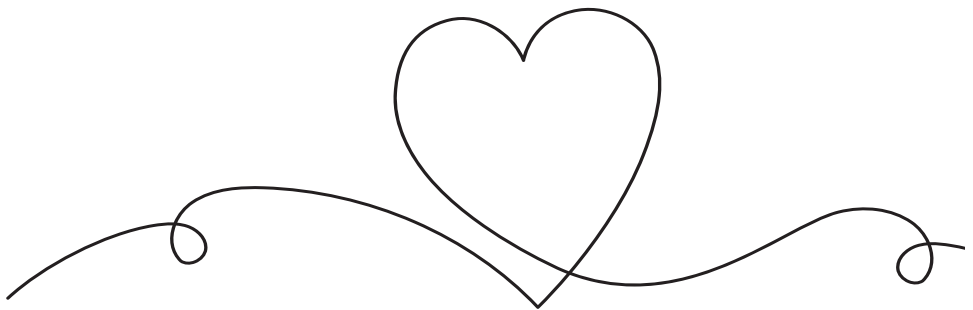
For example:

- Sometimes having the impression that you no longer recognize the person you love
- Having difficulty understanding certain reactions, which may be intense or unpredictable
- Walking on eggshells to avoid conflict
- Feeling consumed by the other person's emotions
- Acting as a mediator, especially to protect the children
- Feeling misunderstood, alone or isolated
- Hoping that the member agrees to go seek help
- Asking many questions in an effort to understand what they are going through
- Sometimes blaming the other person—a natural defence mechanism when the situation becomes too much

Day-to-day responsibilities and workload

Here are some responsibilities that can become difficult for family members over time:

- Taking on most of the family and household responsibilities
- Having to plan and anticipate every detail to avoid unforeseen circumstances
- Feeling like they have to “manage the household single-handedly”
- Noting that the member is participating less in terms of chores or family activities
- Feeling fatigued, exhausted even, in light of the growing workload



Coping responses

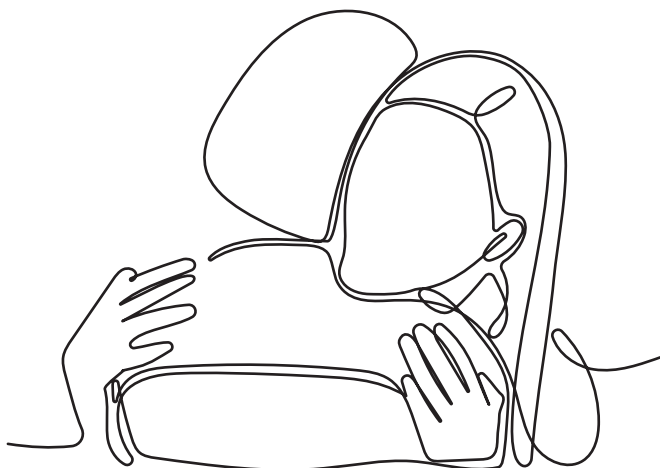
Everyone has their own way of trying to maintain balance and family stability. This may lead to the following:

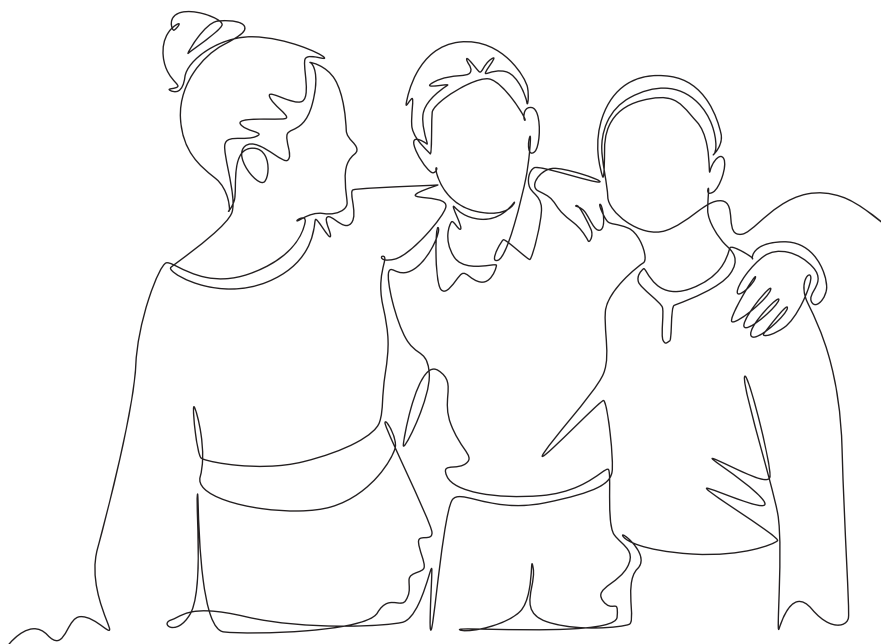
- Excusing certain behaviours by saying that they are "normal because of their job"
- Avoiding certain situations or triggers to prevent tension
- Trying to calm or defuse situations
- Wanting to understand at all costs what the member is going through
- Developing physical pain or discomfort due to stress
- Asking many questions:
"How can I help?"
"How can I talk about it without affecting their career?"
"What is acceptable?"

