

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.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Rural Health

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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?

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)

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)

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

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