



National Center for
PTSD

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Understanding PTSD and Aging



Introduction

Over the years, you may have heard terms like shell shock, combat fatigue, or battle fatigue. Today we use the term posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. PTSD can be a problem for anyone who has gone through or witnessed a traumatic event. It could be an event that happened long ago or something that has happened recently. Although PTSD is often associated with combat, not all PTSD is combat-related. It can be caused by any experience that threatens your life or someone else's, including sexual or physical abuse.

This booklet is written for older adults who have or think they may have PTSD. It is also for people who have been diagnosed with PTSD in the past but find their symptoms reoccurring or changing as they age.

In the following pages, you'll learn about PTSD and treatment options, as well as some of the challenges you may face later in life as a result of PTSD.

Remember, no matter how old you are, it's never too late to heal from trauma.

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This booklet is developed by the National Center for PTSD. We are the world's leading research and educational center of excellence on PTSD and traumatic stress.

What is PTSD?

PTSD is a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life threatening event such as military combat, a natural disaster, a car accident, or physical or sexual assault.

It's normal to have upsetting memories, feel on edge, or have trouble sleeping after a traumatic event. At first, it may be hard to do everyday activities, like working, attending community events or religious services, or spending time with the people you care about. But most people start to feel better after a few weeks or months.

If it's been longer than a month and you're still having symptoms, you may have PTSD. For some people, PTSD symptoms may appear later on, or come and go over time. Untreated PTSD can last for decades; you can even have PTSD and not know it.

Here's the good news: you can get treatment for PTSD even after many years — and it works.



PTSD can come from lots of different kinds of traumas or events. So, even if it wasn't the typical combat trauma that you think about, you can still have PTSD, and you can still get treated for PTSD.

– Dr. Matt Yoder,
VA Clinical Psychologist

What Can Cause PTSD?

Any experience that threatens your life or someone else's can cause PTSD. These types of events are called traumas. Some types of trauma that can cause PTSD include:

- Combat or other military experiences
- Learning about the violent or accidental death or injury of a loved one
- Sexual or physical abuse or assault, at any age
- Serious accidents, like a car wreck
- A sudden life-threatening medical event
- Natural disasters, like a flood, fire, tornado, hurricane, or earthquake
- Mass violence, like a school shooting or a terrorist attack

During this kind of event, you may not have any control over what's happening, and you may feel afraid, helpless, vulnerable, angry, or even numb. Anyone who has gone through a trauma like this can develop PTSD – even years later.

Going through a traumatic event is not rare. At least half of Americans have had a traumatic event in their lives. About 6 out of every 100 people (or 6% of the U.S. population) will have PTSD at some point in their lives. And PTSD can develop at any age.

Whether your PTSD is from a recent trauma or from events that happened long ago, treatment can help. The only way to know for sure if you have PTSD is to talk to your doctor or health care provider.

“ I never felt like there were Viet Cong in the tree line because intellectually, I knew I was home in a safe place. But in my spirit, in my anxiety, I felt like I was always under a sniper's scope.

My life after therapy has been very good. I wanted my old self back. I've gotten that and more. I'm strong. I'm healthy ... I'm doing just fine.

**– Ron Whitcomb
U.S. Army (1968-1969)**

PTSD Signs and Symptoms

There are 4 types of PTSD symptoms, but they may not be exactly the same for everyone. Each person experiences symptoms in their own way.

- 1. Reliving the event.** Unwelcome memories about the trauma can come up at any time, even years after the event. Sometimes they can feel both real and frightening, as if the event is happening again. This is called a flashback. You may also have nightmares.

Memories of the trauma can happen because of a trigger — something that reminds you of the event. For example, watching a war movie or hearing a helicopter or fireworks may trigger unwanted memories of your time in the service. Seeing a news report about a disaster might trigger someone who lived through a hurricane.