Potential impacts

By constantly adapting and carrying so much, some loved ones may:

- Feel powerless in the face of the other's suffering
- Have the impression that everything revolves around the member and their injuries
- Feel their own wellbeing comes second
- Develop compassion fatigue
- Present signs of exhaustion, or possibly secondary traumatic stress (vicarious trauma)





Never forget

All too often, we see loved ones who, in their desire to help and support, gradually find themselves caught up in a dynamic of domestic violence or coercive control. Unfortunately, partners and children learn to tolerate unacceptable behaviours rather than recognizing them and protecting themselves from them. As mentioned above, signs of an OSI in no way justify violent behaviour.

Resources

A number of resources for support and assistance can be found here.



In children/teens

Growing up with a parent who has an OSI will impact children/teens to varying degrees. As a parent, it is essential to remain attentive to how your mental health may affect family members. It is possible to reduce the impact on children/teens, but it is unrealistic to think that there will be no effects at all or that they can be entirely prevented.

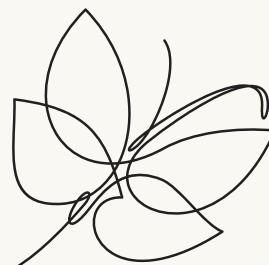
The reactions, questions and emotions of children/teens may be similar to those of other family members. Without necessarily verbalizing it clearly, they may adopt behaviours that suggest something is troubling them, such as no longer having friends over, avoiding staying at home, communicating less, fearing the reactions of the parent with the OSI, turning more to the other parent, isolating themselves, taking on more responsibilities, staying busy with various household tasks, etc.

Children/teens of parents with an OSI do not necessarily develop emotional or behavioural problems. However, some may seek more attention or temporarily show signs of regression in terms of hygiene, language, independence, etc. Other observable behaviours may include withdrawal, anger, anxiety, decreased motivation or concentration, trouble sleeping, sadness, and other similar reactions.

Children/teens learn by modelling their parents' behaviour (they copy what they see). Both during childhood and adolescence, children will repeat what they have seen and learned from their parents' reactions because they see their parents as their role models.

Example

If a parent often reacts with anger or frustration when stressed, the child or teen may, in turn, replicate these reactions when faced with challenges.



Conversely, a parent who calmly manages their emotions in the face of conflict teaches their child to adopt similar behaviours, displaying emotional regulation.

Impacts on the Role of Parent

When a parent is living with an OSI, it can influence their role as a parent in various ways. These impacts may include:

- Increased irritability or fatigue
- Reduced tolerance for children's behaviour or stimuli
- Difficulty maintaining realistic expectations of children, particularly regarding their autonomy
- Inability to understand certain behaviours or reactions in children
- Parental escalation due to limited energy
- The emergence of negative emotional messages, such as attributing behaviours to the child's personality or using criticism or humiliation
- A feeling of powerlessness or inadequacy in the parenting role

These difficulties can also result in a rift within the parenting team, stemming from differing views or approaches, and, in some cases, parental disengagement (temporary or otherwise).

Strategies That Can Help

First and foremost, we want to invite you to acknowledge everything you already accomplish each day. Hats off to you! Despite the challenges and obstacles you and your family encounter, you continue to find the strength to keep moving forward and do your best — and that deserves to be recognized with kindness.

The strategies below are options from which you may select those that best suit you. Proceed gently, at your own pace, and remember that seeking for professional help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

For the Whole Family

Take care of yourself

- Set realistic expectations and goals
- Focus on what you can control
- Implement concrete solutions to make your daily life easier (e.g., ask for outside help with homework or household chores)
- Take care of your overall health—a balanced diet, regular physical activity and good sleep promote emotional balance
- Find simple ways to relax and take a step back, whether through breathing, meditation or other practices

Seek help

- Surround yourself with people to whom you can talk freely about what you are going through
- Do not hesitate to seek professional help: it's a sign of courage and a means of support
- Clearly express your needs to those around you and explain how they can support you (e.g., watching the children or helping out around the house)
- Adjust the resources you use according to the challenges you face (the bigger the challenges, the more helpful it is to draw on multiple resources)

Adapt to change

- Respect each person's pace. It's normal to sometimes need to be alone to recharge your batteries.

