PTSD COACH ONLINE

National Center for PTSD

PTSD Coach Online Provider Guide

National Center for PTSD

VA | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

BACKGROUND

This guide is intended to help clinical providers use PTSD Coach Online with Veterans.

PTSD Coach Online is a free, online, self-paced program that provides education and teaches coping skills and problem solving through step-by-step tools. PTSD Coach Online was developed in 2013 by a team at the VA's National Center for PTSD, Executive Division.

PTSD Coach Online can be used independently or with a provider. Each module of PTSD Coach Online features a video introduction by a psychotherapist who explains the goals of the module. Modules also include written and video help screens to guide users through the content.

Special thanks to the National Center for PTSD for funding to support the development of this guide.

Recommended citation for PTSD Coach Online:
National Center for PTSD. (2013). PTSD Coach Online (Version 1.0). [Online application software]. Retrieved from
https://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/ptsdcoachonline/

Note: PTSD Coach Online was inspired by PTSD Coach, the flagship mobile app from the National Center for PTSD. While these resources complement each other, the app and the online program are completely separate; each offers different features and the app and the online program do not "talk" to each other in any way.

Where can I get more information? If you are a provider who works with Veterans who have experienced trauma and you have additional questions about **PTSD Coach Online**, or about PTSD assessment or treatment in general, contact the PTSD Consultation Program (www.ptsd.va.gov/consult) for free consultation, education and information. You can contact them at PTSDconsult@va.gov or (866) 948-7880.

Questions about the PTSD Coach mobile app or this guide should be directed to:
MobileMentalHealth@va.gov.
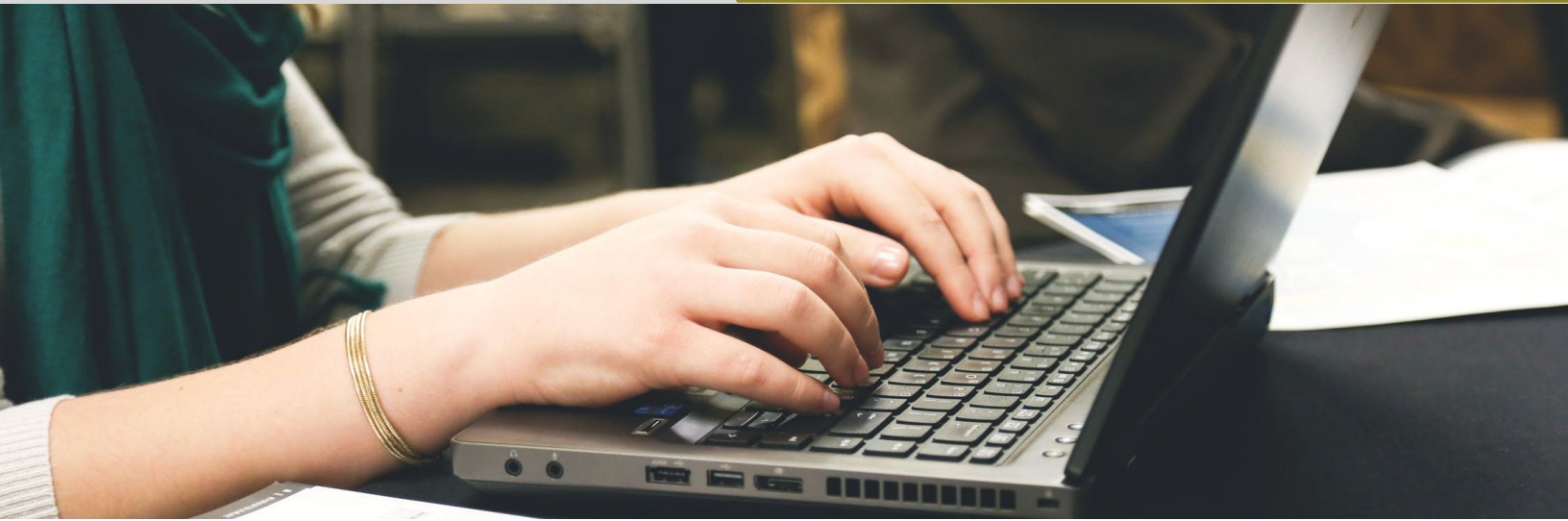
INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before recommending PTSD Coach Online to a Veteran, it is important to determine if the Veteran is a good fit for an online self-help program. Important factors include:

