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# **WRITING YOUR VA MENTAL HEALTH STRESSOR STATEMENT**

**A guide to writing a statement in support of your VA service connection claim for mental health based on a traumatic event**

## WHAT IS A STRESSOR STATEMENT?

When applying for VA Service Connection for a mental health condition like anxiety, depression, or PTSD caused by a traumatic event in service, the VA will ask you to submit VA Form 21-0781. This form helps the VA gather details about what happened in service to connect your mental health condition.

Since the form has limited space, it's a good idea to attach a written statement explaining what you experienced and how it affects you today. This guide explains how to write your stressor statement, and what information will be important to include for your service-connected mental health claim

## PREPARE TO WRITE YOUR STRESSOR STATEMENT

**Before writing your statement**, gather materials that can help you remember details about what happened. Your military records can help you confirm dates, locations, and events. For help requesting your records, check out Swords' self-help guide on [Requesting Your Military Records](#).

Other helpful materials include letters home, emails, text messages, social media posts, or a journal if you kept one. Reviewing these before you start writing may make the process easier.

Since writing about traumatic events can be emotional, consider having a counselor, therapist, or trusted friend available to support you. Avoid writing on weekends when professional help may be harder to reach.

Take breaks if needed—your statement doesn't have to be written all at once. You can always set it aside and come back to it later.

**To take notes, go to the final page of this guide.**



# WRITING YOUR STRESSOR STATEMENT

If you can, write your statement on a computer. If that's not an option, make sure your handwriting is clear and easy to read. On each page, include your name, your Social Security Number or VA Claim File Number, and the page number.

## Introduce Yourself

- Start your statement by introducing yourself to the reader.

### EXAMPLE

"I joined the [branch of service] on [date], and received an [Honorable, General, etc.] discharge on [date]. From [date] to [date], I was stationed in [location] with the [name of unit]. My job was [specify]."

## What Happened in Service?

- **Next**, describe the traumatic event(s) that cause your mental health symptoms today.
- If there are multiple events, it may be helpful to use headings to separate out each one – for example, "Event #1" and "Event #2".
- Start at the beginning, and walk the reader through what happened in chronological order.
- Tell what happened, and tell how you felt about what happened. Were you angry? Fearful? Sad? Numb?
- Tell your story in as much detail as you are comfortable providing, keeping in mind that the goal is for the reader to understand what you experienced and how it affected you.

# WRITING YOUR STRESSOR STATEMENT

(continued)

- For each event, include the date, location, and the unit you were with, if you remember. You don't need a perfect memory—if you can't recall something, it's okay to say so. **If you're unsure of the exact date, try to give an estimated time frame.**
- If it is the kind of incident that might be documented in classified military records, the VA will ask the Department of Defense to verify your stressor. To do this, the VA needs a 3-month time frame for their records search. If you don't know the exact date, provide a 3-month window on VA Form 21-0781 and in your statement.
- You might be able to estimate the date by connecting it to another event in your life. Did it happen around a birthday, anniversary, or holiday? Was the weather hot, cold, or rainy? These details can help narrow down the time of year.

## How Did the Trauma Affect You?

Often, a stressor statement tells a story about **change**. Experiencing traumatic events can lead to changes in a person's habits, behaviors, and personality.

- Explain in your statement how you and your behaviors differ now from how they were before the trauma occurred.
- **Include a brief summary of your life before you entered the military.** How well did you get along with members of your family? Did you have friends? A girlfriend or boyfriend? Did you go to school? Take part in school activities? Did you have a job? How well did you do it? Was religion important to you? If so, how? Did you play sports? Enjoy hobbies?



# WRITING YOUR STRESSOR STATEMENT

(continued)

- After the traumatic event(s), how did you change? Did your parents and friends have trouble understanding you? Did you have trouble on the job? Did you lose interest in sports? In religion? Did your partner see changes in you? Did your children? Have you noticed changes in your outlook on life.
- Tell the reader about **your present state of mind**.
  - Are you feeling hopeless?
  - Angry?
  - Discouraged?
  - Depressed?
  - Are you getting treatment for mental health?
  - Do you intend to remain in treatment? Why (or why not)?
  - Are you just living from day to day or can you see the outlines of your future?
  - How does your mental health condition impact your family, relationships, and ability to work?
  - Do you struggle with daily tasks, like keeping your home clean, maintaining hygiene, getting places on time, and going grocery shopping
  - Do you experience suicidal thoughts or thoughts of hurting yourself?
  - Do you have trouble sleeping or experience nightmares?
  - Is your thought process impacted – meaning, do you feel mostly negative and sad, or detached and numb?
- We've included a list of common trauma response symptoms at the end of this guide. If it's helpful, take a look at the list and include any that apply to your life. Explain to the reader what that symptom looks like in your day-to-day life, how it impacts your work, relationships, social life, and how you take care of yourself.