Recognize and respect each person's reality

- Each family member experiences things in their own way. Every experience is valid. Avoid minimizing or judging how others feel.
- Identify your needs and limits, as well as those of other family members. Express them openly and work together to find ways to address them.

Encourage positivity

- Take the time to acknowledge efforts and progress, even the smallest. Praising what is going well builds confidence and prevents unnecessary criticism.
- Show your affection through kind words and small gestures every day

Communicate with kindness

- Share your emotions without trying to control or change them. Offer comfort to the other person, even if you do not have all the answers.
- Talk about difficulties as soon as they arise, to prevent tension from building up over time
- Work together to find solutions for managing conflicts

Allow yourself to have moments of lightheartedness

- Leave room for : laughing, relaxing and talking about topics that have nothing to do with the challenges
- Treat yourself to small pleasures every day, whether alone, as a couple or with your family. These enjoyable moments, even if short, are important.
- Continue your usual activities, such as sports or outings with friends. They help maintain a good balance.

For Parents

Respect the child and their role

- Allow your child to experience the joys and full responsibilities of a child (play, learn, make mistakes)
- Have realistic expectations: perfection is not an appropriate goal for a child

Consistent routines and discipline

- Be consistent with discipline and routine. If you change the rules based on your mood, the child will not know how to act
- Set the rules together (as a parenting team) and inform the child of them clearly (e.g., write the rules on a board for everyone to see)
- Respect each person's decision. The person who imposed a punishment is the best person to end it
- If you disagree with a punishment or rule, do not say so in front of the child (avoid undermining the other parent)

Value and encourage

- Emphasize good behaviour and encourage the child when they succeed
- Allow them to sometimes take the lead and make age-appropriate choices
- Give them "fake choices" to offer them a sense of control:

"Do you want an apple or a banana?"

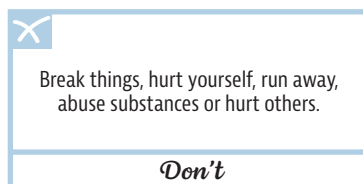
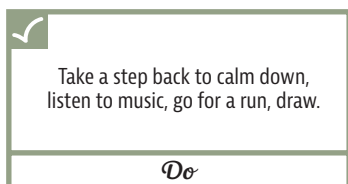
"Are you vacuuming or cleaning the litter box this week?"

"Do you want to take a bath before or after dinner?"

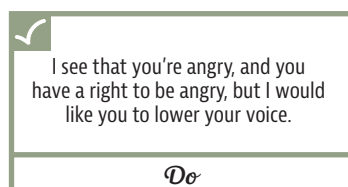
"Do you want to come up with a solution together or would you like me to suggest one?"

Supporting emotional management

- Help your child identify their emotions and find appropriate ways to express them. For example:

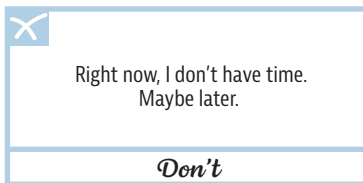


- Question the behaviour and not the person. For example:



Keep your commitments and build trust

- Keep your promises as much as possible. For example:



Create a support network

- Help your child identify trusted people they can talk to about what they are going through, whether that be family members, friends or reliable adults

Important

Having good times with your child is precious. The quality of these shared moments is more important than the quantity of them. During days filled with tasks, work and responsibilities, setting aside time to simply be with your child is enriching both for you and for them.

To promote a connection with your child, it is important to be interested in what they are doing, what they feel and what they like. These moments of sharing not only foster a warm and close relationship, but also strengthen the bond between you and your child. Taking the time to express your affection may seem obvious or natural, but it is actually a very important gesture.

For the Member

Talk and get involved

- Take the time to talk with the member about their part in everyday life
- Encourage them to participate at their own pace, respecting their limits and abilities

Identify and manage triggers

- Observe what may bring on difficult reactions and talk about them with kindness
For example:

I've noticed that children yelling seems particularly difficult for you.

- Work together to find strategies for preventing overly intense situations
For example:

Take a moment away to calm down when tension rises.

