



THE AMERICAN LEGION



# POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

*A guide to identification  
and getting help.*

# POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

## *What is it?*

Stress is a natural reaction to a traumatic or life-threatening event. A traumatic event can have such a strong impact on an individual that his or her performance of daily functions, interaction with family and friends and the ability to stay gainfully employed are greatly compromised. Without proper and timely treatment, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may become chronic and permanent.

The American Legion has established a committee to study PTSD to better understand and consider acceptance of alternate as well as traditional treatment programs.

PTSD has been known by many names through history: Da Costa Syndrome, Soldier's Heart, Shell Shock, Battle Fatigue, War Neurosis and Vietnam Syndrome. It may occur after witnessing death, mass destruction, natural disasters, terrorism, crime, rape and/or abuse. It can lead to other conditions like depression, substance abuse, memory and cognition issues, and other physical and mental health diagnoses.

For veterans, stressful traumatic events may include serving in combat zones that require a constant state of awareness. Such events can include involvement in peacekeeping missions, training accidents, military sexual assault and medical emergencies. Non-combat stressors - such as a death in the family, or a sexual assault - can cause the survivor to react with intense fear, helplessness, hopelessness and horror.

## *Who suffers from PTSD?*

Anyone can experience PTSD symptoms after exposure to a traumatic event. A PTSD diagnosis is not a sign of weakness or malingering. There is no way to predict who will or will not develop PTSD symptoms; it depends on how individuals perceive stressful situations.

Genetic or biological factors may influence how a person will react to extreme stress. It is not uncommon following a life-altering event to experience deep sadness, depression and grief. This emotional state is known as acute stress.

## **SYMPTOMS OF PTSD**

- Recurrent, intrusive and distressing thoughts about the event.
- Recurrent dreams, nightmares (sometimes called “night terrors”) about the event.
- Flashbacks (a sense of reliving the event).
- Distress caused by reminders of the event (sights, sounds, smells).
- Alienation, isolation, and avoidance of people and places.
- Emotional numbing.
- No sense of future.
- Survivor guilt (for having survived when others did not, or for behavior required for survival).
- Angry outbursts.
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering.
- Hyper-vigilant, or survivalist behavior.
- Exaggerated startled response.

These symptoms may lead to substance abuse, suicidal thoughts and feelings, or other self-destructive behavior.

## ***Combat and other deployments***

Servicemembers who experience symptoms of stress may be reluctant to seek assistance. Some have concerns that seeking care will negatively influence their military careers, that superiors will view it as cowardice or an excuse to terminate military obligation. However, the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) are encouraging servicemembers and veterans to receive the assistance they earned.

Increased training and the embedding of counselors in combat units have helped in recent years, but not all who confront PTSD serve in combat units.

It is important that the servicemember seek care as soon as symptoms manifest. Failure to do so may cause the servicemember to exhibit behavior which may lead to negative consequences or terminate military service, like aggression, anger, drug and alcohol abuse, insubordination, murder or suicide.

## ***PTSD and the family effect***

Life goes on for military families during deployments. Children grow up and graduate. Parents and grandparents may pass away. Spouses have to run the household, taking care of all domestic needs from paying the bills to maintaining the home to raising children.

For returning members of the armed forces, adjustment to home life can be extremely stressful.

Following deployment, reintegration – although joyous – may be very stressful. Family members may observe changes not seen prior to deployment, such as depression, anxiety, emotional outbursts, startle response, irritability, nightmares and avoidance of others, all of which may be associated with PTSD. These changes may lead to domestic abuse and/or violence, or lead to psychological changes in family members.

When a family member observes such changes, assistance is available through vet centers, family-support assistance programs on military installations and from VA. In the event of domestic abuse or violence, law-enforcement authorities should be contacted.

## ***What help is available?***

It is not unusual for problems to appear months or years after the initial trauma.

There is help available. Whether you were in the military many years ago, or if you are still in uniform, there are trained professionals who understand military trauma and PTSD treatment at DoD and VA health-care facilities. Within the VA health-care system there are treatments for veterans with PTSD. The VA offers psychotherapy treatments or "counseling" such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), cognitive processing therapy (CPT), prolonged exposure therapy (PET), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, medications called Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs), and complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) to help veterans suffering from PTSD.

VA has established more than 200 Vet Centers and Sexual Assault Treatment Programs nationwide. The Vet Centers, initially created for Vietnam War veterans, now offer services to all combat veterans. The Vet Centers offer group therapy, bereavement counseling, military sexual assault counseling, individual counseling, and marriage and family counseling. Many counselors have experienced combat and have a personal understanding of these issues.

