Gold Star mothers are women who have had a child killed in the line of duty. Why does a gold star symbolize a lost loved one? During World War I, some families hung a banner with a star in their window to show their devotion to the nation. A blue star represented a son in the military and a gold star signified a son who had been killed in action. Mothers of fallen soldiers eventually came to be known as "gold star mothers," according to American Gold Star Mothers Inc., a nonprofit support group formed in 1928 by and for the women whose children made the ultimate sacrifice. There’s even a day set aside for Gold Star Mothers — the fourth Sunday of September.

**FIVE THINGS**

**EVERY AIRMAN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT**

**Virtual PTSD help**

Suspect you might be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder? There’s a new way to check your symptoms from the privacy of your home computer.

A Defense Department team at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., has created a 3-D virtual world to help users learn more about what PTSD is, what the symptoms are and how to get help.

The T2 Virtual PTSD Experience lets you use an avatar in Second Life to anonymously explore a series of locations with information on the disorder. The National Center for Telehealth and Technology launched the free online tool last month.

Here’s what you need to know about the virtual project:

1. **Signing on.** Accessing the T2 Virtual PTSD Experience is easy. Visit the project’s website, http://t2health.org/wvpvjg, and follow the detailed instructions for setting up a Second Life account and accessing the virtual world.

2. **Going digital.** The team chose a digital platform to reach out to service men and women for a number of reasons, said Kevin Holloway, government lead for the project’s development team. It helps engage younger service members who are more familiar with technology such as Second Life, Holloway said. A free, online system also creates a convenient way for service members to help when they might not otherwise.

   "I am a clinical psychologist, so I treat a lot of patients for PTSD," Holloway said, "and I see so many service members and veterans who suffer for years needlessly with symptoms of PTSD because they don’t know where to get resources or because of a perceived stigma."

3. **Not a substitute.** Although the center hopes that the tool will help PTSD sufferers and their loved ones, Holloway emphasized that the virtual world can’t provide professional-level care.

   "This is not therapy," he said. "This space is simply educational in nature. This is not a substitute for a therapist; it’s not a substitute for an actual assessment from a medical provider."

4. **Other uses.** The National Center for Telehealth and Technology hopes to expand the uses of their Second Life world, Holloway said. The center is now working on developing similar spaces for other psychological health needs, such as depression, substance abuse and traumatic brain injury.

5. **Another option.** The center created another digital tool that could help with post-traumatic stress. A free Android app released in November helps users track their moods from day to day. That information can be used for self-help or to share with a therapist as a good record of emotions.

   The app is called the T2 Mood Tracker Application and is available through Android’s app store.

--- Jill Laster

**ONLINE MULTIMEDIA**

The F-22 Joint Strike Fighter completes a picture-perfect vertical landing at Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Md.

**NEWSMAKER**

"It is a fair, equitable and competitive process to remain in the Air Force."

**Name:** Brig. Gen. Sharon Durham **Position:** Air Force director of force management policy on retention boards that will be used to separate as many as 2,000 officers involuntarily

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