- Step in if needed

Adapt activities

- Agree to decrease the duration or frequency of certain activities if necessary
- Keep in mind what may cause stress, and choose more appropriate times or places for activities

Help refocus

- Support them so that they can refocus when stressed and regain control
For example:

Take a step back from your thoughts. Breathe deeply.

- Address them by their first name to keep them in the here and now when experiencing anxiety or reliving difficult memories

Encourage dialogue and support

- Encourage them to talk about what they feel with someone they trust (friend, colleague, chaplain, etc.) so they are not alone with their emotions
- Support them in their efforts to meet with a professional and encourage them to continue with their appointments and treatment
- Recognize achievements and efforts

***For more strategies,
see the annexes.***

Practical communication tools

- Clearly express your needs and expectations, without waiting for them to guess, in order to promote open and caring communication
- Try to defuse frustrations before they build up by adopting respectful and constructive communication strategies
- If necessary, suggest simple tools to help them organize their daily life (lists, notes, reminders, family calendar, family email, etc.)

Effects of OSIs on Coping Mechanisms

A coping mechanism is a psychological or behavioural strategy used to manage stress, trauma or difficult situations. It aims to regulate unpleasant emotions and maintain overall well-being.

There are many possible mechanisms. Here is a list of some of them:

- Hyperactivity
- Control
- Detachment
- Withdrawal
- Culprit seeking
- Self-centredness
- Substance use
- Etc.

The goal is for each person to be able to use different coping mechanisms depending on the challenges they face. When certain mechanisms are overused, they can sustain the problem and sometimes even amplify it. Someone living with an OSI may find themselves falling back repeatedly on the same defence mechanism. Exploring different strategies can make it easier to navigate different situations.



Why Discuss OSIs with Your Child/Teen?

Your child is a full-fledged member of the family. They will intuitively notice that the person they love is going through some challenges, will feel the tension at home and experience changes in family habits (angry outbursts, reduced family activities, isolation, conflicts, etc.). By talking to your child about the OSI, you are making it easier for them to understand, and helping them better manage the situation. It's essential!

Important

Significant adults in the child's life (teacher, coach, educator, etc.) should be informed of your family's current situation. These people play an important role

in supporting your child. They can notice meaningful changes in their behaviour and can be valuable listeners if needed.

When a child has doubts, they tend to make up their own stories, which may lead to increased insecurity or a feeling of guilt: "It's my fault that Daddy/Mommy isn't doing well. I'm the problem. That's why they don't love me any more."

It can be very painful for a child to remain in the dark and feel responsible for their parent's mental imbalance. The damage in terms of emotional relationships is significant; hence the importance of informing them of changes/disturbances in a manner that is appropriate to their stage of development (Quintal et al., 2013).

People may ask your child questions about their parent's behaviour. It is therefore important to give them the tools to deal with those questions. Furthermore, if children learn through another person that their parent has signs of an OSI, they may feel left out.

How to Discuss the Subject With Your Child

Talk together

Ideally, both parents or parental figures say the same thing. You are the most important people to talk to your children about this.

Talk to all the children, the earlier the better

It is better to discuss the subject as soon as possible regardless of the children's ages, and to gather all the children together.

Small reminder

Discussing certain topics such as OSIs can be difficult. Don't hesitate to use the resources available to help you through this process and feel supported.

Be sincere and concise

Provide essential information so that they understand, without going into unnecessary detail.

Adapt your language

Use a vocabulary adapted to the child's age and use practical examples, books or stories. Check to make sure they have understood by rephrasing or asking open-ended questions.

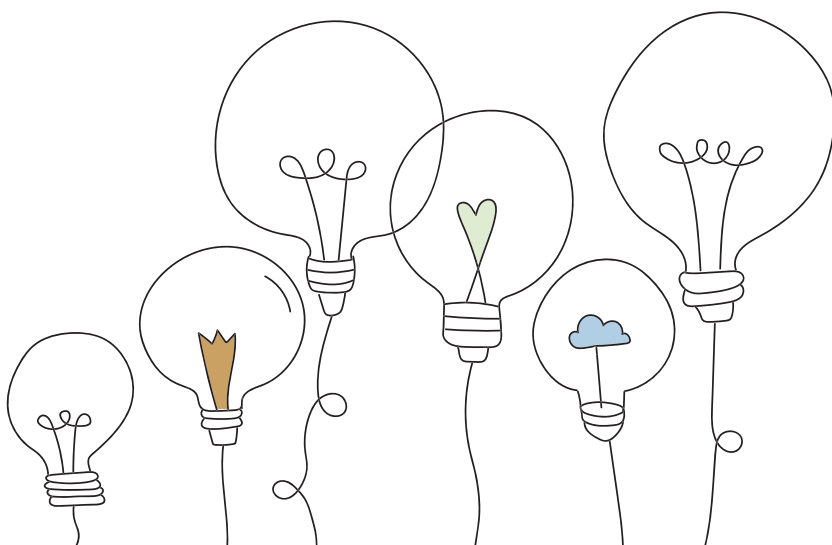
Stay available

Be there to answer their questions, but don't share your own fears and adult interpretations.

