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6.2 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Triggers and Treatment Options for Veterans

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PTSD Triggers in Veterans

There are six primary categories of factors that could initiate a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) response (Figure 6.2a).

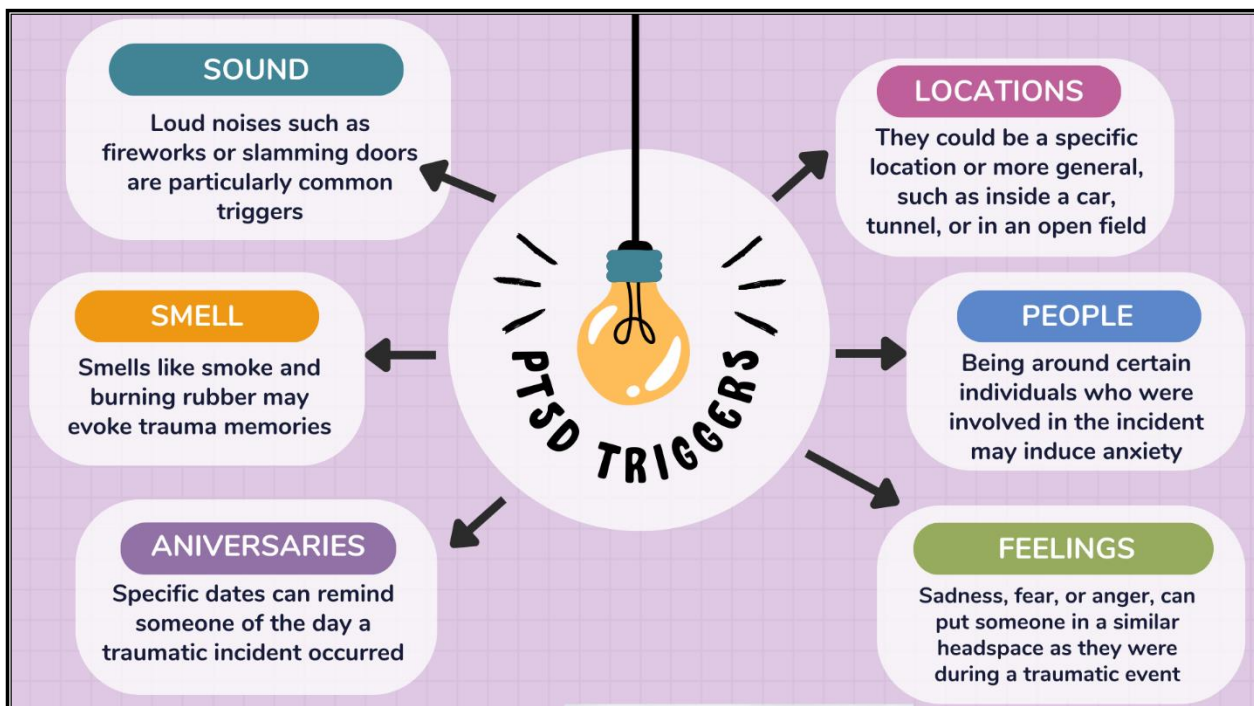


Figure 6.2a
Different Types of Triggers for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
Source
Heroes' Miles, (n.d.)

After experiencing a traumatic event, the brain tries to process it as best as possible. However, many situations or exposures can remind a Veteran with PTSD of the traumatic experience. Because of this, certain places, people, sounds or smells could “trigger” a memory of the event (Heroes' Miles, n.d.). More than thinking about the past and what they had experienced, they may experience panic attacks or anxiety and other symptoms, such as being aggressive or defensive. These events are called PTSD triggers (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023c) and include sounds, smells, anniversaries, people, locations, and feelings.

Triggers can manifest in the following ways:

Sounds: similar sounds to those that happened during the traumatic event can have a trigger effect. For Veterans with PTSD, for instance, fireworks or slamming a door are common triggers.