## WRITING YOUR STRESSOR STATEMENT

(continued)

- When you describe your symptoms, provide specific examples from your real life. This helps the reader to better understand the impact your symptoms have on you in your daily life.

### EXAMPLE

For “being easily startled”, you could describe: “Someone set off fireworks by my house last week after the championship game, and I jumped out of my chair. It took over an hour for me to calm down.” Adding these sorts of details tells a more accurate account of what you experience.

- If you have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, you may be reluctant to discuss it in your statement, but folks at the VA understand that it's common to use substances to deal with debilitating mental health symptoms. We encourage you to be candid with the VA. When did you begin to use drugs or alcohol? Did your use begin or increase after you experienced the stressful events that you described earlier in your statement? Have you been in treatment? If so, where? If you're still using drugs or alcohol, how often do you use them? Do your best to explain why you use them.

**All of these are normal reactions to traumatic events, and sharing them with the VA will help provide an accurate understanding of your mental health symptoms today.**

# WRITING YOUR STRESSOR STATEMENT

(continued)

- End your statement with this declaration:
  - ***I certify under penalty of perjury that the foregoing statement is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.***
- Add your signature and the date. Keep a copy of this statement for your records.
- You will submit this statement as an attachment to **VA Form 21-0781** – Statement in Support of Claimed Mental Health Disorder(s) Due to an In-Service Traumatic Event(s). This can be submitted with your VA claim application or shortly after filing your claim.

**No two stressor statements are alike.** There's no set length, and no mandatory format.

We've attempted to give you an outline for a typical statement, but you may need to alter or even ignore this outline to get across to the reader what happened to you in the military and how it has affected you. **Don't hesitate to do what you need to tell your story.**

# COMMON SYMPTOMS OF PTSD

(continued)

Below is a list of common PTSD symptoms from the National Institute of Health. This list can help you recognize experiences, behaviors, or feelings you may have due to the traumatic event(s) in service.

Review the list and include in your statement any symptoms you experience.

Even if you don't have PTSD but have another mental health condition related to your trauma, this list may still help you identify symptoms to mention in your statement.

## Re-experiencing symptoms

- Flashbacks—reliving the traumatic event, including physical symptoms, such as a racing heart or sweating
- Recurring memories or dreams related to the event
- Distressing thoughts
- Physical signs of stress

Thoughts and feelings can trigger these symptoms, as can words, objects, or situations that are reminders of the event.

## Avoidance symptoms

- Staying away from places, events, or objects that are reminders of the experience
- Avoiding thoughts or feelings related to the traumatic event

Avoidance symptoms may cause people to change their routines.

### EXAMPLE

**For example,** some people may avoid driving or riding in a car after a serious car accident.



# COMMON SYMPTOMS OF PTSD

(continued)

## Arousal and reactivity symptoms

- Being easily startled
- Feeling tense, on guard, or on edge
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Feeling irritable and having angry or aggressive outbursts
- Engaging in risky, reckless, or destructive behavior

Arousal symptoms are often constant. They can lead to feelings of stress and anger and may interfere with parts of daily life, such as sleeping, eating, or concentrating.

## Cognition and mood symptoms

- Trouble remembering key features of the traumatic event
- Negative thoughts about oneself or the world
- Exaggerated feelings of blame directed toward oneself or others
- Ongoing negative emotions, such as fear, anger, guilt, or shame
- Loss of interest in previous activities
- Feelings of social isolation
- Difficulty feeling positive emotions, such as happiness or satisfaction

Cognition and mood symptoms can begin or worsen after the traumatic event. They can lead people to feel detached from friends or family members.

**National Institute of Mental Health.** (2023). Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Retrieved February 10, 2025, from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>.

## NOTES

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### **Disclaimer**

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