- 2. Avoiding things that remind you of the event.** You may try to avoid certain people or situations that remind you of the event. For example, you may avoid going out to public events because it feels too dangerous to be around groups of people. You may feel unsafe away from the familiarity of your own home, so traveling becomes difficult or impossible. You may also withdraw from relationships with important people in your life because you worry they'll ask you questions about your past military experience or because you feel they just don't understand what you are going through.

- 3. Having more negative thoughts and feelings than before.** You may feel more negative than you did before the trauma. You might be sad or numb and lose interest in doing the things you used to enjoy, or things that you might have waited to experience during retirement. You may feel that the world is dangerous, and you can't trust anyone, which can keep you from seeking medical care. It may be hard for you to feel or express happiness, or other positive emotions.

You might also feel guilt or shame about the traumatic event itself, even after many years. For example, you may wish you had done more to keep it from happening.

- 4. Feeling on edge.** It's common to feel jittery or "keyed up" — like it's hard to relax. You might have trouble sleeping or concentrating or feel like you're always on the lookout for danger. You may feel like you have to sit with your back to the wall when you go to a restaurant. You may feel overprotective towards people you love, making it hard to unwind and enjoy time with your children or grandchildren. You may find you suddenly get angry and irritable at a time in life when you wanted to relax a little more. You may also act in ways that are potentially dangerous, like abusing drugs, drinking too much alcohol, or driving aggressively.

How Aging Can Affect PTSD

Some changes that come with aging can make you feel more vulnerable, and this can make your PTSD symptoms more noticeable.

Strategies that once seemed to help you avoid thinking about the trauma, like long hours spent at work or self-medicating with alcohol or drugs, may no longer work. Even positive coping strategies, like exercising or friendships with supportive peers, can be more difficult to maintain as you get older.

Here are some examples of how aging can affect PTSD:

- **Self-reflection:** You may look back at the course of your life, and unwanted memories that you had forgotten or purposefully bottled up may return.
- **Retirement:** With more time on your hands, unpleasant memories may surface more often.
- **Loss:** The death of a spouse, partner, or friend can mean losing an important source of support. This can make you feel alone and unsafe, leaving you vulnerable to PTSD.
- **Physical ability:** Because a loss of physical strength often comes with age, you may feel like you can't protect yourself.
- **A change in environment:** Spending time in unfamiliar or new places, like moving to a new home or staying at a hotel while on vacation, can upend your daily routine and make you feel less safe.
- **Increased screen time:** You may be watching more television than you used to. Media can cause you to relive memories of past traumas. For instance, watching the news or war movies may trigger flashbacks.
- **Medical problems:** Hospital stays, chronic illness, and end-of-life issues can make you feel weaker and more fearful. PTSD symptoms may increase. There is research linking PTSD to hypertension and cardiovascular disease, so if you have PTSD, getting treatment is an important part of managing your health as you age.



“ But it really wasn't until after I retired in 2005 and moved to be with my family that the symptoms began to disrupt my life, disrupt my family's life. I noticed that I was isolating. I'm typically a gregarious person, had a very active social life, love to take classes, whether it's art or writing or whatever, and I was doing none of that.

– Mary Martin
U.S. Air Force (1981-2005)

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What to Do if You Have Symptoms of PTSD

- **Ask for help. Don't wait.** Talk to your doctor or health care provider about any symptoms you're experiencing. Ask for a referral or seek the care of a mental health specialist.
- If you get your medical care at the VA, you can also get treatment for PTSD there. Every VA offers effective treatments for PTSD.
- Reach out to your friends and family for support.

PTSD treatment works for people of all ages.

“ If you even have an inkling there's a problem, go find out. There's help out there for you. And you can turn your life around, it's not too late.”

– Jim Moorman
U.S. Marine Corps (1963–1971)



“ Talking about your trauma is scary. You’ve had a shut closet, and don’t know how much is going to come out when you open it. But until you address it, you are stuck.

– Edward “Terre” Douglas
U.S. Air Force (1970-1976) ”

Recommended Treatments for PTSD

There are many types of PTSD treatments that are proven to work. Treatment for PTSD is not one size fits all. It is important to meet with a medical or mental health care provider and discuss your needs so they can help you find a therapist who is trained in the treatment that will work best for you.