Smells: certain scents can remind memories of the trauma. For Veterans with PTSD, smells like smoke or burning rubber may remind them of the traumatic event.

Anniversaries: specific dates can remind Veterans with PTSD of the day a traumatic incident occurred. This realization may cause them to obsess over the event more than usual.

People: being around certain people who were involved in the event may generate anxiety.

Locations: places associated with traumatic events can trigger anxiety. For example, be inside a car, tunnel, or open field.

Feelings: specific thoughts and emotions, like sadness, fear, or anger, can put someone in a similar mindset as they were during a traumatic event. These emotions can unfold into a trauma-induced episode (Heroes' Miles, n.d.).

Will Veterans and/or Other People with PTSD Get Better?

After a trauma, people tend to think, act, and feel differently than usual. However, if these symptoms last longer than a month, the person seems upset or cannot continue their everyday activity. In that case, it has been recommended for them to talk with a medical provider about it. There are many treatment options available for people with PTSD. For some people, these treatments can eliminate the symptoms; for others, they will have fewer symptoms or feel that their symptoms are less intense.

What Treatment Options Are Available for Veterans and Other People with PTSD?

Some effective strategies for PTSD treatment include individual therapy for the Veterans and their partners, couples or family counseling, education for the entire family about the effects of trauma on survivors and their families, and support groups for both partners and Veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023b). Licensed therapists or credentialed healthcare workers provide treatment options for Veterans and their families.

Individual therapy is the treatment of psychological problems conducted on a one-to-one basis. This treatment empowers individuals to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, or career goals. The therapist will help individuals address life transitions, traumatic events, and difficult situations (American Counseling Association, n.d.).

Couples counseling focuses on addressing conflict between intimate partners. Couples counseling is short-term and focuses on specific problems. Some of the benefits may include improving communication skills, creating a safe space, building understanding and empathy in their relationship, helping resolve conflicts or disagreements, and helping couples work through life challenges such as mental health concerns, traumatic events, or financial issues (Advance Psychiatry Associates, 2021).

Family counseling is a type of therapy that concentrates on improving relationships and behaviors among family members. It can help with situations such as adjusting to a change in life (e.g., new medical condition or moving), death and grief, challenges associated with age, and relationship conflicts like parent-child or conflict among siblings (Cleveland Clinic, 2022).

Group therapy focuses on the treatment of multiple people simultaneously. It is commonly used to treat emotional trauma, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The benefit of this type of therapy is that it reduces wait times and increases accessibility. It is commonly used in rural low-income areas where clinics are usually understaffed and have many patients (Malhotra & Baker, 2022).

Support groups gather people who are or have been going through similar situations or life experiences. For instance, cancer, chronic medical conditions, addictions, bereavement, or caregiving. It gives an opportunity for people to share personal experiences, feelings, and coping strategies about the disease or treatment. They may be done face-to-face, teleconferences or online communities. The distinct characteristic is that a layperson, someone who shares or went through the same situation as the group, is the person who leads the meeting. On other occasions, it may be led by a professional facilitator (Mayo Clinic, 2023).

Treatment Styles:

There are different treatment styles available. According to the American Psychological Association, the most effective and recommended intervention for treating people with PTSD include the following therapies (American Psychological Association, 2020).

- a. **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.** This type of therapy emphasizes the relationship among thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Changing Veterans' unhelpful thinking

can lead to healthier behaviors, improve their quality of life, and give them greater satisfaction.

