

# Preventing Harm from Ostracism

All service members can play a critical role in recognizing and addressing ostracism through raising awareness and through deliberate supportive connection with one another.

## What is Ostracism?

Ostracism —intentionally excluding or ignoring others — can be a harmful experience.<sup>1</sup> Even brief experiences of ostracism are associated with negative outcomes for all involved. Prolonged ostracism can be associated with decreased performance, readiness, and retention.<sup>2</sup> Being attuned to the impact of ostracism and taking steps to prevent or intervene can reduce harm to both the ostracized individual and the group, and potentially improve individual and team readiness, organizational health, and mission success.

## What are the Consequences of Ostracism?

An individual who experiences acute and chronic ostracism may develop:

- Increased risk of mental health concerns, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicide<sup>3,4,5</sup>
- Worsening of physical health<sup>6</sup>
- Compromised self-esteem and well-being<sup>7</sup>
- Damage to familial and interpersonal relationships<sup>6</sup>

Ostracism can impact the military unit and the mission and potentially harm the team. These impacts include:

- Erosion of team-based trust and cohesion<sup>6</sup>
- Increased employee turnover<sup>8</sup>
- Significant human resource and financial costs to organizations<sup>6</sup>

While research continues to develop with military populations, the damaging consequences of ostracism are especially relevant in military settings,<sup>2,3</sup> as the negative impact of ostracism may intensify during periods of high stress, such as in combat or deployed locations, and appears to be a significant factor associated with PTSD.<sup>3</sup>

## What are the Signs of Ostracism?

Look for the following patterns:

- Mission related group activities and invitations occur and appear to be missing one team member
- Communications appear to skip one team member or fail to include one team member in discussions
- Informal team social activities omit one team member
- One team member appears consistently isolated or is observed interacting minimally with the team
- One team member's opinions or inputs are ignored by the group or by the leader of the group

## EXAMPLE




Staff Sgt. Smith was an outstanding mechanic with rare critical skills who was assigned to a unit with high ops tempo. Although he had a more reserved interpersonal style, he was dedicated to his duties. He decided to request transfer to another unit after being repeatedly left out by his team in discussions with leadership, on topics where his critical expertise and input was needed. Leadership decisions were then made without Staff Sgt. Smith's input, leading to repeated mission failure. His sudden departure led to increased stress, decreased morale, and increased workload for his team.

EXAMPLE

REAL WARRIORS + REAL BATTLES  
**REAL STRENGTH**

VISIT [HEALTH.MIL/REALWARRIORS](https://health.mil/realwarriors)  
to learn about resources for staying  
mission ready.

Join the conversation:

  @RealWarriors  
 @RealWarriorsCampaign

NEED TO TALK? Contact the  
Psychological Health Resource Center  
for free 24/7 confidential support:  
• 866-966-1020  
• [health.mil/PHRC](https://health.mil/PHRC)

IF IN CRISIS CALL/TEXT 988

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:  
• [militaryonesource.mil](https://militaryonesource.mil)  
• [health.mil/inTransition](https://health.mil/inTransition)

# Preventing Harm from Ostracism

## How to Guard Against Ostracism on Your Team

Ostracism-related interventions have been studied in the civilian population and are beginning to be studied in military settings. Emerging research suggests formal, individualized interventions delivered in one's natural environment, and involving meaningful and authentic shared experiences may be effective.<sup>1</sup>

### Here are Some Steps You Can Take:

- Pass the word about ostracism, why it's important to prevent it, and how to intervene if it begins to develop
- Evaluate your unit climate of inclusion
  - Consider the experiences of new team members
  - Ensure you have developed a warm and supportive on-boarding process, linking new members to well-established and welcoming unit mentors
- Assess if there are team members who may be different from the rest of the group and may find it difficult to integrate
  - Learn more about them and their interests
  - Link new team members who appear different with a team mentor who appears well-connected with the team
- Monitor for team members who are experiencing psychological issues or increased stress
  - Consider how you can support them as a community
  - Encourage your team to provide increased support to each other during times of stress
- Consider the tone command leadership sets for the unit
  - Engage in continuous self-evaluation of your leadership strengths and weaknesses to ensure you are inclusive and welcoming to everyone on your team
  - Ensure all supervisors avoid abusive supervisory behavior (such as ridicule or scapegoating) which can be a risk factor for ostracism<sup>1</sup>
- Watch for team members who appear to deliberately exclude others
  - Provide information and resources to these individuals to create awareness and promote supportive connections within the unit
  - Address ostracism immediately if observed in a public setting or engage your supervisor or chain of command

## References

1. Psychological Health Center of Excellence. (in progress). *Ostracism in the Military*. Evidence Brief.
2. McGraw, K. (2016). Gender differences among military combatants: Does social support, ostracism, and pain perception influence psychological health? *Military Medicine*, 181(suppl\_1), 80–85. <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-15-00254>
3. Wesselmann, E. D., Ispas, D., Olson, M. D., Swerdlik, M. E., & Caudle, N. M. (2018). Does perceived ostracism contribute to mental health concerns among veterans who have been deployed?. *PLoS One*, 13(12), e0208438.
4. Rudert, S.C., Janke, S., & Greifeneder, R. (2021). Ostracism breeds depression: Longitudinal associations between ostracism and depression over a three-year-period. *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports*, 4, 100118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadr.2021.100118>
5. Chen, Z., Poon, K, DeWall, C. N., & Jiang, T. (2020). Life lacks meaning without acceptance: Ostracism triggers suicidal thoughts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes*, 119(6), 1423–1443. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000238>
6. Sharma, N. & Dhar, R. L. (2022). From curse to cure of workplace ostracism: A systematic review and future research agenda. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32(3). 100836. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2021.100836>
7. Ferris, D. L., Chen, M., & Lim, S. (2017). Comparing and contrasting workplace ostracism and incivility. *The Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4, 315–338. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032516-113223>
8. Bedi, A. (2021). No herd for black sheep: A meta-analytic review of the predictors and outcomes of workplace ostracism. *Applied Psychology*, 70(2), 861–904. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12238>