

Forged by Fire

Turning Trauma into Strength and Sustainable Success

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PTSD

WHAT IT IS

Posttraumatic Stress, often called PTSD, happens after someone lives through or witnesses something frightening, life-threatening, or deeply disturbing. Many clinicians now call it an injury rather than a disorder, because injuries can heal. It is not a permanent condition, and it is not a character flaw. Service members with PTSD often relive the event through unwanted memories, nightmares, or flashbacks. They may feel on edge, avoid reminders of what happened, or feel emotionally numb. When these reactions last more than 30 days and start affecting daily life, it may be PTSD.

WHAT CAUSES IT

- A single frightening event, such as a vehicle accident, a violent incident, or a natural disaster
- Repeated exposure to other people's trauma, common for combat medics, security forces, and first responders
- Combat or war-related experiences
- Sexual assault or abuse
- Any event that brings intense fear, helplessness, or horror

Vicarious Trauma

WHAT IT IS

Vicarious trauma happens when someone absorbs the pain of other people's traumatic experiences, even though it did not happen to them directly. It is sometimes called secondary traumatic stress. The damage can feel just as real and just as painful as trauma experienced

firsthand. It is often sneaky. It builds slowly, one hard mission or one hard story at a time, until it quietly takes a toll. Like a frog placed in water that is slowly heated, a person can adapt without realizing how much danger they're in.

WHAT CAUSES IT

- Listening to or witnessing other people's traumatic stories repeatedly, common for medics, chaplains, and support personnel
- One especially difficult incident that leaves a lasting mark
- A slow buildup of many smaller, difficult experiences over time
- Personal life circumstances that make certain missions or cases hit closer to home

PTS / VICARIOUS TRAUMA SELF-ASSESSMENT — ARE YOU...

1. Experiencing unexpectedly disturbing memories of a traumatic event?
2. Having dreams or nightmares related to a traumatic event?
3. Feeling emotionally numb in situations where you feel you shouldn't be?
4. Avoiding thoughts or feelings connected to a traumatic event?
5. No longer enjoying activities you once loved?
6. Finding it harder to concentrate?
7. Finding it hard to relax?
8. Having trouble falling or staying asleep?
9. Quicker to anger or lash out than normal?
10. Struggling to control your emotions?
11. Using drugs or alcohol to escape?

If several of these feel familiar, it may be worth talking with someone.

Moral Injury

WHAT IT IS

Moral injury is an injury to a person's psyche that happens when a moral value has been violated, whether on purpose or by accident, either by the person themselves or by someone else they witnessed and felt unable to stop (Litz & Kerig, 2019).

WHAT CAUSES IT

- Being unable to save someone, despite doing everything possible
- Making a split-second decision with no good options
- Witnessing harm that couldn't be stopped
- Following orders, policies, or rules of engagement that conflicted with personal values
- Feeling betrayed by leadership, a system, or people who were trusted to do the right thing

HOW IT OVERLAPS WITH PTSD

PTSD and moral injury often travel together, but they are not the same. PTSD centers on fear: hyperarousal, hypervigilance, memory loss, flashbacks. Moral injury centers on guilt and betrayal: sorrow, grief, regret, shame. Both can bring anger, isolation, depression, anxiety, insomnia, nightmares, and a pull toward self-medicating with alcohol or drugs.

MORAL INJURY SELF-ASSESSMENT — ARE YOU EXPERIENCING...

1. Guilt about something you did, didn't do, or couldn't prevent?
2. Shame that feels hard to talk about, even with people close to you?
3. Anger at yourself, others, or a system you feel let you down?
4. A sense that you can't forgive yourself?
5. A loss of trust in people, leadership, or institutions?
6. A feeling that your values or sense of right and wrong were violated?
7. Withdrawing from faith, purpose, or things that used to feel meaningful?
8. A nagging thought that you are a bad person because of what happened?

These feelings are common and understandable responses to impossible situations. They are not proof of wrongdoing.

REFLECTION

Is there something from this section that you recognize in yourself, or in someone you serve alongside? What would it look like to talk about it with someone you trust?

Resilience Skills

TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY

- Breathing exercises and grounding techniques (try box breathing: inhale 4 counts, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4)
- Movement: yoga, walking, stretching, dance
- Time in nature
- Better sleep habits
- Nutrition and hydration
- Massage, acupuncture, or other bodywork

TAKE CARE OF YOUR MIND

- Mindfulness and meditation
- Journaling and gratitude lists
- Self-compassion and kind self-talk
- Radical acceptance of what cannot be changed
- Reframing self-defeating thoughts (the ABC approach)
- Stopping the thought process before it spirals
- Focus your energy on what you can control, and let go of what you can't

- Grounding exercise: name 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, 1 you can taste

TAKE CARE OF YOUR CONNECTIONS

- Aim to have at least three trusted people in your life, and try not to have all three be fellow service members. A mix of perspectives outside the military gives you more places to turn, and more ways to be understood
- Talking to someone you trust: a friend, battle buddy, or counselor
- Building community and finding your support network
- Practicing empathy, for others and for yourself
- Keeping professional distance so you can stay objective
- Seeking professional help from someone who understands

REFLECTION

What is one resilience skill from this list you'd be willing to try this week?

Resources

These self-assessments are screening tools, not diagnoses. If any of this felt familiar today, please reach out. You are not alone, and support is always within reach.

Crisis & Immediate Support

ORGANIZATION	CONTACT
Emergency (Medical/Police)	Call 911
988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline	Call or text 988 www.988lifeline.org
Crisis Text Line	Text HOME to 741741

Military-First Responder Specific Support

ORGANIZATION	CONTACT
Veterans Crisis Line	Call or text 988, then press 1
Vets4Warriors (answered by veterans)	(855) 838-8255
Military OneSource	(800) 342-9647
Status: Code 4, Inc. (SC4i)	(719) 822-3387 www.sc4i.org
Safe Call Now	(206) 459-3020 www.safecallnow.org
CopLine	(800) 267-5463 www.copline.org
Badge of Life	www.badgeoflife.org
Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance	www.ffbha.org
IAFF Center of Excellence	(855) 900-8437

Colorado / Local Resources

ORGANIZATION	CONTACT
Peak Military Care Network	(719) 955-0742
Pikes Peak Suicide Prevention	(719) 573-7447

National Treatment & Advocacy

ORGANIZATION	CONTACT
NAMI HelpLine	(800) 950-6264 Text NAMI to 62640
SAMHSA Treatment Locator	www.findtreatment.gov (800) 662-4357