## STRESSFUL EVENT EVIDENCE

If you are a combat veteran and received any of the following individual citations you can submit them as evidence of a stressful event:

- Air Force Cross
- Air Medal with "V" Device
- Army Commendation Medal with "V" Device
- Bronze Star with "V" Device
- Combat Action Ribbon (CAR)
- Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB)
- Combat Medical Badge
- Distinguished Flying Cross
- Distinguished Service Cross
- Joint Service Commendation Medal with "V" Device
- Medal of Honor
- Navy Commendation Medal with "V" Device
- Navy Cross
- Parachutist Badge with Bronze Service Star
- Prisoner of War Medal
- Purple Heart
- Silver Star

VA also has inpatient PTSD programs, residential treatment, and day hospital programs. In addition, VA has special programs for substance abuse, homelessness and women veterans suffering from PTSD. There are also many private clinicians or not-for-profit agencies that offer specialized treatment for PTSD similar to care provided by VA.

There are clinicians, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers who are certified trauma specialists (CTS) who are qualified to treat PTSD. If symptoms are particularly severe and persistent, medication may be necessary after careful consultations with doctors and pharmacists.

Support groups can be found online at [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) for medical and benefits information. More than 3,000 American Legion service officers can also be contacted online at [www.legion.org/serviceofficers](http://www.legion.org/serviceofficers) to provide help.

### *How to file a claim*

When your PTSD symptoms are the result of time in service, you may be eligible for disability compensation from VA. You should contact The American Legion at [www.legion.org/serviceofficers](http://www.legion.org/serviceofficers) to find out more about your benefits. You will need military records, such as your DD214, personnel

records, and any proof of combat awards or other reports, if any, that document the traumatic event you experienced during service. If available, your own diary or a witness statement from a friend, roommate or the clergy can be effective as evidence. You may need to have a VA exam if you have not seen a doctor. This exam is free.

More than 3,000 accredited American Legion service officers are available to assist you in filing claims for PTSD.

In addition to the web directory on **[www.legion.org](http://www.legion.org)**, The American Legion Claims Coach app provides resources, information and contact information to reach service officers and understand the claims process. The app may be downloaded from **[www.legion.org/mobileapps](http://www.legion.org/mobileapps)**, the iTunes store or Google Play store.

You may also call (800) 433-3318.

## **SUPPORTING A CLAIM**

If you are the victim of an assault, rape, domestic violence, mugging, stalking, terrorist attack or hate crime, and never reported the crime, the following can be used to support your VA claim:

- Private civilian records.
- Treatment records for a physical injury for the assault, but not reported as such.
- Police reports.
- Reports from crisis centers.
- Statements from others who may know about the incident.
- Personal diary or journal.
- Military personnel file.
- Increase in sick call or leave slips.
- Change in military performance evaluations.
- Increased use of prescription and over-the-counter medications.
- Substance abuse and/or other compulsive behavior.
- Request for HIV test or counseling for sexually transmitted diseases.
- Breakup of marriage or relationship.
- Reports to Child Protective Services (in cases of domestic violence).
- Request for pregnancy tests.

# RESOURCES

## *Department of Veterans Affairs*

Benefits.....	800-827-1000
Center for Women Veterans.....	202-273-6193
National Center for PTSD.....	802-296-6300
Compensated Work Therapy.....	800-929-7690 ext. 5335
Website.....	<a href="http://www.ptsd.va.gov">www.ptsd.va.gov</a>

## *Department of Defense*

### TRICARE

Northern Region.....	877-874-2273
Southern Region.....	800-444-5445
Western Region.....	877-988-9378
Military One Source.....	800-342-9647

<i>Social Security</i> .....	800-772-1213
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## *Substance Abuse*

Alcoholics Anonymous.....	212-870-3400
Al-Anon.....	800-356-9996
National Drug Abuse Helpline.....	800-662-4357

## *Child Abuse/Domestic Violence*

Child Abuse Hotline.....	800-633-5155
Domestic Violence Hotline.....	800-799-7233

## *Professional Referrals*

Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists.....	864-294-4337
International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies	847-480-9028
National Organization for Victims Assistance (NOVA).....	800-879-6682
National Veterans Foundation.....	888-777-4443

<i>Mental Health America</i> .....	800-969-6642
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## *Survivor Assistance*

Tragedy Assistance Program For Survivors.....	800-959-8277
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## *The American Legion*

National Headquarters.....	317-630-1200
Washington DC Office.....	202-861-2700
Or call toll-free.....	800-433-3318



**THE AMERICAN LEGION**  
VETERANS AFFAIRS & REHABILITATION

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