

Box 14.1 What Do You Think?

Imagine if you were a social worker meeting with Sergeant Wiggins's wife. How might you respond to her comment that medications were not what he needed,

that "he needed help"? What kind of help might social workers offer in this case?

From 2001, when the United States went to war, through 2013, 2.5 million US military personnel were deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan, with a third of them having been deployed more than one time (Adams, 2013). According to a major study, more than 18 percent of them have or will suffer from PTSD and/or depression, while another 19 percent have traumatic brain injuries (Band Report, 2011). According to the National Center for PTSD, about 7 to 8 percent of the US populations will experience PTSD at some point in their lives, while 11 to 30 percent of veterans of wars will experience PTSD (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Veterans today tend to be young, and not all their struggles are easily identified or fit the traditional services of the Department of Veterans Affairs because of the uniqueness of the combat they experienced and incompatibility between life and work done in the military, and life and work as a civilian (Zogas, 2017). Thus, there is a growing need for mental health and other social services for these men and women, already identified as the field of military social work. Throughout this chapter, we discuss the role of social work in helping individuals, families, and communities to cope with devastating crises and trauma, as well as the specialized field of military social work.

Stress



Not all stress is the same. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005) identified three types of stress—positive, tolerable, and toxic. Although the council directed its report specifically toward children and their development, they described the types of stress we all face.

1. **Positive stress:** Stress generated by short-lived adverse experiences that result from events such as starting a new job, meeting new people, or seeing a doctor for routine medical care.
2. **Tolerable stress:** Stress generated by adverse experiences that are more intense, but still of relatively short duration, such as the death of a loved one, an accident, divorce, or separation; this stress can become positive and help people develop emotionally or psychologically, or it can become more severe and lead to the toxic level.
3. **Toxic stress:** Stress generated by intense adverse experiences sustained over a long period of time, such as abuse or exposure to violence, which place the body under a prolonged physiological and psychological response.

High levels of stress, particularly over prolonged periods of time, mean the body emits high levels of stress hormones such as cortisol, which have severely negative effects on people's health. In children, toxic stress can suppress

immunity to infections, impair brain development, and cause other permanent damage that affects learning and memory (CDC, 2008). The link between stress in childhood and adult health is significant. Studies have found that adverse childhood experiences are common among people in the United States, and the consequences are distressing (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010). The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study (CDC, 2006) focused on the occurrence and impact of 10 adverse events: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, household dysfunction of mother treated violently, household substance abuse, household mental illness, parental separation or divorce, and incarceration household member. On the basis of responses of over 17,000 adults, the ACE Study found that almost 66 percent reported at least one experience, and 25.5 percent reported three or more adverse experiences. The study further documented that as the number of adverse experiences increased, the risk for negative health outcomes increased. These negative outcomes include alcoholism and alcohol abuse, depression, illicit drug use, heart disease, sexually transmitted diseases, smoking, and suicide attempts. Overall, there is significant evidence that demonstrates that early life deficits and stress contribute to poor health outcomes and greater psychiatric disorders in adults (Taylor, 2010; Meyer-Lindenberg & Tost, 2012). This interrelationship of stress and trauma with mental and physical well-being make the understanding of crises and intervention key concerns for social workers.

Stress in the United States is a major health problem (APA, 2017). The APA conducts an annual nationwide survey, and it found that one-fifth of people in this country live with extreme stress, and 31 percent report that their stress has increased over the past year. Of particular concern is the finding from the study that young people report higher levels of stress than do those who are among older age groups. The result of stress hits on the personal as well as societal levels. For individuals, there are declines in health and poor relationships, and for society there is a decrease in work productivity and social interactions. Stress increases with major events and conditions in our society. Although the worst of the economic downturn has passed, it still impacts people. The 2017 survey found that adults reported that the top three reasons for their stress were money, work, and the economy. Current events can have a powerful impact as well. In 2016, psychologists were reporting a new anxiety they were seeing among their patients, related to the political climate. So, new to the 2017 survey was a question about stress in relation to the presidential election. More than half the respondents (57%) reported that the political climate was a source of stress. Overall, the 2017 poll showed a statistically significant increase in stress for the first time since 2007. And this increase in stress impacted people's health, with 80 percent reporting at least one physical or emotional symptom, such as headache, feeling overwhelmed, or depression.

Social workers face the impact and consequences of stress on people all the time. It covers many groups and circumstances in society. However, there are some groups who are more prone to stress and its debilitating effects. Many years of research indicate that people in subordinate or marginalized groups have additional stressors in their lives that often have a negative impact