Clinical considerations
- **Crisis situations** – safety issues must be addressed using VA protocols, or the appropriate protocols for your setting and license, before starting or using PTSD Coach Online
- **Unstable psychiatric conditions** – consider stabilization prior to starting PTSD Coach Online
- **Concurrent treatments** – collaborate with the treatment team to see if PTSD Coach Online can complement treatment

Psychosocial considerations
- **Reading level** – most of the PTSD Coach Online content does not exceed a 7th grade reading level
- **Access to computers/tablets** – the PTSD Coach Online program (versus the PTSD Coach mobile app) is best accessed through a computer; Veterans can be encouraged to use computers at VA or public libraries, or you may be able to "prescribe" (i.e., have the VA issue) the Veteran a device through your local VA. However, if the Veteran intends to access the course on a public computer, they should be made aware of the fact that information and progress may be saved on the computer if browser cookies are enabled (see technological considerations section below).
- **Social support** – sharing PTSD Coach Online content with supportive others may increase satisfaction and engagement

Technological considerations
- **Internet connectivity** – PTSD Coach Online is available on a publicly accessible website; access to the internet is a requirement
- **Hardware requirements** – speakers are recommended, but transcripts and closed captioning are provided for those without these items. Headphones are optional and a microphone is not needed.
- **Assistive technology** – PTSD Coach Online is 508-compliant and should work with most assistive technology programs and devices

- **Software requirements** – we recommend Internet Explorer (9 or higher). If you are accessing the website from behind the VA firewall, Google Chrome is recommended.
- **Browser settings** – JavaScript must be enabled in order to properly run the course. Cookies must also be enabled so that the Veteran can save information and progress for each module/session. If using a public computer, deleting Browser Cookies is recommended after each session. To learn how to do this, use the given browser's search function to look up "How to delete browser cookies" and follow the steps shown.

Clinician familiarity with PTSD Coach Online

- **Get comfortable** – Familiarize yourself with the online program prior to recommending it to a Veteran. Spend time exploring the features and understand how it can complement or facilitate the care you provide.

USING PTSD COACH ONLINE

Who can use PTSD Coach Online?

Any individual who has been impacted by trauma, experiences emotional difficulties, or struggles in their day-to-day life. Many scenarios and examples in the course are military-focused, but PTSD Coach Online is not strictly for Veterans or Servicemembers.

Who can recommend the use of PTSD Coach Online?

Any healthcare provider (e.g., case manager, peer specialist, primary care provider, specialty care provider, mental health provider).

When should I recommend PTSD Coach Online?

Any time you meet with an individual (e.g., Veteran, family member) who has been impacted by trauma. PTSD Coach Online can be used if a client is refusing treatment, or before, during, or after more structured PTSD treatment, including psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy.

What do I say to my client when I recommend PTSD Coach Online?

Remind your client that PTSD Coach Online is not a substitute for PTSD treatment. Share how PTSD Coach Online provides tools and teaches skills to help manage symptoms and improve coping with stress and daily struggles. It is designed to be used as a stand-alone self-help online program. The client can pick and choose the tools and skills that will be most useful for them. If the client is unclear about next steps after using PTSD Coach Online, recommend they contact their medical provider to discuss additional treatment options. If they are in crisis, they can call 911 or contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/; 1-800-273-8255, Veterans press 1).

Is PTSD Coach Online a substitute for treatment?

No. PTSD Coach Online is not a stand-alone PTSD treatment. It reinforces and strengthens coping skills and improves symptom management. PTSD Coach Online can be used to help manage problems (e.g., stress, worry, anxiety, sleep problems, anger, sadness) by examining thoughts, problem solving, establishing goals, identifying values, and teaching coping skills and relaxation.

What kinds of tools are in PTSD Coach Online?

PTSD Coach Online has tools for coping with sadness, anxiety, and other symptoms that people who have been through trauma can develop. Some modules are brief and can help users relax when they feel stressed, or improve mood, for example. These tools closely follow the structure of similar tools in the PTSD Coach mobile app.

Other modules are designed to teach users how to tackle difficult problems, change thinking patterns, and take steps to achieve their goals. These modules, which take longer to complete, often feature worksheets that can be completed online, or printed out and completed by hand.

Modules can be completed more than once. For example, a user can use any of the three relaxation modules any time they feel stressed. The modules that discuss the connection between thoughts and feelings might be worth viewing repeatedly, so that users can remind themselves of the principles they cover.

