



Post-Traumatic Stress

eLibrary
Reference
Materials

1.1 Introduction	<u>3</u>
1.1.1 Unwanted Memories	<u>3</u>
1.1.2 Avoidance Reactions	<u>3</u>
1.1.3 High Physical Tension or Arousal	<u>3</u>
1.1.4 The “Vicious Cycle” of Stress Reactions	<u>4</u>
1.2 Understanding Trauma Memories	<u>4</u>
1.2.1 What are Trauma Triggers?	<u>5</u>
1.2.2 Common Deployment Triggers	<u>5</u>
1.2.3 How to Identify Personal Trauma Triggers	<u>7</u>
1.3 Tools for Managing Stress Reactions	<u>8</u>
1.3.1 The RID Tool	<u>8</u>
1.3.2 Staying Present in the Situation	<u>10</u>
1.3.3. The PLAN Tool	<u>11</u>
1.3.4 Do’s and Don’ts of Coping with Trauma Triggers	<u>12</u>
1.4 Getting Additional Support for Trauma Memories	<u>13</u>



1.1 INTRODUCTION

There are three main types of combat or post-traumatic stress reactions:

- Unwanted memories
- Avoidance reactions
- High physical tension or arousal



1.1.1 Unwanted Memories

Service Members who have been through stressful events often have repeated, disturbing memories of those events. This is called “re-experiencing.” When your mind tries to make sense of what happened, you may experience upsetting thoughts or dreams. Certain people, places, sounds, or smells can remind you of things that happened while deployed. These reminders are called “triggers.”

1.1.2 Avoidance Reactions

It’s natural to do everything possible to avoid reminders of a past trauma. This second set of reactions is called “avoidance reactions.” When you avoid reminders of your deployment, you might:

- Stay away from certain people, places, or conversation topics
- Avoid watching or reading the news
- Try not to think about the war, or talk to people about it
- Avoid your feelings and become emotionally numb or distant

Avoidance can seem like a good strategy in the short-term, but it becomes a problem over time. If you avoid trauma reminders, you cannot learn that things are different now. In the meantime, your world becomes smaller and smaller.

1.1.3 High Physical Tension or Arousal

The third type of stress reaction is maintaining a high level of physical tension and alertness all the time, which is sometimes called a “hyper-arousal reaction.” *When a serious life threat occurs, humans are hard-wired to be “on-guard” until the threat is over.* You may have trouble falling or staying asleep, feel irritable or angry, have trouble concentrating, or feel like you are always on guard.

1.1.3 High Physical Tension or Arousal (continued)

If the threat is prolonged, like during deployment, it can be hard for Service Members to return to a calm state when they return home. It is possible to practice some simple tools to help your body return to a normal, less tense state.

1.1.4 The “Vicious Cycle” of Stress Reactions

Remember, it is natural for Service Members to experience unwanted memories of a trauma, avoid trauma reminders, and maintain a high level of alertness. However, if you never confront these reactions, you could experience a “vicious cycle” of depression or anxiety; relationship problems; struggles at work; alcohol or substance abuse; and a lower quality of life.

Keep in mind that the reactions you are experiencing do not mean that you are weak, losing control, or going crazy.

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Do the reactions described in this section sound like ones that you have been experiencing?
- Can you think of specific examples when you experienced an unwanted memory, avoided a trauma reminder, or felt hyper-alert?
- How have these stress reactions interfered with your life?

1.2 UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA MEMORIES

After experiencing a traumatic event in theater, it's normal to have repeated thoughts about what happened. Traumatic events are so shocking and different that they don't fit well with what you already know about the world. In order to make sense of what happened, your mind keeps bringing the trauma memory back, replaying it over again when you're awake or dreaming. Basically, your mind is trying to digest what happened, fit it in to what you already know, and regain some sense of control. Unfortunately, you may have very little control over upsetting thoughts about the trauma.



Remember that these responses don't mean that you're going crazy. That being said, if your reactions last for more than a few months and are starting to affect your life, or if at any point you start feeling like taking risks with your life,

**It is natural to
experience unwanted
memories of a trauma**

you should seek face-to-face assistance. See the Staying Healthy Where You Live section of this website to learn what you can expect if you go for counseling and how to find local resources.