Trauma-focused Talk Therapy

Trauma-focused talk therapies are the most effective treatments. They work better than medication. Some of these therapies involve thinking or talking about the trauma in a way that helps people change how they react to their memories. Others focus on challenging negative or unhelpful thoughts about the trauma.

Trauma-focused talk therapies can be intense, but they are safe and effective. Here are the most recommended types of trauma focused talk therapies.

CPT (Cognitive Processing Therapy)

After a trauma, it is common to have negative thoughts — like thinking what happened is your fault or that the world is very dangerous. CPT helps you learn to identify and change these thoughts. Changing how you think about the trauma can help change how you feel.

PE (Prolonged Exposure)

People with PTSD often try to avoid things that remind them of the trauma. This can help you feel better in the moment, but in the long term it can keep you from recovering from PTSD.

In PE, you expose yourself to the thoughts, feelings, and situations that you've been avoiding. It sounds scary, but facing things you're afraid of in a safe way can help you learn that you don't need to avoid reminders of the trauma.

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)

People with PTSD react negatively to the memory of their traumas. EMDR can help you process these upsetting memories, thoughts, and feelings. You'll pay attention to the memory while focusing on a back and forth movement until you start to experience the memory in a way that's less upsetting.

Medication

Ask your doctor about antidepressants called **SSRIs** (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) and **SNRIs** (selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors), which are medications that can help raise the level of certain chemicals in your brain so you feel better. **Sertraline** and **paroxetine** are SSRIs that work for PTSD. **Venlafaxine** is an SNRI that is effective. Your primary care provider or a psychiatrist — a doctor who specializes in mental health — can prescribe medication for PTSD.

“Many Veterans who come into my office wonder if these therapies work, and the short answer is, yes, they work for most people who come in and get the treatments.”
– Dr. Steven Thorp, Clinical Psychologist

It's important to know that as you age, changes take place in the way your body handles medications. Be sure to discuss all of your medications with your health care provider.

A warning about certain anxiety medications:

Some doctors may prescribe a type of anxiety medication called benzodiazepines (or benzos) — but benzodiazepines aren't a good treatment for PTSD. They can be addictive, cause other mental health problems, and make PTSD talk therapy less effective. Taking them also increases the risk of falls and memory problems, which are of special concern in older people.

Some commonly used benzodiazepines are: alprazolam (Xanax®), clonazepam (Klonopin®), diazepam (Valium®), lorazepam (Ativan®), and temazepam (Restoril®). If you've been taking benzodiazepines, talk to your doctor about making a plan to stop. Ask about PTSD treatments that are proven to work and other ways to manage your anxiety.

Get Help Deciding Which PTSD Treatment is Right for You

The PTSD Treatment Decision Aid (<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/Decisionaid/>) can be used by anyone and is a great way to learn about the most effective options and to consider which treatment is right for you. You can watch videos of providers explaining how treatments work, then build a personalized comparison chart of the treatments that appeal to you. You can share a printout of the chart with your provider as you decide together which treatment best meets your needs.

How Treatment Can Help

Treatment works and is safe and effective for anyone, no matter their age.

For many people, treatment will get rid of PTSD altogether. For others, it can make symptoms less intense. After treatment, most people say they have a **better quality of life**.

Treatments have improved over the years. If you were disappointed in treatment you received in the past, you should know that today's treatments — especially trauma-focused talk therapy — are effective and their benefits last longer.

You don't have to suffer with PTSD and its symptoms any longer. Treatment has helped many people like you.

It's never too late to get treatment.

What about support groups?

In support groups you talk about your day-to-day problems with other people who have had similar experiences. They can be a good addition to PTSD treatment, or something you can do after you've gotten treatment. However, it's important to know that support groups don't replace trauma-focused talk therapy as a way to treat your PTSD.

