
Information from your Patient Aligned Care Team

Aging Veterans and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms

Information from the National Center for PTSD

www.ptsd.va.gov

Aging Veterans and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms

For many Veterans, memories of their wartime experiences can still be upsetting long after they served in combat. If you are an older Veteran, you may have served many years ago, but your military experience can still affect your life today. Here are some ways that past military experience can affect you as you get older.

PTSD symptoms later in life

Many older Veterans find they have PTSD symptoms even fifty or more years after their wartime experience. Some symptoms of PTSD include having nightmares or feeling like you are reliving the event, avoiding situations that remind you of the event, being easily startled, and loss of interest in activities. There are a number of reasons why symptoms of PTSD may increase with age:

- Having retired from work may make your symptoms feel worse, because you have more time to think and fewer things to distract you from your memories.
- Having medical problems and feeling like you are not as strong as you used to be also can increase symptoms.
- You may find that bad news on the television and scenes from current wars bring back bad memories.
- You may have tried in the past to cope with stress by using alcohol or other substances. Then if you stop drinking late in life, without another, healthier way of coping, this can make PTSD symptoms seem worse.

PTSD symptoms can occur soon after a traumatic experience, but this is not always the case. Here are some common symptom patterns:

PTSD and Older Veterans (continued)

- Some Veterans begin to have PTSD symptoms soon after they return from war. These symptoms may last until older age.
- Other Veterans don't have PTSD symptoms until later in life.
- For some Veterans, PTSD symptoms can be high right after their war experience, go down over the years, and then worsen again later in life.

Late-Onset Stress Symptomatology (LOSS)

Many older Veterans have functioned well since their military experience. Then later in life, they begin to think more or become more emotional about their wartime experience. As you age, it is normal to look back over your life and try to make sense of your experiences. For Veterans this process can trigger Late-Onset Stress Symptomatology (LOSS).

The symptoms of LOSS are similar to symptoms of PTSD. With LOSS, though, Veterans might have fewer symptoms, less severe symptoms, or begin having symptoms later in life. LOSS differs from PTSD in that LOSS appears to be closely related to the aging process. People with LOSS might live most of their lives relatively well. They go to work and spend time with family and friends. Then they begin to confront normal age-related changes such as retirement, loss of loved ones, and increased health problems. As they go through these stresses, they may start to have more feelings and thoughts about their military experiences.

Having symptoms of LOSS is not upsetting for all Veterans. While some find that remembering their wartime experience is upsetting, many find that it helps them to make meaning of their wartime experience.

What can you do to find help?

If you are having a hard time dealing with your wartime memories, there are a number of things that you can do to help yourself. There are also ways you can seek help from others.

- Do things to feel strong and safe in other parts of your life, like exercising, eating well, and volunteering.
- Talk to a friend who has been through the war or other hard times. A good friend who understands and cares is often the best medicine.
- Join a support group. It can help to be a part of a group. Some groups focus on war memories. Others focus on the here and now. Still others focus on learning ways to relax.
- Talk to a professional. It may be helpful to talk to someone who is trained and experienced in dealing with aging and PTSD. There are proven, effective treatments for PTSD. Your doctor can refer you to a therapist.

PTSD and Older Veterans (continued)

- Tell your family and friends about LOSS and PTSD. It can be very helpful to talk to others as you try to place your long-ago wartime experiences into perspective. It may also be helpful for others to know what may be the source of your anger, nerves, sleep, or memory problems. Then they can provide more support.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. Most of all, try not to feel bad or embarrassed to ask for help. Asking for help when you need it is a sign of wisdom and strength.

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For more information call the PTSD Information Line at (802) 296-6300 or send email to ncptsd@ncptsd.org.