What is the evidence base for the tools in PTSD Coach Online?

The tools in PTSD Coach Online draw from techniques that are commonly used in cognitive behavioral therapy, sleep hygiene, and mindfulness practices. While the individual modules have not been tested in randomized trials, these techniques are evidence-informed.

Is the information users enter kept private?

Absolutely. Many of the modules in PTSD Coach Online use what are called "session variables" so that information entered into worksheets is available to users as they navigate through them. Once a module is closed, the information is deleted. This is why PTSD Coach Online gives users the option to print out worksheets.

Some anonymous information about users is collected automatically, however. For example, the date and time of users' visits, the operating system they used to access the site, and the internet domain from which they connected to PTSD Coach Online are all collected automatically. This data is only used to help make the site better for visitors. It is not used to identify individual users. Please see the VA Privacy Policy (https://www.va.gov/privacy/) for a list of information that is collected automatically.
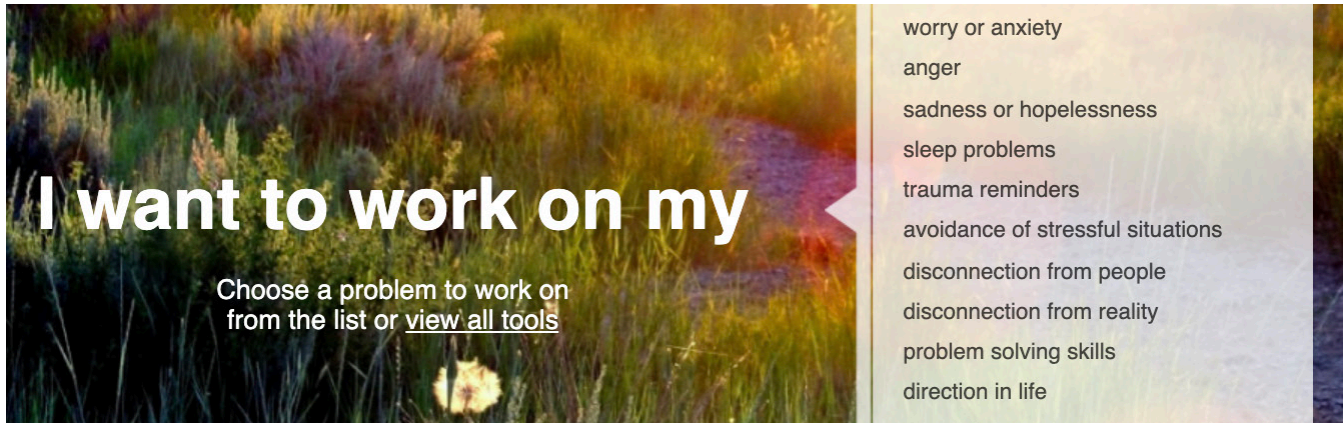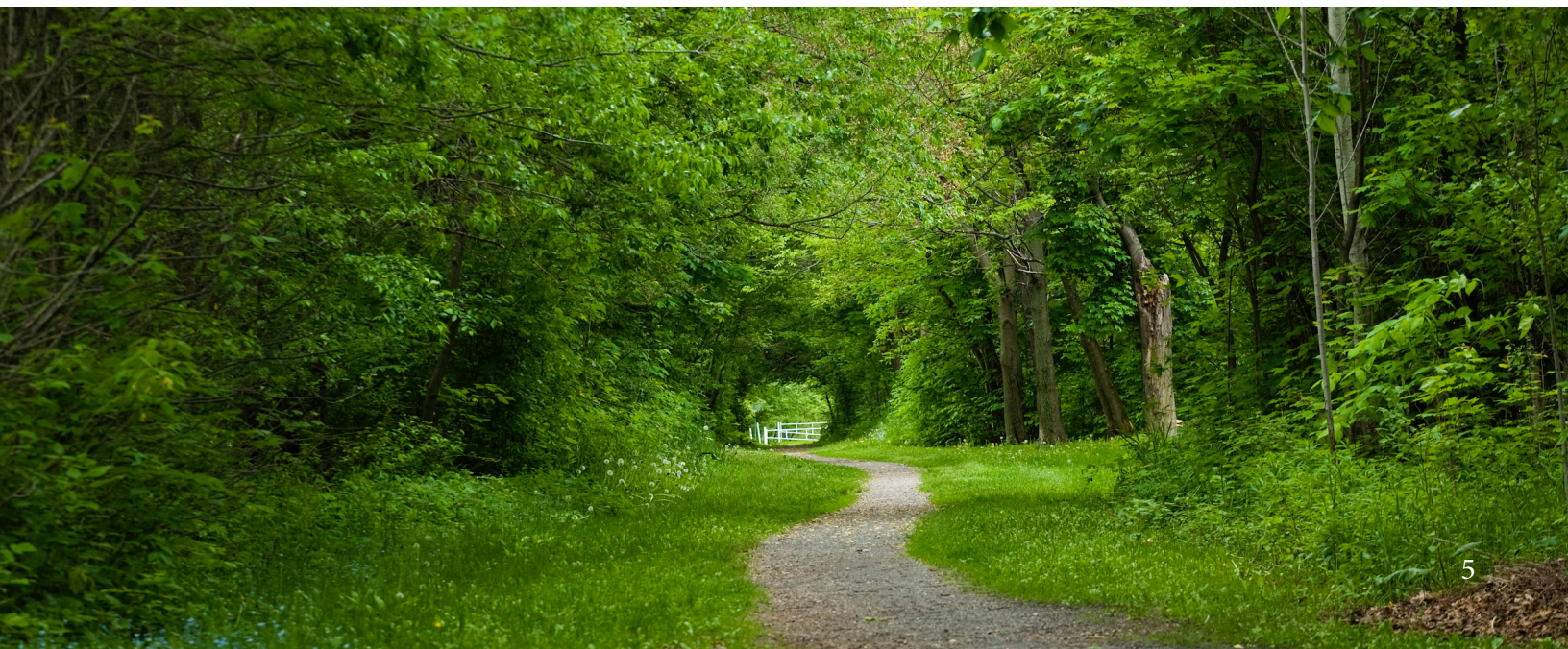
How do patients use PTSD Coach Online?