It is essential to remember that every child is unique and develops at their own pace. Therefore, it is important not to assume that they are more mature than their age. Chronological age may differ from emotional age, and this distinction should be taken into account.

It is also useful to keep in mind that the ability to understand other people's emotions and anticipate what they may be thinking develops from an early age, but only matures to its complex form at the end of primary school.

Finally, if your child has been diagnosed with or shows signs of developmental delay, this must be taken into consideration, as it will influence how you communicate with them and the choice of words you use to promote appropriate and compassionate understanding.





Here are a few examples

"When mommies and daddies get tired, sometimes they are less patient and need to rest, just like you. It's not your fault if Daddy got mad."

"Sometimes, when Mom is sad or mad, it's not because you did something wrong. It's just because her injury makes her feel bigger emotions or emotions that are difficult to control."

"When you have a cold, you may have a runny nose and a headache. You may not sleep well and you may not feel like playing with your friends. It's the same for Daddy. How he behaves (trouble sleeping, mood swings and things like that) are symptoms of the OSI. Tell me what you understood."

"Sometimes, Daddy needs to go away where there's less noise. It helps me recharge to spend time with you."

"You know, our brains are what control our emotions like anger, sadness and happiness. Sometimes, my brain doesn't work very well and it is mixed up because of the injury. That's why sometimes I can be happy and sad at the same time. That's also why I sometimes get angry over nothing."

"Mom has an injury, but you can't see it with your eyes. That's why it's sometimes difficult to understand. My injury is in my brain. It's called an operational stress injury (OSI)."

What About Teens?

Just like children, teens are aware of changes in the family routine and dynamics. They too are going through an important transition at their stage of development, which has impacts and repercussions on their identity and their behaviours.

Although it is easier to assume that teens will come directly to us for answers to their questions and concerns, this may not be the case. It is therefore important to take the time to explain to them what is currently happening.

It is also necessary to clearly tell the teen that they are not expected to take on the tasks and responsibilities that their parent is no longer able to perform. The goal is to prevent the teenager from feeling the pressure of being the second or third adult in the home.

Suggestions for Answering Questions from Children and Teens

Use clear and simple language

- Speak honestly and simply, using an age-appropriate vocabulary
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" if you don't have all the answers

Protect the relationship and the emotion

- If the discussion gets too intense, take a pause and resume it when you're calm. The objective is to protect the relationship and create a safe space.
- Answer with calm and patience, even if the child asks difficult questions or repeats certain questions

Inquire into their questions and needs

- Clarify what they are trying to understand: "What are you trying to find out by asking this question?"
- Ask them what they think. It will help you know how much and how far to go with your explanations

Stay available and attentive

- Your role is to ensure that your child understands and feels safe
- Be present, listen, and pay attention to their reactions, emotions and needs

Additional tips

- Use concrete examples or age-appropriate stories to illustrate the situation
- Encourage them to express their emotions through drawing, play, or discussion
- Normalize difficult emotions by explaining that everyone can feel worry, sadness, anger or other emotions

- Suggest simple stress management tools: deep breathing, taking breaks, physical activity, yoga, etc.
- Maintain an open and regular dialogue without waiting for them to be the ones to ask the questions

Remember

Keep in mind that your child needs a parent who is happy, present and available. The more you take care of yourself, the better the positive impact on your role as a parent.

The goal is not to strive for parental perfection (which is impossible anyways), but to do your best!

Control: Regaining Your Place

Control is our ability to act on what we can influence, change, or adapt. It's not about controlling everything, but about making conscious and thoughtful choices. In the case of an OSI, sources of control are limited due to the instability of the situation. It's important for loved ones to identify what they can act on.

Having control means taking an active stance: deciding, reacting and living in accordance with oneself rather than passively enduring what is happening around us.

