

Speech: Defence Secretary Op-Ed for the Mail on Sunday on mental health

Our Armed Forces do a magnificent job. It's my privilege to see the incredible work they do all around the globe – every hour of every day. In Iraq I've spoken to our impressive air men and women who have been hammering barbaric Daesh fighters in Iraq to destroy the death cult that has brought bloodshed to the streets of Britain. In Poland I've met inspirational soldiers – not simply supporting and leading NATO missions in Eastern Europe but underpinning our security at home. And in the North Atlantic and the Gulf I've listened to the sailors protecting our precious undersea communications cables and patrolling our vital trading routes. All the while, our dedicated submariners maintain our nuclear deterrent – our nation's ultimate armour against the most extreme threats to our way of life.

These people are the greatest of their generation. And they have the right to expect more than simply the best jets, warships and tanks to help them do their duty. It is also their right to expect the best possible support care on and off the battlefield. In the not too distant past that would have meant treating the physical scars of conflict. There wouldn't have been much thought about helping heal the invisible wounds war leaves behind. But times have changed. We now understand the importance of a healthy mind as well as a healthy body. That's why the Ministry of Defence is now spending around £20 million a year on mental health services to treat the trauma life on the front line can bring. But while things have vastly improved – they are not perfect. We should never be too afraid or too timid to tackle the stigma of mental illness and look at new ways to offer help. That's why I want to commend the Mail on Sunday's Helpline for Heroes campaign for shining the spotlight on this critically important issue. It's simply unacceptable that serving personnel with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, suicidal or negative thoughts, should suffer in silence.

So I have now agreed to spend an extra £20m over the next decade to improve mental health services in the Armed Forces – £2m more every year for vital services. That's at least £220m over the next 10 years. Today we launch the Military Mental Health Helpline for serving personnel and their families while bolstering the care currently on offer. We are forming a deeper partnership with Combat Stress – the leading charity in the UK for supporting veterans with mental health problems. The charity already helps a small number of serving personnel through their 24-hour helpline, but we will be enhancing this service with additional funds and creating the entirely new Military Mental Health Helpline with its own memorable number – 0800 323 4444. This will be specifically targeted at serving personnel and their families – allowing them to access help anywhere, anytime. It will be staffed by professionals and will benefit from improved information sharing with the military, so those in need get the vital help they need. We have examined the choices closely and believe this will deliver the best service for our Armed Forces.

The freephone number will take calls from midday today. And it will be backed up by a major internal marketing campaign. The truth is we've not always been the best at talking about these issues in the military. So I will personally be working with the Service Chiefs to make sure there isn't a single person in the forces who doesn't know where to turn in times of trouble.

But I don't just want people to know who to call when they need to talk to someone. I want them to know what else is on offer.

I want them to know about the 20 sites providing mental health care for the military in the UK and abroad – bringing together psychiatrists, mental health nurses, clinical psychologists and social workers to help manage the mental health needs of those in difficulty.

I want them to know about the service provided by NHS England – the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Mental Health Service – which seeks to increase the access to, and treatment of, mental health services for those approaching discharge who may have mental health needs.

I want them to know more about the Veterans Gateway – offering current and former personnel support on everything from financial assistance to property problems.

I want them to know about our ground-breaking partnership with Prince Harry and the Royal Foundation – raising awareness about the importance of good mental fitness, drawing on the best research and putting a wealth of information online.

And I want them to know we have a mental health strategy that can work for them. It's about educating our chain of command and working with our people and their families. It's about spotting the early warning signs of mental illness. It's about encouraging those who need help to get it quickly. And it's about prevention – building that vital awareness of good mental health fitness into training so that our troops are better equipped to deal with operational stress before, during and after combat as well as the stresses of day-to-day living that we all experience.

Next month the King's Centre for Military Health Research will be holding a conference uniting leading experts from across the UK and the world to discuss mental health challenges encountered by personnel from the day they join through to retirement. Their work is increasingly important.

As the dangers our nation faces become ever more intense and ever more complex, whether from aggressive states such as Russia, terrorism or cyber warfare, it's vital for us to keep our brave men and women at the top of their game both physically and mentally.

But there's always more we can do to help those who find themselves isolated or feeling low. So make no mistake, it is one of my top priorities as Defence Secretary to make sure everyone in the Armed Forces feels valued.

At home, as well as across the world, our Service personnel remain Britain's

finest. And if the ever-evolving nature of conflict demands that we keep adapting our approach then, have no doubt, we are ready and willing to do so. No-one in our Armed Forces need suffer in silence. Our heroic men and women are the backbone of our nation. They lay their lives on the line for us every single day. They are the very best of British. And they deserve nothing less than the very best support.