

the Post-Traumatic Gazette

A newsletter providing a healing perspective for all trauma survivors, their families, friends and therapists

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Dear Veteran,

I'm writing to give you encouragement about the struggle to get a VA rating for PTSD. I suggest writing out the claim in your own handwriting and taking it with you to the interview and giving it to the examiner. Tell him or her to attach to your claim. Keep a xerox copy. Do this every time you go for an interview and every time you appeal, which you will probably have to do because if you have PTSD they will try to give you the lowest rating they can get away with. You need to be persistent and to supply them with concrete (written) evidence for your claim. You will also need to do this every two years when they review your case.

What you have to have: A traumatic stressor: a-threat of death or bodily injury to yourself (ie. combat, friendly fire, being mortared or rocketed, wounded, captured, driving a truck on a mined road, flying in a helicopter that was shot at, jumping out of a helicopter into a hot LZ. I'm sure you have more than one. list them all); b-threat of death or bodily injury to someone you are close to (if you had a buddy who was wounded or lost squad members, family member) c-sudden loss of home or community (squad wiped out, hooch or hospital mortared, evacuated due to wounds, etc.) or d-seeing anyone who has recently been killed or injured (being a medic or nurse on a trauma ward, body bagging, seeing someone you didn't know killed, seeing kids, women or other Americans or civilians who had been killed, or wounded, etc.). You probably have a large number of these. They want you to have felt fear, horror or helplessness at the time, so say that you did. You can probably remember how you felt the fear, horror or helplessness the first time or so that you saw death and how later you got numb to it because that numbness is a symptom of PTSD. Write out at least one of these stressors (or as many as you remember if you can) and write that you felt one or more of those emotions. It doesn't have to be detailed. the bald facts will do.

Then you have to have one reexperiencing symptom, but include all that you have: these include nightmares, not being able to stop thinking about the war, getting really upset at things that remind you of the war including anniversaries, as well as flashbacks where you might feel like you're back there for a moment . Also if the sound of a Huey going over gets your adrenaline going (or any other thing that reminds you of your particular war if it wasn't Vietnam) causes physiological arousal, that's a physiological reexperiencing symptom which you should list.

Next you need three numbing symptoms. They are: a- efforts to avoid thought or feelings associated with the trauma (If you try not to think about the war or if you try not to feel love because you lost a beloved buddy, try never to feel guilt because you think you fucked up over there, try never to be happy because you were ambushed when you were feeling fine, those are all examples. So is trying never to get angry because you're afraid of what you might do. So is staying drunk or drugged, but I would not bring that up unless they try to say that's your problem); b-efforts to avoid activities or situations associated with the trauma (never watch war movies, don't hunt, don't go to veterans day parades or associate with other vets, can't stand authority figures because of the REMF's or the lifers, etc); c-inability to recall important aspects of the trauma (particular battles or periods of time that you can't remember or whether those guys were killed or just wounded are all symptoms of PTSD. Use it as such); d-markedly diminished interest in significant activities (what did you used to do that you don't since your PTSD came on? Lots of guys with PTSD stay home watching TV which is this symptom.

Others still get out but they've given up hunting, or going places where there are crowds or whatever). e-feeling of detachment or estrangement from others (No one can understand what it's like. I'm on the outside looking in at all these people who haven't a clue. I don't care about things or people the way I used to). f- restricted range of affect (feelings) for example unable to have loving feelings (unable to cry when parent dies or kid dies, told you have no feelings, can't feel love for wife, etc). g- sense of a foreshortened future: does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a long life (may be still driving drunk or stoned, still jumping out of airplanes or taking other risks, afraid to commit to anyone or anything etc.). This all has to be written out too. Well it doesn't have to be—I'm not trying to boss you around here— but examples of three of them will establish your case and the more concrete examples the better to buttress your case.

The last set of symptoms, you need two of these, are "symptoms of increased arousal not present before the trauma" which include a-difficulty falling or staying asleep, b-irritability or outbursts of anger, c-difficulty concentrating (Read a page and can't remember it? Forget what your wife just told you or constantly hear "I told you that yesterday!" Feel dumb because you don't follow a lot of conversations, etc, or just can't focus because part of you is scanning for danger all the time?), d-hypervigilance (always looking for danger, worrying about people getting hurt, still looking for tripwires and sitting with your back to the wall, avoiding crowds, etc), e-exaggerated startle response (hit the dirt at the sound of a backfire, can't be touched when asleep, etc).

You have to have had the symptoms for a month or more. Mention how they have affected your ability to get and retain employment, your social and your intimate relationships.

Beyond taking a description of your traumatic experiences in your war and your current symptoms to the interview, I also suggest taping the interview. Here in Gainesville, FL, the only time the VA Compensation examiner asks you about your experiences in the war or your symptoms is when you are recording the interview. Otherwise he doesn't ask and so he doesn't report and you don't get service connected. Remember they need this information spelled out to service connect you.

If you were given another psychiatric diagnosis before 1980 (or even later in most VA's) you may need to point out to the examiner that during that period, there was no such diagnosis as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder available. The examiner may not be aware of this fact.

The compensation and pension (C&P) examiner is required to ask for a social history, stressor history, past and present symptoms both subjective and objective. This takes time. If the correct procedure wasn't followed (like it was a short exam or the examiner didn't ask you specific questions about your social history, stressor history, past and present symptoms both subjective and objective), you can request another exam because that exam was not adequate for compensation purposes. You don't have to wait for them to make a decision and get back to you.

I hope this helps. Best of luck.
Thanks and Welcome Home!

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