1.2.1 What are Trauma Triggers?

Although it may seem that unwanted thoughts or memories are occurring “out of the blue,” they are actually being triggered by some reminder. Most service members who have experienced a traumatic event are reminded of it in their day-to-day life.

Reminders of triggers can include:

- Sights
- Sounds
- Smells
- Body Sensations
- Internal Experiences (thoughts, memories or feelings)

Personal reminders of a trauma can easily set off upsetting emotions including:

- Fear
- Anger
- Sadness
- Guilt

There may also be intense physical reactions, such as:

- Pounding Heart
- Shortness of Breath
- Sweating

Whatever was present at the time the trauma was happening may become connected in your mind with the trauma itself. For example, if you were ambushed while driving under a bridge, you may find yourself becoming very upset whenever you approach a highway overpass. Your mind now associates bridges with danger.

This powerful type of learning helped you survive while you were deployed. You quickly learned the signs that you were in a dangerous situation, which helped you react more quickly. But many of the things that signaled danger in the war zone are harmless back in the civilian world. For example, bridges and overpasses are not typically dangerous in the United States.

Thinking you are constantly under attack stresses your body and creates strong emotions. If you feel like you are always in danger, you may want to go out less, or avoid certain places or people. It is very important for you to “disconnect” these old reminders from the danger circuits of your brain. You can do this by re-training yourself to recognize when you are safe – even if physical, mental, and emotional reactions tell you that you’re in danger.

1.2.2 Common Deployment Triggers

Every individual who experiences a traumatic event has unique triggers. Input from your five senses, along with the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that you had during the original trauma, can trigger negative reactions long after your deployment.



1.2.2 Common Deployment Triggers (continued)

Here is a list of common triggers that Service Members may experience after deployment. Not all of the items on the list will apply to you.

Places

Similar to those in which the trauma occurred

- Crowded public places
- Hospitals

Conflict

With others

- An argument with a family member or friend

People

Who look similar to your attackers

- Trauma Anniversaries
- Time of day, month, or day of the year when the trauma occurred

Circumstances

Similar to those in which the trauma occurred

- Driving through an intersection
- Hearing a child crying

Situations

Where you feel you have little or no control

- Being told what to do by a boss or family member

Sights, Smells, Sounds

From the time of the trauma

- Open air food markets
- Fireworks
- People speaking in Arabic

Conversations

About your trauma or the traumas of others

- Emotional and physical sensations that remind you of the deployment
- Emotional sensations
- Sadness, feeling helpless
- Physical sensations
- Bright light in your eyes
- Itching that reminds you of sand fleas

Trauma Triggers

are often closely related to the type of trauma experienced

HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF TRIGGERS THAT MIGHT ARISE FROM SPECIFIC WAR ZONE TRAUMAS

Firefights

- Loud Noises
- Being Yelled at
- Seeing a War Movie
- Watching news of conflicts
- The flag
- Certain smells (diesel fuel, barbecue, sulfur)

Civilian Suffering

- Seeing damaged houses
- Seeing news coverage of injured people
- Hearing someone scream or cry

Accidents

- Screeching brakes
- Hearing sirens
- Smelling burnt rubber
- Headlights coming at you

Sexual Assaults

- Someone who resembles your attacker
- A smell (cologne, body odor, cigarette smoke) that reminds you of your attacker
- An area similar to that where the assault occurred, etc.

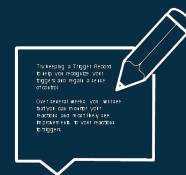
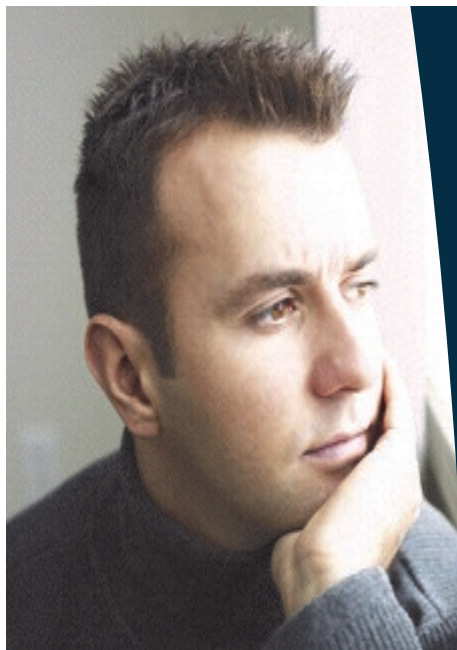
1.2.3 How to Identify Personal Trauma Triggers

Your brain makes connections between traumatic events and danger, and does so in ways that are sometimes confusing or hard to figure out.