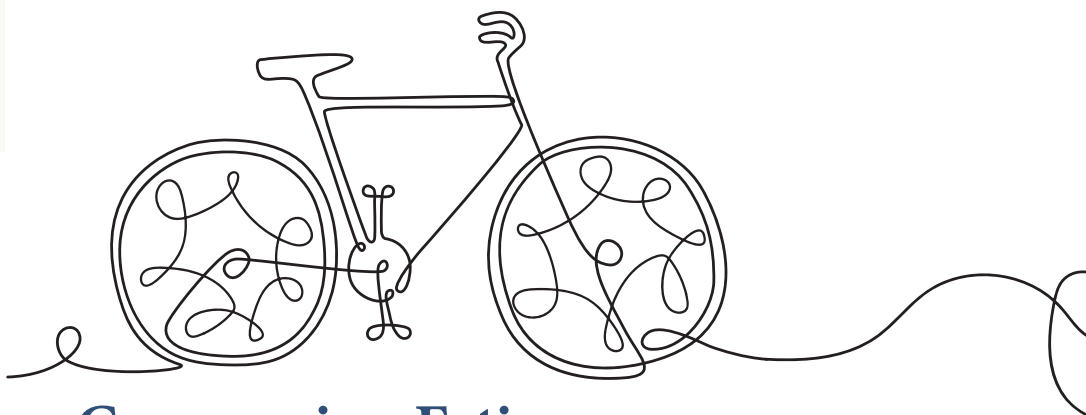
How Control Is Exhibited

It can appear in different areas of our lives:

- **Our daily habits and behaviours:** adopting behaviours that support our well-being
- **Our personal choices and decisions:** acting in accordance with our values and priorities
- **Our way of communicating:** choosing our words and actions carefully
- **Our thoughts and interpretations:** observing our ideas and redirecting them when they become harmful
- **Our well-being:** meeting our overall needs (see Maslow's Hierarchy in annex)
- **Our strategies for dealing with challenges:** putting concrete measures in place to manage difficult situations
- **Our actions and initiatives:** deciding what we do on a daily basis
- **Our emotional and behavioural reactions:** choosing how to respond to events rather than reacting automatically

An image to help understand

Imagine that someone is riding a bike: each spoke of the wheel represents an aspect of control. To move forward, each spoke supports the wheels. The more we strengthen these different sources of control, the more we can move forward with confidence and ease. Despite our efforts, sometimes our tires go flat and we have to pump them up again to continue. This is not a failure or a lack of willpower. The road can be full of unexpected detours, and the path that OSIs take is not always straightforward or under our control. Despite the obstacles, we can choose our pace, adjust our speed, and keep moving forward.



Compassion Fatigue

If you are the life partner of a member living with an OSI, it is important to meet your own needs and to listen to yourself. When trying to support your loved one on a daily basis, it is normal to sometimes feel tired or overwhelmed, and there is a risk of compassion fatigue.

As explained by Marie-Ève Caron (s.d.) in her article *Prévenir l'usure de compassion*, compassion fatigue—also called emotional exhaustion—appears when someone provides a great deal of support to a person going through difficulties. It can affect the body, heart and mind.

Here are some signs to watch for

- Profound fatigue
- Strong, varied emotions: anger, worry, anxiety
- A feeling of detachment or loss of interest
- A feeling of powerlessness
- Needing to take time for oneself
- Questioning the meaning of life
- Trouble sleeping or eating
- And other stress-related reactions

To better protect yourself and preserve your energy, here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Take a step back and observe what is causing you stress
- Ask yourself the question: “What do I really have control over?”
- Maintain good habits: eat well, get enough sleep, exercise
- Make time for leisure activities, cultural activities and maintain an active social life
- Identify your limits and respect them: your need for rest, your priorities, your energy level and your realistic expectations
- Practise self-compassion
- Don't hesitate to seek support from those around you or from professionals

Remember

Taking care of yourself is not a luxury; it is essential. We know how difficult it can be to prioritize yourself when you are caring for a loved one, but it is crucial. By taking care of yourself, you also give yourself the means to be fully present for the other person, without exhausting yourself.

Furthermore, in the context of an OSI, it can be difficult to distinguish between the role of life partner and that of daily caregiver. Often, spouses end up losing themselves: the spouse gradually fades into the background to make way for the caregiver, becoming a crutch, a constant source of support, sometimes to the detriment of the intimate and emotional relationship. According to the *Guide de survie des proches aidants* (Arcand & Brissette, 2022, p.109), the role of caregiver to a loved one can give rise to specific needs, depending on the situation:

1. The need for a break
2. The need to socialize and reduce isolation
3. The need for leisure activities and personal hobbies
4. The need to get outside and stay active
5. The need to express one's emotions
6. The need to feel valued in one's role as a caregiver
7. The need to talk to people outside the situation, especially if the person being cared for suffers from cognitive deficits

It is important to take time to meet these needs, even in cases where you believe they are not a priority compared to everything else that needs to be done.