VA Telehealth

Telehealth makes it possible for Veterans with PTSD to access mental health services using the Internet or the phone. You can do this in a VA setting or at home. You can receive the same treatments that are available in person at the VA, including:

- Individual therapy
- Family/couples therapy
- Group therapy
- Medication management

Telehealth is especially helpful for those that live too far from or can't get to a local VA clinic.

To learn more about VA Telehealth Services visit <https://www.telehealth.va.gov> or talk to your health care provider.

Information and Resources

Every VA offers treatments for PTSD that have proven to be effective. So if you are a Veteran, check with your local VA. You can also visit <http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp> to find a specialized VA PTSD program near you.

If you're looking for care outside the VA, ask your doctor for a referral to a mental health care provider who specializes in PTSD treatment. Or visit <https://findtreatment.gov/> to search for providers in your area.

Finding a Provider: Things to Consider

- **Find a provider who uses PTSD treatments proven to work.**

It's best if you can find someone who offers one of the treatments talked about in this booklet, since these treatments have been shown to work. All VA medical centers provide these proven treatments, and many mental health centers (especially at hospitals or universities) offer them as well.

Many doctors can treat PTSD with medication, but it may be harder to find therapists who use the other treatments talked about.

If you can't find a therapist who offers CPT, PE, or EMDR, ask about trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy. General cognitive behavioral therapy can also be a good alternative.

- **Find out about payment options.**

If you have health insurance, including Medicare, check to see what mental health services are covered. If you don't have health insurance or can't afford to pay out of pocket, you may be able to find low-cost care through a clinic funded or run by a government agency.

- **Find someone who is a good fit for you.**

You and your therapist or doctor will work closely together, so it's important that you feel comfortable asking questions and talking about problems in your life. It's always okay to look for a different therapist or doctor if you're not happy with the person you're seeing.



“ You’re not the only one who’s gonna get so much from this. Your family’s going to get the rewards. If you’re married, your wife, your children—they’re going to see it. It’s never too late.

– Richard Adams
U.S. Navy (1971-1972) ”

Information for Family and Friends

When someone you love has PTSD, it can take a toll on your relationship. Fortunately, there are options for making things better.

Here are ways you can help:

- Learn what you can about PTSD. Knowing how PTSD affects people may help you understand what your family member is going through.
- Offer to go to doctor visits with your family member. You can also offer to help keep track of medications and therapy appointments, and you can be there for support.
- Learn about the specific treatment your loved one is receiving and what you can do — and should not do — to be helpful. For example, helping your loved one avoid feared situations may be doing more harm than good.
- Tell your loved one you want to listen and that you also understand if it’s not the right time to talk.
- Plan activities together, like having dinner or going to a movie.
- Encourage contact with family, close friends, or other Veterans. A support system will help your loved one get through difficult changes and stressful times.
- Be sure to take care of yourself. Supporting someone with PTSD can take a lot of time and energy — and it can be stressful. Take care of your own health and consider seeing a counselor or therapist to help you deal with emotions that might be hard to discuss with friends and family.

Resources for Family and Friends

■ PTSD Family Coach

The PTSD Family Coach mobile app provides support for concerned family members of those with PTSD. The app can help you learn about PTSD, how to take care of yourself, and how to manage your relationship with your loved one. It also has information on getting your loved one the treatment they deserve. For more information and to download the free iOS or Android app, please visit www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/familycoach_app.asp.

■ VA's National Caregiver Support Line

VA's National Caregiver Support Line, 1-855-260-3274 (toll-free), is a free national service that provides information and available support services to caregivers, friends and family members, Veterans and community partners. Whether it is in-home help, someone to listen to, or anything in between, call to find out what's available to you and for assistance connecting with the **Caregiver Support Team** at your local VA Medical Center.

■ CRAFT-PTSD/Self-Help Course

Community Reinforcement and Family Training – Posttraumatic stress disorder (CRAFT-PTSD) is a self-paced online course for family members of someone working to manage PTSD. Learn skills to encourage and support your loved one and find additional resources to support your own quality of life. For more information or to take the course, please visit www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/craft_ptsd.asp.