For example, if your trauma occurred late at night, you might feel extremely upset any time you are suddenly awakened. Even though the trauma had very little to do with the time of the day, your brain made the connection and so your body reacts as if it is in danger. Not knowing the cause of your reaction can be uncomfortable and frustrating. One of the first steps is to identify your unique triggers so that you can lessen their impact.

If you know your triggers, you can better recognize when you are being triggered. This can help you react more effectively and calmly. Over time you can break the connection in your brain between the trigger and the unpleasant reactions. The more you learn about your personal triggers, the more you'll feel in control of how you respond to them. The ultimate goal is for **you** to control your life, not the triggers.

Some trauma triggers are easy to identify because they obviously remind you of your traumatic deployment experiences. Other triggers might not be so easy to recognize. Once you begin to discover what situations, objects, people or events are acting as trauma triggers, you will have some insight into what is causing your negative reactions — this is the first step to changing those reactions. Importantly, you should ask yourself whether the thoughts and feelings you're having are based in the past or the present. When you begin slowing down the process in this way, you will begin to reduce the power that triggers have over you.



A TRIGGER RECORD

A great way to identify triggers (especially the ones that are less obvious and harder to catch) is to keep a Trigger Record. Keeping a Trigger Record has two major benefits — It will help you to Recognize Your Triggers, and to Monitor your Improved Reactions to Triggers.



RECOGNIZING YOUR TRIGGERS

Will help you regain a sense of control. Learning what your triggers are also prepares you for future situations when you are confronted again by a trigger.



KEEPING THE TRIGGER RECORD

For several weeks will help you monitor your improved reactions to triggers over time as you use the strategies found here.

1.2.3 How to Identify Personal Trauma Triggers (continued)

Try keeping a Trigger Record for the next seven days. You can print out a copy of a Trigger Record [here](#). Or you can make a personalized Trigger Record by writing down the following observations whenever you think you have experienced a trauma trigger:

- The date and time
- A description of the trigger
- The emotions you were feeling
- Your body's reactions (sweating, nausea, etc)
- The thoughts you were having and what you were telling yourself
- Ways the trigger situation differed from the original traumatic event
- The amount of difficulty you had managing the trigger (on a scale from 1 to 10)

Use the Trigger Record *as soon as possible* each time you are triggered. It is important that you recognize what triggered you. It is also important to see how the trigger affected your emotions, physical reactions, and behaviors. You will begin to see how trauma triggers are different from the original traumatic experience. If you have strong feelings or sensations, you can start from there and work backwards to determine the trigger that set you off.



1.3 TOOLS FOR MANAGING STRESS REACTIONS

Since most service members who have experienced traumatic events triggered at least once in a while, it's important to practice good coping skills. Whether you are triggered by something you know always upsets you or by something unexpected, there are tools you can use to reduce the emotional and physical impact.

1.3.1 The RID Tool

The RID Tool is a three-step skill you can use when triggered to help “RID” yourself of reactions to triggers:

STEP 1:
Relax

STEP 2:
Identify the Trigger

STEP 3:
Decide Your Response

Using this Tool is Not Always Easy—

It requires practice! You may have to talk yourself through your reaction to a trigger the first few times. But with time and practice, the RID Tool can help you handle triggers more effectively.

STEP 1: Relax

TRIGGERS ARE COMMON FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN DEPLOYED

Here are a few things to help you relax when you have been triggered:

- Take a few deep breaths or use other brief relaxation exercises
- Tell yourself something calming or reassuring, like “I’m not in danger now,” or “the trauma is not happening again”
- Take a moment to calm down. Get a drink of water or walk to the restroom and splash cool water on your face.

STEP 2: Identify the Trigger

THE TRIGGER IS DIFFERENT FROM YOUR TRAUMA.

