



PTSD in Military Veterans

Causes, Symptoms, and Steps to Recovery



For all too many veterans, returning from military service means coping with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). You may be having a hard time readjusting to life out of the military. Or you may constantly be feeling on edge, emotionally numb and disconnected, or close to panicking or exploding. But no matter how long the V.A. wait times, or how isolated or emotionally cut off from others you feel, it's important to know that you're not alone and there *are* plenty of things you can do to start feeling better. These steps can help you learn to deal with nightmares and flashbacks, cope with feelings of depression, anxiety or guilt, and regain your sense of control.

What causes PTSD in veterans?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sometimes known as shell shock or combat stress, occurs after you experience severe trauma or a life-threatening event. It's normal for your mind and body to be in shock after such an event, but this normal response becomes PTSD when your nervous system gets "stuck."

Your nervous system has two automatic or reflexive ways of responding to stressful events:

Mobilization, or fight-or-flight, occurs when you need to defend yourself or survive the danger of a combat situation. Your heart pounds faster, your blood pressure rises, and your muscles tighten, increasing your strength and reaction speed. Once the danger has passed, your nervous system calms your body, lowering your heart rate and blood pressure, and winding back down to its normal balance.

Immobilization occurs when you've experienced too much stress in a situation and even though the danger has passed, you find yourself "stuck." Your nervous system is unable to return to its normal state of balance and you're unable to move on from the event. **This is PTSD.**

Recovering from PTSD involves transitioning out of the mental and emotional war zone you're still living in and helping your nervous system become "unstuck."

Symptoms of PTSD in veterans

While you can develop symptoms of PTSD in the hours or days following a traumatic event, sometimes symptoms don't surface for months or even years after you return from deployment. While PTSD develops differently from veteran to veteran, there are four symptom clusters:

1. **Recurrent, intrusive reminders of the traumatic event**, including distressing thoughts, nightmares, and flashbacks where you feel like the event is happening again. Experiencing extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the trauma such as panic attacks, uncontrollable shaking, and heart palpitations.
2. **Extreme avoidance of things that remind you of the traumatic event**, including people, places, thoughts, or situations you associate with the bad memories. Withdrawing from friends and family and losing interest in everyday activities.
3. **Negative changes in your thoughts and mood**, such as exaggerated negative beliefs about yourself or the world and persistent feelings of fear, guilt, or shame. Diminished ability to experience positive emotions.
4. **Being on guard all the time, jumpy, and emotionally reactive**, as indicated by irritability, anger, reckless behavior, difficulty sleeping, trouble concentrating, and hypervigilance.

Suicide prevention in veterans with PTSD

It's common for veterans with PTSD to experience suicidal thoughts. Feeling suicidal is not a character defect, and it doesn't mean that you are crazy, weak, or flawed.

If you are thinking about taking your own life, seek help immediately. Please read [Suicide Help](/articles/suicide-prevention/are-you-feeling-suicidal.htm) (/articles/suicide-prevention/are-you-feeling-suicidal.htm), talk to someone you trust, or call a suicide helpline:

- In the U.S., call 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- In the UK, call 08457 90 90 90.
- In Australia, call 13 11 14.
- Or visit [IASP](http://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres) (http://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres) to find a helpline in your country.

PTSD in veterans recovery step 1: Get moving

Getting regular exercise has always been key for veterans with PTSD. As well as helping to burn off adrenaline, exercise can release endorphins and improve your mood. And by *really focusing* on your body and how it feels as you exercise, you can even help your nervous system become “unstuck” and move out of the immobilization stress response.

Exercise that is rhythmic and engages both your arms and legs—such as running, swimming, basketball, or even dancing—works well if, instead of continuing to focus on your thoughts as you move, you focus on how your body *feels*.

Try to notice the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, for example, or the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of wind on your skin. Many veterans with PTSD find that sports such as rock climbing, boxing, weight training, and martial arts make it easier to focus on your body movements—after all, if you don't, you could get injured. Whatever exercise you choose, try to work out for 30 minutes or more each day—or if it's easier, three 10-minute spurts of exercise are just as good.

The benefits of the great outdoors

Pursuing outdoor activities in nature like hiking, camping, mountain biking, rock climbing, whitewater rafting, and skiing can help challenge your sense of vulnerability and help you transition back into civilian life.

Seek out local organizations that offer outdoor recreation or teambuilding opportunities, or, in the U.S., check out [Sierra Club Military Outdoors](http://content.sierraclub.org/outings/military) (<http://content.sierraclub.org/outings/military>). This program provides service members, veterans, and their families with opportunities to get out into nature and get moving.

Step 2: Self-regulate your nervous system

PTSD can leave you feeling vulnerable and helpless. But you have more control over your nervous system than you may realize. When you feel agitated, anxious, or out of control, these tips can help you change your arousal system and calm yourself.