■ PTSD Coach Online

PTSD Coach Online is a collection of stress management tools created to help anyone who needs help with upsetting feelings. Trauma survivors, their families, or anyone coping with stress can benefit. To use PTSD Coach Online visit www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/ptsdcoachonline/.

■ AboutFace

AboutFace features real stories of Veterans who have experienced PTSD, their family members, and VA clinicians. The Veterans on the website span over six decades of military conflicts. By watching the videos on AboutFace, you can learn about PTSD, explore treatment options, and get advice from others who have been there. Visit www.ptsd.va.gov/aboutface for more information.

“ It was so much easier to be isolated. The triggers were all around me. I couldn't go down certain roads, or hear different types of music ... I liked to stay up at night and drink. As I look back now, it was a lot of wasted time.

– Bob Evans
U.S. Army (1967-1968)



To Sum Up

- PTSD is a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life threatening event, like combat, a car accident, a natural disaster, or sexual assault.
- After a traumatic event it's normal to feel scared, keyed up, angry, or sad. But if it's been months or years since the trauma and you're not feeling better, you may have PTSD.
- Changes that naturally come with getting older can make you feel more vulnerable. This can make your PTSD symptoms more noticeable, cause them to come back after many years, or even to occur for the first time.
- Strategies that once seemed to help you avoid thinking about the trauma can be more difficult to maintain as you get older.
- If you have symptoms of PTSD **don't wait to ask for help. PTSD treatment works for people of any age.**
- There are many types of PTSD treatments that are proven to work. Ask your provider to help you find the treatment that will work best for you. **It's never too late to get the help you deserve.**

If you're a Veteran, check with your local VA about available treatment. If you're looking for care outside the VA, ask your doctor for a referral to a mental health care provider who specializes in PTSD treatment.

Remember — it's never too late to heal from a trauma. There are treatments that are proven to work for people of all ages ... **PTSD treatment can turn your life around** — even if you've been struggling for years.

GET HELP IN A CRISIS

Call 988 anytime to talk with a crisis line counselor. The call is confidential (private) and free.