Once you are relaxed, try identifying what factors may have caused a trigger by asking yourself:

- “What is triggering me?”
- “What unsettled me?”
- “Did I accidentally walk into one of my known triggers?”
- “What is it about *this* situation that is like my deployment?”

It is important to recognize that the current trigger is different from your trauma. This helps you to see that you are not in danger and can also help you regain a sense of control or safety.

FOR EXAMPLE:

“I was triggered by this van because the one that I saw explode was also white. But the van that exploded was smaller and foreign made. The explosion happened in a war zone, while this is just a U.S. highway.”

Sometimes it’s hard to pinpoint your trigger. If you can’t identify it, don’t worry. Work on relaxing and calming yourself.

STEP 3: Decide Your Response

CHOOSE YOUR RESPONSE TO THE TRIGGER,
INSTEAD OF LETTING THE TRIGGER CONTROL YOU.

Deciding how to respond to a situation can help you feel more in control. Try these suggestions:

- Go back to what you were doing before the trigger
- Start a conversation with someone around you
- Excuse yourself from situations in which you feel angry
- Seek support from someone you trust
- Focus on sights and sounds around you
- Find a positive distraction that will hold your attention - like going for a walk

1.3.2 Staying Present in the Situation

If your trigger makes you feel fearful or anxious, you may want to leave the situation as soon as possible. But it is important to stay in the situation and face your fear. If you let yourself feel painful emotions without backing away, the power of the trigger will weaken over time.

Remember, don't leave the situation until you feel the trigger is less powerful than when you first confronted it. If you run away from your trigger by immediately leaving the situation, you won't learn the trigger is not dangerous. If you continue to avoid your triggers, they may become more difficult to confront and overcome. But if you face your triggers, they will gradually weaken and you feel less distress.

TALKING YOURSELF THROUGH A SITUATION

- I'm okay and safe in this situation
- My trauma happened in the past
- My thoughts and feelings are uncomfortable, but they can't harm me
- These feelings won't last forever
- These feelings will gradually become less powerful
- If I can tolerate these feelings for one minute, I can tolerate them for one *more* minute

NOTE:

If the trigger makes you angry and you believe staying in the situation may cause you to act in a way you'll regret, remove yourself from the situation and cool off. Try some relaxation tools (e.g., Time Out or a Cool Down), or find someone you trust and talk things out. When you have cooled down, you can return to the situation if you choose. If you choose to stay in the situation remember to stay calm, communicate effectively, and be flexible.

WHAT TO DO AFTER A TRIGGER EVENT IS OVER

- Avoid harsh judgments or criticisms of the way you handled the trigger.
- Treat yourself like a loved one or a close friend going through the same thing.
- See the trigger as a learning experience, regardless of outcome.
- Complete your TRIGGER RECORD. Review what went well and where to improve.
- Talk about the trigger event with a close friend or loved one.
- Remind yourself that, with time and practice, triggers get easier to handle.
- Prevent your triggers from limiting your freedom or keeping you from activities that make your life fulfilling or meaningful.
- Reward yourself for successfully managing your triggers.



1.3.3 The PLAN Tool

The PLAN Tool Workshop on *afterdeployment.org* will guide you through the use of the PLAN Tool or, here's a simple strategy to PLAN for encountering triggers or other stressful situations:

- **P**repare for the situation
- **L**et go of your worry
- **A**ccept that you will experience distress and that you can manage your reaction
- **N**ote all of your coping skills and helpful resources

STEP 1: Prepare for the situation.

Think about the upcoming situation and how to handle it. If possible, talk about it with someone whose judgment you respect and ask yourself:

- Can I relax before the situation?
- Would it help to take along a friend who knows what I might experience?
- Can I change the situation, or make a plan to make it easier to deal with?
- What exactly sets me off in *this* situation?

STEP 2: Let go of your worry.

It's good to know beforehand when you will face a trigger. Worrying how you will react to a situation can be worse than the situation itself. To let go of your worry:

- Ask yourself, "What exactly is scaring me?"
- Ask yourself, "Are my fears reasonable."
- Rehearse ways to successfully manage the situation in your mind
- Tell yourself, "I've prepared for the situation and that's the best I can do."
- If you start to worry, focus on a positive activity.