Why Ask for Help

- To prevent the situation from deteriorating
- To make it easier to adapt to this new reality
- To equip yourself with the right tools
- To reduce the impacts on yourself and those around you
- To realize that you are not alone in this experience

There is no good or bad time to ask for help. The important thing is simply doing it!

The Role of Hope

The involvement of families and loved ones, along with external assistance from support services and professionals, are key factors that play a role in the hope felt by individuals struggling with mental health issues. When individuals receive support that is proportional to the challenges they face and are surrounded by people who believe in their abilities and power to act, you can then see a positive impact on their feelings of hope (Quintal et al., 2013).

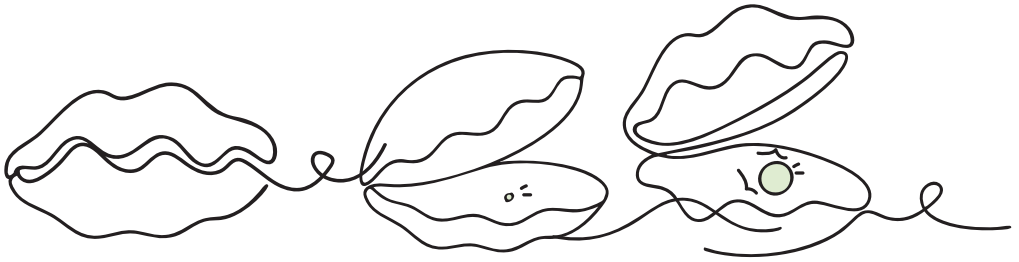
Recovery begins in the immeasurable suffering of a life thrown into chaos, then germinates from the dreams and desires that emerge.

It often grows quietly through daily actions carried out with determination and resilience, supported by companions encountered along the way.

It matures with the peace that gradually settles within the person who then dares, despite their fears, to become themselves again: a human who is wonderfully ordinary (adapted from Quintal et al., 2013, p. 63).

It should be noted that, in the field of mental health, recovery does not mean a return to the life you had before. As explained by psychologist Patricia Deegan (cited in St-Onge, 2025): “[translation] recovery is a process, not an end goal; it is a way of approaching daily challenges and opening oneself up to possibilities. [...] This process is rooted in the deep awareness that people with mental health issues are, first and foremost, human beings.”

The Tale of the Oyster



Do you know how an oyster makes a pearl? While on a long and wonderful journey at the bottom of the sea, a small grain of sand enters an oyster's shell. Sometimes the grain causes the oyster some discomfort. At other times, the oyster is truly irritated, to the point of closing itself off in pain and hiding. How could such a small grain of sand cause so much pain? The oyster tries to ignore it and tries to get rid of it, but the grain of sand remains stuck. So the oyster begins to think, asking its friends from the sea for advice, and finally understands that it won't be able to get rid of the grain of sand.

What Can Be Done?

What would be the best way to adapt to the situation and benefit from it?

The oyster courageously decides to surround the grain of sand with mother-of-pearl, smooth it, polish it and make it iridescent. Since that day, our oyster has lived proudly at the bottom of the ocean and continued to take care of its pearl. Why not change our difficulties into a precious pearl?

Based on an allegory by Boris Cyrulnik

Annexes

Annex 1: Mental Health Continuum, February 17, 2025

| | HEALTHY | REACTING | INJURED | ILL |
|---------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING | Frequent and regular experience of positive thoughts and emotions | Some reduced experience of positive thoughts and emotions | Finding it difficult to experience positive thoughts and emotions | Almost never experience positive thoughts and emotions |
| PERFORMANCE & FUNCTIONING | My capacity to function is excellent | My capacity to function is good | My capacity to function is fair | My capacity to function is poor |
| SLEEP | Mostly get enough quality sleep | Sometimes get enough quality sleep | Rarely get enough quality sleep | Never get enough quality sleep |
| PHYSICAL WELL-BEING | My health is excellent | My health is good | My health is fair | My health is poor |
| SOCIAL WELL-BEING | Socially active | Decreased social activities | Avoidance and/or withdrawal from social activities | Don't go out or answer the phone |
| SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING | Established sense of purpose and meaning; beliefs and worldview are secure | Exploring sense of purpose and meaning; beliefs and worldview are challenged | Losing sense of purpose and meaning; beliefs and worldview are weakened | Lost sense of purpose and meaning; beliefs and worldview are shattered |
| ADDICTIONS | No or limited use of alcohol and/or substances and/or gambling | Regular but controlled use of alcohol and/or substances and/or gambling to cope | Increased use of alcohol and/or substances and/or gambling; hard to control with negative consequences | Frequent use of alcohol and/or substances and/or gambling; unable to control with severe consequences |

Annex 2: Grounding and Calming Strategies

Abdominal/tactical breathing exercise

Abdominal breathing, also known as tactical breathing, aims to regulate the nervous system and bring the body and mind into a state of calm and control. It helps overcome the physiological reactions to stress (increased heart rate, muscle tension, shortness of breath) by activating the parasympathetic nervous system — the system that promotes relaxation and recovery.