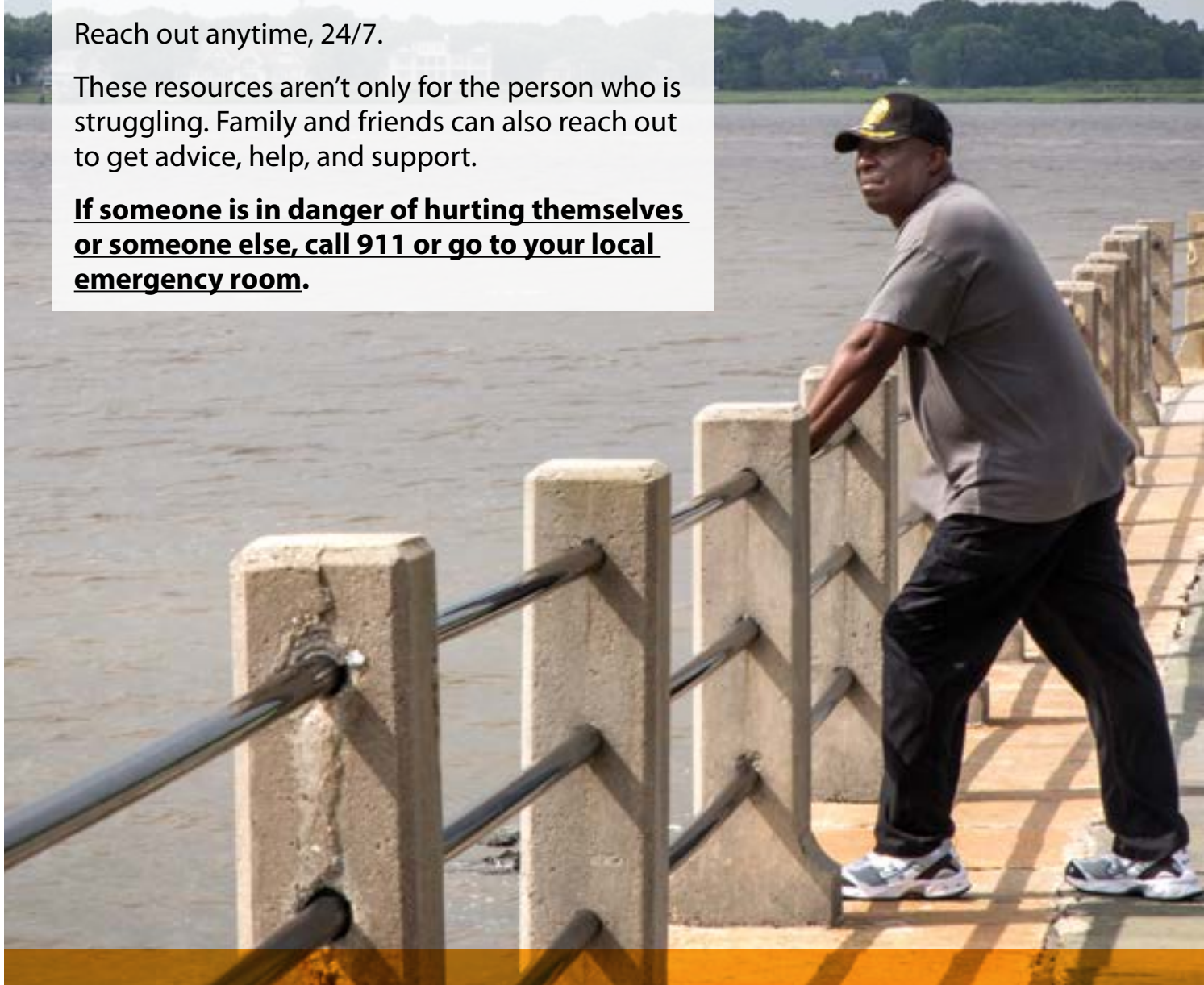
If you are a Veteran or are concerned about one, press 1 to connect to the Veterans Crisis Line. **Text 838255** or chat online at **www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/chat**.

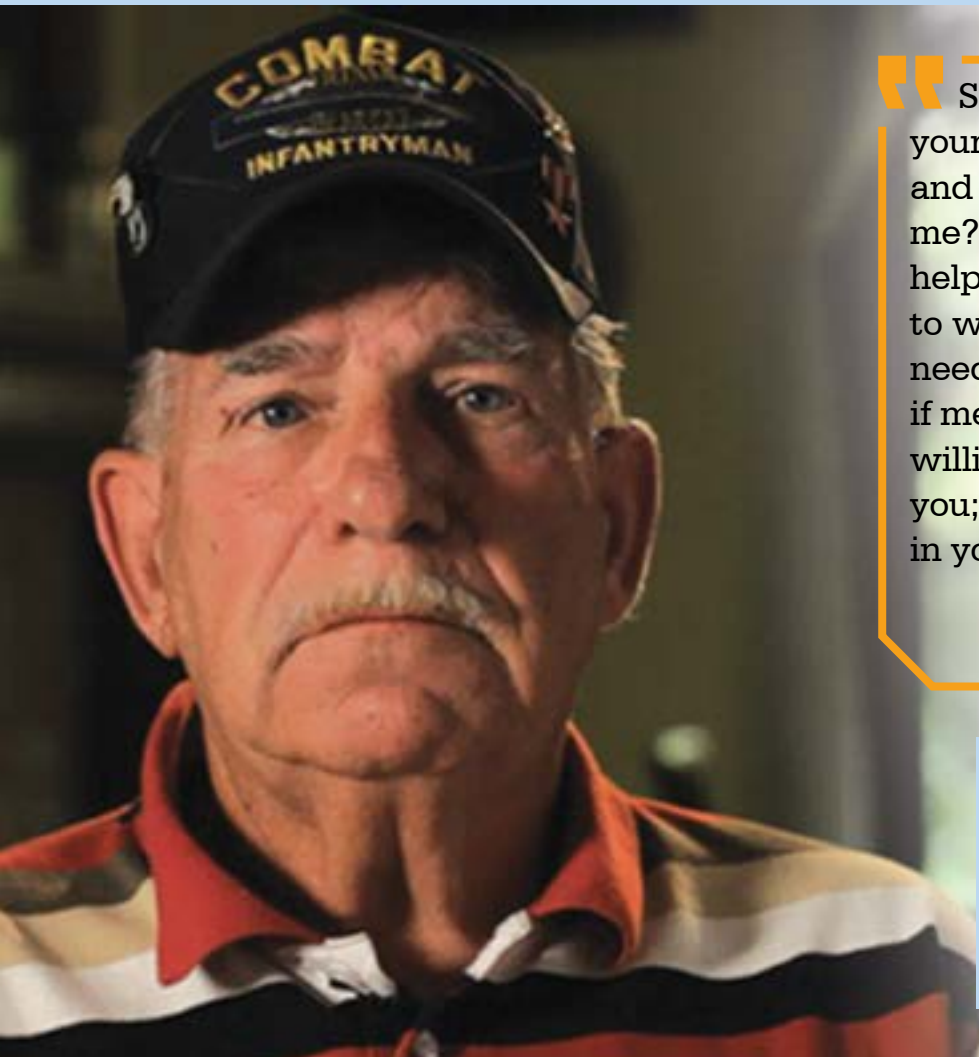
Not a Veteran? Use the online chat at 988lifeline.org.