Users can access PTSD Coach Online through any computer with an internet connection. From the home screen, users can either view all the tools in the program, or access tools that are sorted by feeling states and issues that they might want to work on, such as building problem solving skills, addressing sleep issues, or coping with worry, sadness, or anxiety.

ALL AVAILABLE TOOLS

I want to work on my

Choose a problem to work on
from the list or view all tools

worry or anxiety
anger
sadness or hopelessness
sleep problems
trauma reminders
avoidance of stressful situations
disconnection from people
disconnection from reality
problem solving skills
direction in life

Be in the moment
Strategies for when you feel disconnected or disoriented.

Change feelings by changing thoughts
Change how you think about situations to feel better.

Change how you think about sleep
Replace negative thoughts and get a good night's sleep.

Change negative thinking patterns
Escape all-or-nothing thinking and other mind traps.

Deal with trauma reminders
Manage distress when you're reminded of past trauma.

Form good sleep habits
Simple changes to help you sleep better.

Identify your values and goals
What really matters to you?

Learn to be assertive
Strategies to communicate effectively.

Learn to problem solve
Overcome barriers to solving problems.

Look carefully at your thoughts
Learn how thoughts impact feelings and behaviors.

Notice your thoughts and feelings
Bring awareness to the present moment.

Plan something enjoyable
Make time for activities that bring joy to life.

Relax through breathing
Breathe in, breathe out, feel better.

Relax through visualization
Imagine a pleasant scene and decrease stress.

Relax your body
A quick stress reliever.

Weigh the pros and cons
Are your distressing thoughts really worth holding onto?

Write to reflect
Use writing to process important emotional events.

I want to work on my

Choose a problem to work on
from the list or <u>view all tools</u>

worry or anxiety
anger
sadness or hopelessness
sleep problems
trauma reminders
avoidance of stressful situations
disconnection from people
disconnection from reality
problem solving skills
direction in life

Tools to work on my **worry or anxiety**

Change feelings by changing thoughts
Change how you think about situations to feel better.

Change negative thinking patterns
Escape all-or-nothing thinking and other mind traps.

