

# Caring For Veterans With Posttraumatic Stress Disorder at the End of Life

TIPS FOR RECOGNIZING TRAUMA-RELATED SYMPTOMS



## PTSD Symptoms at the end of life may be challenging to recognize

Symptoms may present as:

### SIMILAR

to common end of life symptoms like agitation or sleep disturbance

### SPECIFIC

to PTSD like intrusive memories of a traumatic event

### INTERNAL

such as thoughts and feelings and be hard to know unless one asks



## How PTSD may look at the end of life

Symptom	Example
Intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks	Distressing thoughts or dreams of trauma
Avoiding reminders of traumatic events	Missing appointments around Veterans Day or Memorial Day
Expressing feelings of guilt	Saying things like "I shouldn't have made it"
Irritability and anger	Anger when healthcare workers come to the home
Agitation and increased restlessness	Terminal restlessness that seems minimally responsive to medications
Resistance to care	Refusing medical care
Sleep impairment	Unable to fall or stay asleep
Fractured family relationships	Close family minimally involved or absent



## Key Facts about PTSD in late life

**1**

Most older adults have at least **1 traumatic event** in their lifetimes.

**7%**

**Among older adults, 7%** experience PTSD during their lifetimes.

**33%**

**Among Vietnam Veterans, 1/3** experience PTSD in their lifetimes.

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## TIPS FOR RECOGNIZING TRAUMA-RELATED SYMPTOMS



### Conversation Starters for Clinicians

As some people navigate serious illness they experience memories of previous frightening or shocking events. Is this something that you experience?

Some veterans think more about military service later in life. Is this true for you?

### Primary Care PTSD Screen for Clinicians 5 questions screen for PTSD

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/screens/pc-ptsd.asp>

Sample – In the past month have you...  
Had nightmares about the event(s) or thought about the event(s) when you did not want to? (yes/no)

Sample – In the past month have you...  
Felt guilty or unable to stop blaming yourself or others for the event(s) or any problems the events may have caused? (yes/no)

### PTSD Checklist 20 self-report questions for PTSD

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/adult-sr/ptsd-checklist.asp>

Sample - How much are you bothered by:  
Being “superalert” or watchful or on guard? (rate 0-4)

Sample - How much are you bothered by:  
Feeling distant or cut off from other people? (rate 0-4)

### LOSS Scale 11 or 44 self-report questions about re-engaging military memories in late life

[https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/adult-sr/loss\\_scale.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/adult-sr/loss_scale.asp)

Sample –  
My family and friends tell me that I have recently been speaking more emotionally about the war. (rate 0-4)

Sample –  
Lately, I think more about friends I lost during the war. (rate 0-4)

For more help contact the VA PTSD Consultation Program at 866-948-7880 or [PTSDconsult@va.gov](mailto:PTSDconsult@va.gov)

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## WAYS TO RESPOND TO SYMPTOMS OF PTSD



### Responding to Trauma Disclosures

“What you’re describing sounds frightening. How are these memories impacting you?”

“Thank you for sharing this memory with me. I am so sorry you experienced that.”

“Sometimes pain isn’t only a physical sensation but can include fear, anxiety, grief, or difficult memories. Do you feel like these other factors might be contributing to your experience?”

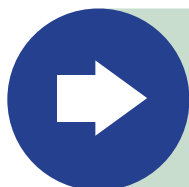


### Including Family

“Would it be okay to spend a bit of time talking about why I think PTSD-related symptoms might be impacting your loved one now?”

“Symptoms at end of life can be complicated. Is it possible some of the distress your loved one is showing may come from difficult memories?”

“We sometimes see when an individual nears the end of life, they begin to think more about their military experiences. Have you noticed this happening with your loved One?”



### Non Verbal Approaches

- Sitting calmly
- Listening
- Being with someone
- Avoid distractions



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## WAYS TO RESPOND TO SYMPTOMS OF PTSD



**Skills you've developed** to respond to patient emotions related to their illness course can also work when responding to a patient's disclosure of a traumatic experience using the **NURSE** acronym from VitalTalk.org

For more help contact the VA PTSD Consultation Program at 866-948-7880 or PTSDconsult@va.gov

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**Naming (Validating):** "That sounds really scary" or "Anyone in that situation would feel scared."