Reach out anytime, 24/7.

These resources aren't only for the person who is struggling. Family and friends can also reach out to get advice, help, and support.

If someone is in danger of hurting themselves or someone else, call 911 or go to your local emergency room.





“Some of you may be questioning yourself, “If I reach out for help and get treatment, will it help me?” I’m a living testimony; it helped me. But first of all, you need to want the help. Secondly, you need to embrace the help. Thirdly, if medication is suggested, be willing to utilize the tools given to you; be willing to fully participate in your own recovery.

– Bob Murphy
U.S. Army (1966-1969)

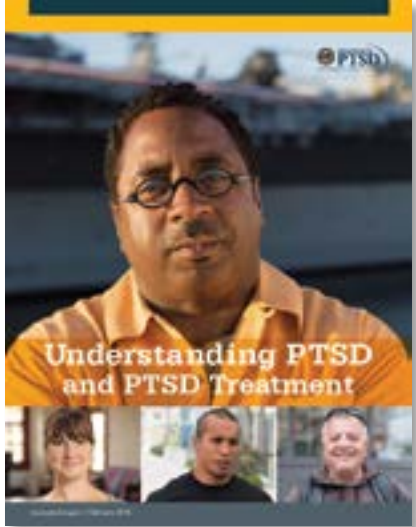
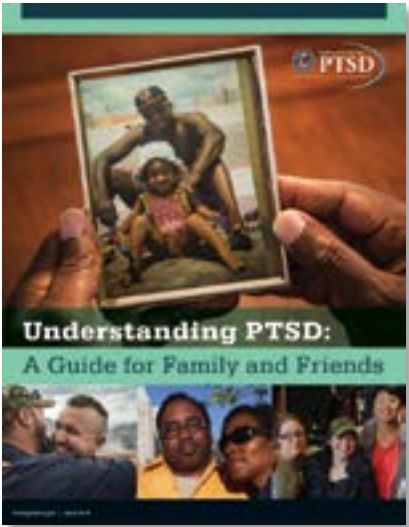
ABOUTFACE

Find out about PTSD and PTSD treatment from Veterans who’ve been there.

www.ptsd.va.gov/aboutface

PTSD treatment works

To learn more about PTSD and PTSD treatments, check out our companion booklets at https://www.ptsd.va.gov/publications/print/understandingptsd_booklet.pdf and https://www.ptsd.va.gov/publications/print/understandingptsd_family_booklet.pdf



For more information and resources, visit the National Center for PTSD at www.ptsd.va.gov.