Method

Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest. Inhale, expanding the abdomen. This will help lower your diaphragm and give your lungs space to fill up. Exhale, contracting your abdominal muscles. This will make your diaphragm rise toward your chest and help your lungs push out any remaining air. Breathe in slowly, counting “1... 2... 3... 4,” then breathe out as slowly as you breathed in (otherwise, you may feel dizzy).

Relaxation exercise, inspired by the Jacobson Method

The Jacobson Method, also known as progressive muscle relaxation, is a technique developed in the 1930s. It is based on a simple idea: the body and mind are closely linked. By learning to relax the muscles, we can directly influence our mental and emotional tension levels.

Method

Find a quiet place and take the time to contract the muscles in each part of your body for 10 seconds each. Begin by squeezing your eyes shut tightly. Then move all the way down your body, ending with your toes.

Time out exercise

Identify the physical signs, behaviours and emotions you experience when you find yourself in a situation that makes you uneasy or tense.

- Examples of physical signs: muscle tension, heart racing, headaches, stomach aches, rapid breathing
- Examples of behaviours: irritability, trouble concentrating, speaking quickly, restlessness, nervously moving hands or feet
- Examples of emotions: anxiety, frustration, anger, feelings of being overwhelmed or powerless, nervousness

Identify appropriate ways to help you calm down and take a step back (e.g., getting outdoors, engaging in physical activity, taking deep breaths)

Method

When you become aware of your warning signs in a given situation, choose to take a step back first. Inform those present that you are taking a time out and ask them to respect this time. Use one or more methods to assist you and regain your composure. When you feel calm, resume the situation with the people involved. Make sure they are available and in a good state of mind to discuss the incident.

VAKOG exercise

VAKOG is a simple refocusing tool using our five senses. Its name comes from the first letter of the five main senses:

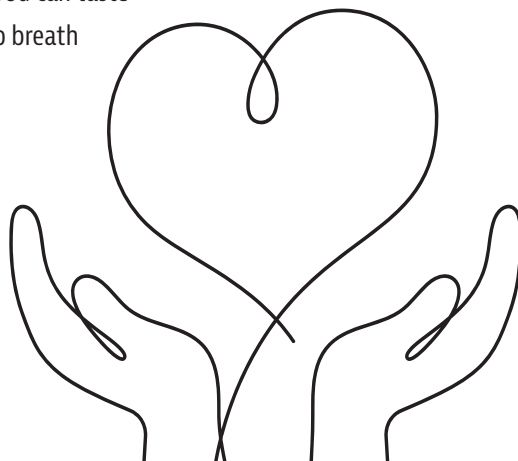
- V – Visual:** What do I see?
- A – Auditory:** What do I hear?
- K – Kinesthetic:** What do I feel in my body?
- O – Olfactory:** What can I smell?
- G – Gustatory:** What can I taste?

This exercise helps bring you back to the present, calm the body and mind and reconnect with your immediate environment. It's a simple and effective method, particularly useful in preventing emotional escalation.

Method

Take a few minutes in a calm location. Breathe deeply, then go through the following steps:

1. Visual → Name 5 things you can see
2. Auditory → Name 4 things you can hear
3. Kinesthetic → Name 3 things you can feel (contact with the ground, tension, temperature, breathing)
4. Olfactory → Name 2 things you can smell
5. Gustatory → Name 1 thing you can taste
6. Finish by taking a slow deep breath



Annex 3: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Fulfillment, continuous growth



ESTEEM

Confidence, achievement, positive self-image, etc.



LOVE AND BELONGING

Social relationships, family, part of a group, friendship, etc.



SAFETY

Stability, order, predictability, accommodation, employment, etc.



PHYSIOLOGICAL

Food, water, sleep, health, sex, rest, etc.



Annex 4: Proposed Tools

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This guide was written by our team, with occasional support from artificial intelligence tools used solely to improve the wording of certain sentences. The content, the human and compassionate approach, and all of the information were entirely developed, validated and reviewed by the writing team to ensure accuracy, relevance and quality.

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