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PTSD COACH ONLINE MODULES

Tool	Problem/feeling state *I want to work on my...*	Psychoeducation	Worksheet	Audio exercises	Interactive exercises	Video vignettes	Additional printable materials	Video exercise (breathing retraining)
Be in the moment	*trauma reminders* *disconnection from people* *disconnection from reality*	X		X				
Change feelings by changing thoughts	*worry or anxiety* *anger* *sadness or hopelessness* *trauma reminders* *avoidance of stressful situations*	X	X		X	X	X	
Change how you think about sleep	*sleep problems*	X			X		X	
Change negative thinking patterns	*worry or anxiety* *anger* *sadness or hopelessness* *trauma reminders* *avoidance of stressful situations*	X	X			X	X	
Deal with trauma reminders	*trauma reminders* *avoidance of stressful situations*	X	X		X			X
Form good sleep habits	*sleep problems*	X			X		X	
Identify your values and goals	*problem solving skills* *direction in life*	X	X					
Learn to be assertive	*worry or anxiety* *sadness or hopelessness* *avoidance of stressful situations* *problem solving skills*	X	X			X		

Tool	Problem/feeling state *I want to work on my...*	Modality						
		Psychoeducation	Worksheet	Audio exercises	Interactive exercises	Video vignettes	Additional printable materials	Video exercise (breathing retraining)
Learn to problem solve	*worry or anxiety* *sadness or hopelessness* *avoidance of stressful situations* *problem solving skills*	X	X		X			
Look carefully at your thoughts	*worry or anxiety* *anger* *sadness or hopelessness* *trauma reminders* *avoidance of stressful situations*	X	X*			X		
Notice your thoughts and feelings	*worry or anxiety* *anger* *sadness or hopelessness* *disconnection from people* *disconnection from reality*	X		X			X	
Plan something enjoyable	*worry or anxiety* *anger* *sadness or hopelessness* *disconnection from people*	X	X				X	
Relax through breathing	*worry or anxiety* *anger* *sadness or hopelessness* *sleep problems* *trauma reminders*	X		X				
Relax through visualization	*worry or anxiety* *anger* *sleep problems*	X		X				

* Not a printable worksheet

Tool	Problem/feeling state *I want to work on my...*	Modality						
		Psychoeducation	Worksheet	Audio exercises	Interactive exercises	Video vignettes	Additional printable materials	Video exercise (breathing retraining)
Relax your body	*worry or anxiety* *anger* *sleep problems* *trauma reminders* *disconnection from reality*	X		X				
Weigh the pros and cons	*worry or anxiety* *anger* *sadness or hopelessness* *trauma reminders* *avoidance of stressful situations*	X	X					
Write to reflect	*worry or anxiety* *sadness or hopelessness* *direction in life*	X	X					

EXPLORING THE PTSD COACH ONLINE MODULES

- ■ Brief overview of the module topic
- ■ Video introducing the topic

- ■ ⓘ Information: gives instruction on what to do
- ■ "Begin" takes the user to modality (e.g., interactive exercise, psychoeducation)

EXAMPLE OF AN INTERACTIVE EXERCISE

■ Within an interactive exercise, each step of the exercise is displayed

■ If you need help, or a video explaining the step, click "Help with this step" or "Video coaching"

■ Brief overview of the step you are in and the selections to make in the exercise

■ ⓘ Information: gives instruction on what to do

■ Click "Back" to return to the previous page or "Next" once you are ready to continue

PTSD COACH ONLINE WORKSHEETS

Most of the modules in PTSD Coach Online include worksheets that users can complete online. They can also print out these worksheets and fill them out by hand if they prefer. Many modules also have helpful handouts that reinforce the information contained within the modules.

EXAMPLE

PTSD COACH ONLINE | Weigh the pros and cons

Weigh the pros and cons

The thought that I want to change is:

I am not good at my job.

The pros of keeping this thought are:

It can make me think critically about the work I do, so I can try to be better in the future.

The cons of keeping this thought are:

This thought makes me anxious to go to work because I feel like a failure. I also worry about if my coworkers think I am bad at my job.

Do the cons outweigh the pros?

Yes.

Is holding onto the thought getting in the way of acting in line with your values and goals?

Yes because my goal is to get promoted and feel valued at work.

Final note: This guide focused on the clinical integration of PTSD Coach Online. If you have questions about topics that were not covered, such as security/privacy issues when using mobile apps or online programs, please feel free to email us. We have additional resources, including handouts and videos, that answer many of the Frequently Asked Questions of clinical integration of technology that are not specific to PTSD Coach Online. We also offer a monthly lecture series related to this topic that is open to the public and a monthly Community of Practice call for those within VA.

Questions about the PTSD Coach mobile app or this guide
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