- b. **Cognitive Processing Therapy.** It is a type of therapy where Veterans can learn how to modify unhelpful beliefs related to the traumatic event to change those upsetting thoughts that have been affecting everyday activities since their trauma. By changing their thoughts, they can change how they feel.
- c. **Prolonged Exposure** is a type of therapy where people continue to talk about the trauma until those memories are no longer upsetting. This will help Veterans to regain control over their thoughts and feelings about the trauma. People may also visit places or do things that are safe, but they usually avoid them because they remind them of the traumatic event (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Treatment options that had received a conditional recommendation from the American Psychological Association indicate that all evidence suggested they could lead to good treatment outcomes. However, this evidence may not be as strong, the balance between treatment benefits and possible harms may be less favorable, or the intervention may be less applicable across treatment settings or subgroups of individuals with PTSD. These treatment options are:

- a. **Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)** uses eye movements (or sometimes rhythmic tapping) to change how memory is stored in the brain, allowing you to process it. This therapy aims to help Veterans work through painful memories with their body's natural functions to recover from the effects of trauma (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023c).
- b. **Narrative Exposure Therapy:** is a treatment for trauma disorders, particularly survivors of multiple and severe traumatic events such as organized violence, torture, war, rape, and childhood abuse.
- c. **Medication:** some medications that can help to treat PTSD symptoms are paroxetine (Paxil), sertraline (Zoloft), Fluoxetine (Prozac) and venlafaxine (Effexor) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023a)

[Treatment Options](https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/treatments)

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Figure 6.2b shows a list of suggestions that Veterans and other people with PTSD can follow to help them manage their PTSD.

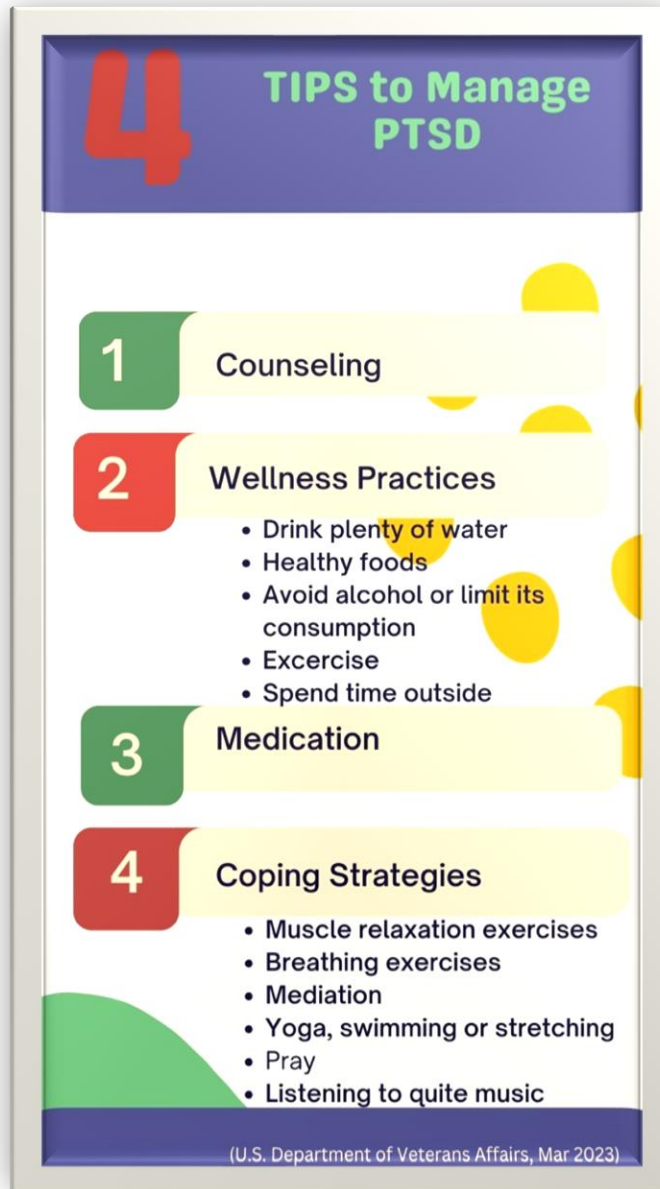


Figure 6.2b
Strategies Veterans and Other People Could Use to Help them Manage their PTSD
Source
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, March 2023.

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