Mindful breathing. To quickly calm yourself in any situation, simply take 60 breaths, focusing your attention on each out breath.

Sensory input. Just as loud noises, certain smells, or the feel of sand in your clothes can instantly transport you back to the combat zone, so too can [sensory input quickly calm you](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) (/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm). Everyone responds a little differently, so experiment to find what works best for you. Think back to your time on deployment: what brought you comfort at the end of the day? Perhaps it was looking at photos of your family? Or listening to a favorite song, or smelling a certain brand of soap? Or maybe petting an animal quickly makes you feel calm?

Reconnect emotionally. By reconnecting to uncomfortable emotions without becoming overwhelmed, you can make a huge difference in your ability to manage stress, balance your moods, and take back control of your life. See our [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm) (/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm).

Step 3: Connect with others

Connecting with others face to face doesn't have to mean a lot of talking. For any veteran with PTSD, it's important to find someone who will listen without judging when you want to talk, or just hang out with you when you don't. That person may be your significant other, a family member, one of your buddies from the service, or a civilian friend. **Or try:**

Volunteering your time or reaching out to someone in need. This is a great way to both connect to others and reclaim your sense of power.

Joining a PTSD support group. Connecting with other veterans facing similar problems can help you feel less isolated and provide useful tips on how to cope with symptoms and work towards recovery.

Connecting with civilians

You may feel like the civilians in your life can't understand you since they haven't been in the service or seen the things you have. But people don't have to have gone through the exact same experiences to relate to painful emotions and be able to offer support. What matters is that the person you're turning to cares about you, is a good listener, and a source of comfort.

You don't have to talk about your combat experiences. If you're not ready to open up about the details of what happened, that's perfectly okay. You can talk about how you feel without going into a blow-by-blow account of events.

Tell the other person what you need or what they can do to help. That could be just sitting with you, listening, or doing something practical. Comfort comes from someone else understanding your emotional experience.

People who care about you want to help. Listening is not a burden for them but a welcome opportunity to help.

If connecting is difficult

No matter how close you are to someone, PTSD can mean that you still don't feel any better after talking. If that describes you, there are ways to help the process along.

Exercise or move. Before chatting with a friend, either exercise or move around. Jump up and down, swing your arms and legs, or just flail around. Your head will feel clearer and you'll find it easier to connect.

Vocal toning. As strange as it sounds, vocal toning is a great way to open up to social engagement. Find a quiet place before you meet a friend. Sit straight and simply make "mmm" sounds. Change the pitch and volume until you experience a pleasant vibration in your face.

Step 4: Take care of your body

The symptoms of PTSD in veterans, such as insomnia, anger, concentration problems, and jumpiness, can be hard on your body and eventually take a toll on your overall health. That's why it's so important to take care of yourself.

You may be drawn to activities and behaviors that pump up adrenaline, whether it's caffeine, drugs, violent video games, driving recklessly, or daredevil sports. After being in a combat zone, that's what feels normal. But if you recognize these urges for what they are, you can make better choices that will calm and care for your body—and your mind.

Take time to relax [Relaxation techniques \(/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm\)](/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) such as massage, meditation, or yoga can reduce stress, ease the symptoms of anxiety and depression, help you sleep better, and increase feelings of peace and well-being.

Find safe ways to blow off steam. Pound on a punching bag, pummel a pillow, go for a hard run, sing along to loud music, or find a secluded place to scream at the top of your lungs.

Support your body with a healthy diet. [Omega-3s play a vital role in emotional health \(/home-pages/healthy-eating.htm\)](/home-pages/healthy-eating.htm) so incorporate foods such as fatty fish, flaxseed, and walnuts into your diet. Limit processed and fried food, sugars, and refined carbs which can exacerbate mood swings and energy fluctuations.

Get plenty of sleep. Sleep deprivation exacerbates anger, irritability, and moodiness. Aim for 7 to 9 hours of quality [sleep each night \(/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm\)](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm). Develop a relaxing bedtime ritual (listen to calming music, take a hot shower, or read something light and entertaining), turn off screens at least one hour before bedtime, and make your bedroom as dark and quiet as possible.

Avoid alcohol and drugs (including nicotine). It can be tempting to turn to drugs and alcohol to numb painful memories and get to sleep. But substance abuse can make the symptoms of PTSD worse. The same goes for cigarettes. If possible, stop smoking and [seek help for drinking and drug problems \(/home-pages/addictions.htm\)](/home-pages/addictions.htm).

Step 5: Deal with flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts

For veterans with PTSD, flashbacks usually involve visual and auditory memories of combat. It feels as if it's happening all over again so it's vital to reassure yourself that the experience is not occurring in the present. Trauma specialists call this "dual awareness."

Dual awareness is the recognition that there is a difference between your "experiencing self" and your "observing self." On the one hand, there is your internal emotional reality: you feel as if the trauma is currently happening. On the other hand, you can look to your external environment and recognize that you're safe. You're aware that despite what you're experiencing, the trauma happened in the past. It is *not* happening now.