**Understanding (Giving Recognition):** "Thank you for sharing this and letting me be a part of your life. This helps me a lot to understand your experience." "I can't begin to imagine what that might have been like"

**Respecting (Validating):** "We, as a team, can appreciate how hard it has been to let people into your home and open up about your experiences. We see how hard you're trying. I will continue to work with you to make sure you feel comfortable with the care you're receiving."

**Supporting (Reflecting):** "An important aspect of this phase of life is being able to heal and experience closure. We will do the best we can to support you. Do you think it would be helpful to talk with a mental health specialist to explore this more?"

**Exploring (Focusing):** "When you said you've been thinking a lot more about X...could you say more about what you mean?"



\*Read more about the NURSE acronym and other communication skills for serious illness <https://www.VitalTalk.org>

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## CAREGIVER CHALLENGES AND PRACTICAL INFORMATION



**Being a caregiver** is a tough job and a lot of people have questions about providing care to Veterans at end of life. By learning more, you are taking a proactive approach.

### Who is a caregiver or support person?

Provides support for individuals with a chronic or disabling condition including emotional support, assistance in day-to-day activities, and / or medical management.

### When Caring for a Veteran with PTSD caregivers may struggle with:

- Experiencing secondary stress from listening to your loved one's trauma story.
- Feeling shut out
- Agitation, anger, and insomnia experienced by your loved one
- Not knowing what to say or how to react
- Additional feelings that caregivers may experience can be found here: <https://www.caregiver.org/emotional-side-caregiving>



**Remember** that you know this person and you are their loved one. Trust yourself in this process.

### The love and support of a family member is crucial.

You can provide a lot through listening and letting your loved one know they are not alone. It can also be helpful to involve a licensed mental health provider. Some situations in which you may wish to do so:

- Your loved one is having distressing signs of PTSD impacting their ability to function
- Your loved one is expressing suicidal thoughts. Note that it is normal for individuals to think about death as they approach their own death. If your loved one is actively thinking about or looking for ways to hurt or kill themselves, please reach out to the Veterans Crisis Line.

### Veteran's Crisis Line

**Call:** 1-800-273-8255 and press 1

**Text:** 838255

**Online chat:** <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat>

### Being a caregiver means you must take care of yourself too!

It may be difficult to maintain a relationship with the Veteran and separate yourself from being their caregiver. Self-care strategies include:

- Take a break (explore caregiver support services, VA respite services)
- Positive coping (enjoy humor, exercise, focus on one day at a time)
- Eat healthy & exercise daily; pay attention to your stress
- Attend caregiver support groups and seek professional support
- Practice teamwork & give each other space when needed
- Build a support network (friends, family, support groups)
- It's okay to say, 'no', and set emotional limits



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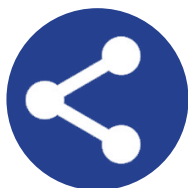
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## WAYS CAREGIVERS CAN RESPOND TO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



**As a Veteran** approaches their end of life, they may experience symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. These symptoms may be related to past experiences of trauma, such as those that occurred during military service.



### Common PTSD symptoms seen at end of life include:

- Nightmares, Flashbacks
- Isolation
- Agitation, Restlessness
- Stoicism
- Withdrawal, Care Refusal
- Guilt, Distrust



### Healthcare providers have noticed that at end of life, Veterans show:

- Outward displays of PTSD symptoms such as pain, agitation, exaggerated startle, and avoidance of difficult memories
- Positive memories of military experiences, and a desire to share these memories



**Understanding PTSD** and being able to recognize it in your loved one may be a big help. Putting together the pieces of the puzzle to realize your loved one is struggling from PTSD can be immensely powerful.

**Situations may arise where it may be difficult to respond.** Below are select open-ended responses that can be adapted to fit your needs:

### In general, demonstrate empathy.

Listen without judgment

Provide a safe space, but do not force a conversation

Ask open-ended questions rather than yes or no questions

**If the Veteran has disclosed something stressful or traumatic, or is visibly stressed, you may choose to validate their experience or feelings.**

I am so sorry you had to go through that.

This must be really hard for you.

It sounds like you're having a hard time. Do you want to talk to me about it or to one of your medical providers, such as a nurse, doctor, or psychologist?

### Provide support.

I'm here if you need to talk.

I'm sorry you're having a bad day.

### Ask the Veteran what they need.

What can I do to help?

What do you need from me?



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