STEP 3: Accept that you will experience distress and that you can manage your reaction.

Even normal stress can become more difficult to manage after a trauma. Accepting that you will experience negative feelings can help you because:

- It means you have realistic expectations about your reactions. Accepting *does not* mean feeling good about being upset.
- It can help you to cope with situations better
- You won't allow negative feelings to control your life

STEP 4: Note all of your coping skills and helpful resources.

Think of all the skills you have learned for managing stressful situations. Tell yourself: "During stressful situations, I can..."

- Have a friend or loved one with me
- Practice relaxation exercises
- Say positive things to myself
- Use positive strategies that worked on my retriggerers in the past



1.3.4 Do's and Don'ts of Coping with Trauma Triggers

To strengthen your coping skills, you should recognize behaviors and thoughts that may be interfering with coping. Review the following Do's and Don'ts.

LIST OF DO'S:

Relax: Listen to music, sit in nature, say a prayer, take a hot bath, get a massage, or do whatever relaxes you. Or use the relaxation exercises found in the LIFE STRESS Workshop.

Exercise: Maintain a daily exercise routine. Regular exercise helps fight depression and reduces physical tension. Or use the HEALTH & WELLNESS Workshop.

Stay Connected: Resist the urge to be alone. Make plans, commit, and follow through with getting together with family and friends — they provide support and comfort you need to recover.

Mind Your Habits: Limit harmful behaviors, like isolating socially, drinking excessively, using drugs, driving fast, overeating or hurting yourself to avoid emotional pain.

Create a Routine: Develop and maintain a routine for eating, sleeping, and exercising. Create a schedule that keeps you active and involved in things you value. A routine can carry you through the tough periods, helping you manage times of high stress.

Take a Break From Feeling Bad: Limit the amount of time you allow yourself to feel bad. If you start to worry, put it off until a time you've scheduled just for that purpose.

Be a Friend to Yourself: Go easy on yourself. Imagine how you would treat a friend in a similar experience. Take time to grieve your losses. Remind yourself that things will get better.

Have Some Fun, Allow Yourself to Feel Good:

Take care of yourself by finding pleasant and healthy activities. Often trauma survivors don't think they are allowed to feel good or heal. You may feel guilty, embarrassed or ashamed but positive emotions help you overcome the challenges of recovery.

LIST OF DON'TS:

Excessive Avoidance: Because trauma memories tend to cause stress, you may try not to think about them. Constantly avoiding trauma memories disrupts the natural recovery process

Dwelling on Memories: Spending too much time going over the event in your mind and wishing things turned out differently or second guessing yourself can be very unproductive.

Alcohol and Drug Use: Engaging in heavy drinking and drug use lengthens the natural recovery process and can lead to substance abuse. If alcohol or drug use is causing problems in your life, seek counseling by using the "Locate" tab on this website for assistance locating a provider near you. You are also encouraged to participate in the ALCOHOL AND DRUGS Workshop.

Excessive Anger: Property destruction and violence against others are clear signs your anger is out of control and it's time to speak with a professional. Another resource is the ANGER Workshop.

Emotional Numbing: A common reaction to traumatic stress is to automatically turn down the intensity of feelings and dull your negative *and* positive emotions. As you confront triggers and experience uncomfortable emotions, you may begin to notice the return of positive emotions as well.

Excessive Risk-Taking: Engaging in dangerous behavior such as gambling, risky sex, or driving fast may distract momentarily, but they disrupt the natural recovery process.

Self-Harm

If you've hurt yourself or thought about suicide, there are resources to help you. Speak to a live counselor by clicking the DCoE Outreach Center Call or Chat Tabs. Or, for immediate help, call 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)



1.4 GETTING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR TRAUMA MEMORIES

To learn more about managing trauma memories, you are encouraged to complete the Post-Traumatic Stress Workshops. You'll learn more about identifying and coping with your triggers.

If you are having intense and painful memories and reactions, you may benefit from getting help. Our Staying Healthy Where You Live section contains detailed, accurate information on face-to-face care, plus information on resources in your area. You may also want a primary care doctor or psychiatrist who can prescribe medication to help you until you can manage on your own.