State to yourself (out loud or in your head) the reality that while you *feel* as if the trauma is currently happening, you can look around and recognize that you're safe.

Use a simple script when you awaken from a nightmare or start to experience a flashback: *"I feel [panicked, overwhelmed, etc.] because I'm remembering [traumatic event], but as I look around I can see that the event isn't happening right now and I'm not in danger."*

Describe what you see when look around (name the place where you are, the current date, and three things you see when you look around).

Try tapping your arms to bring you back to the present.

Tips for grounding yourself during a flashback

If you're starting to disassociate or experience a flashback, try using your senses to bring you back to the present and "ground" yourself. Experiment to find what works best for you.

Movement - Move around vigorously (run in place, jump up and down, etc.); rub your hands together; shake your head

Touch - Splash cold water on your face; grip a piece of ice; touch or grab on to a safe object; pinch yourself; play with worry beads or a stress ball

Sight - Blink rapidly and firmly; look around and take inventory of what you see

Sound - Turn on loud music; clap your hands or stomp your feet; talk to yourself (tell yourself you're safe, you'll be okay)

Smell - Smell something that links you to the present (coffee, mouthwash, your wife's perfume) or a scent that has good memories

Taste - Suck on a strong mint or chew a piece of gum; bite into something tart or spicy; drink a glass of cold water or juice

Step 6: Work through survivor's guilt

Feelings of guilt are very common among veterans with PTSD. You may have seen people injured or killed, often your friends and comrades. In the heat of the moment, you don't have time to fully process these things as they happen. But later—often when you've returned home—these experiences come back to haunt you. You may ask yourself questions such as:

- ▶ Why didn't I get hurt?
- ▶ Why did I survive when others didn't?
- ▶ Could I have done something differently to save them?

You may end up blaming yourself for what happened and believing that your actions (or inability to act) led to someone else's death. You may feel like others deserved to live more than you—that you're the one who should have died. **This is survivor's guilt.**

Healing from survivor's guilt

Healing doesn't mean that you'll forget what happened or those who died. And it doesn't mean you'll have no regrets. What it does mean is that you'll look at your role more realistically.

- ▶ Is the amount of responsibility you're assuming reasonable?
- ▶ Could you really have prevented or stopped what happened?
- ▶ Are you judging your decisions based on full information about the event, or just your emotions?
- ▶ Did you do your best at the time, under challenging circumstances?
- ▶ Do you truly believe that if you had died, someone else would have survived?

Honestly assessing your responsibility and role can free you to move on and grieve your losses. Even if you continue to feel some guilt, instead of punishing yourself, you can redirect your energy into honoring those you lost and finding ways to keep their memory alive. For example, you could volunteer for a cause that's connected in some way to one of the friends you lost. The goal is to put your guilt to positive use and thus transform tragedy, even in a small way, into something worthwhile.

Step 7: Seek professional treatment

Professional treatment for PTSD can help you confront what happened to you and learn to accept it as a part of your past. Working with an experienced therapist or doctor, treatment may involve:

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or counselling. This involves gradually "exposing" yourself to thoughts and feelings that remind you of the event. Therapy also involves identifying distorted and irrational thoughts about the event—and replacing them with more balanced picture.

Medication, such as antidepressants. While medication may help you feel less sad, worried, or on edge, it doesn't treat the causes of PTSD.

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing). This incorporates elements of CBT with eye movements or other rhythmic, left-right stimulation such as hand taps or sounds. These can help your nervous system become “unstuck” and move on from the traumatic event.

Helping a veteran with PTSD

When a loved one returns from military service with PTSD, it can take a heavy toll on your relationship and family life. You may have to take on a bigger share of household tasks, deal with the frustration of a loved one who won't open up, or even deal with anger or other disturbing behavior.

Don't take the symptoms of PTSD personally. If your loved one seems distant, irritable, angry, or closed off, remember that this may not have anything to do with you or your relationship.

Don't pressure your loved one into talking. Many veterans with PTSD find it difficult to talk about their experiences. Never try to force your loved one to open up but let them know that you're there if they want to talk. It's your understanding that provides comfort, not anything you say.

Be patient and understanding. Getting better takes time so be patient with the pace of recovery. Offer support but don't try to direct your loved one.

Try to anticipate and prepare for PTSD triggers such as certain sounds, sights, or smells. If you are aware of what causes an upsetting reaction, you'll be in a better position to help your loved one calm down.

Take care of yourself. Letting your loved one's PTSD dominate your life while ignoring your own needs is a surefire recipe for burnout. Make time for yourself and learn to [manage stress](/articles/stress/stress-management.htm) (/articles/stress/stress-management.htm). The more calm, relaxed, and focused you are, the better you'll be able to help your loved one.

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Lawrence Robinson, and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: September 2018.

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