

# PTSD Self-Help Guide

## SECTION 1: WHAT IS IT

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

If you experience unwanted memories of distressing experiences and it feels like past events are happening again, you might have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



**Do you:**

- Have unwanted memories of past events pop into your head?
- Experience upsetting dreams about difficult situations you've been through?
- Stay away from things that remind you of past events?
- Feel on edge and like you can't relax?

Finding your way to this page demonstrates a desire and motivation to improve your mood and take good care of your mental fitness. By following the strategies and tips on this page you are taking an important first step towards a more energised you. The exercises we recommend are helpful for both low mood and depression.

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## What do we mean by traumatic?

Trauma means 'injury'. When mental health professionals talk about trauma, they mean something very specific, that is:

**An event that was life-threatening or threatened the safety of yourself or others.**



Trauma can be something that happened directly to you, something you witnessed happening to somebody else or something you heard about that happened to a close friend or family member.

Some examples might include:

- Seeing a friend or colleague injured
- Coming under enemy fire
- Witnessing the loss of comrades
- Seeing the aftermath of war
- Helping injured civilians including children
- Being bullied or assaulted by military colleagues

You may have experienced trauma that isn't on the list. You may find it difficult to pinpoint a particular trauma that started your difficulties. For some people, difficulties arise due to repeated trauma over time.

**To struggle after a trauma is a normal part of recovery. For some, however, the difficulties will go on to develop into PTSD.**

## How do we develop PTSD?

You may be thinking 'shouldn't my military training have prepared me to deal with trauma?'

Unfortunately, despite the best possible training, traumatic experiences of this kind can still have profound and lasting effects. Military training is vital in preparing you to survive in dangerous situations by responding automatically and strategically. However, it does not necessarily prepare you to manage the aftereffects (how the trauma might have left you feeling).

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PTSD develops as a result of the way in which memories of a traumatic event are stored in the brain.

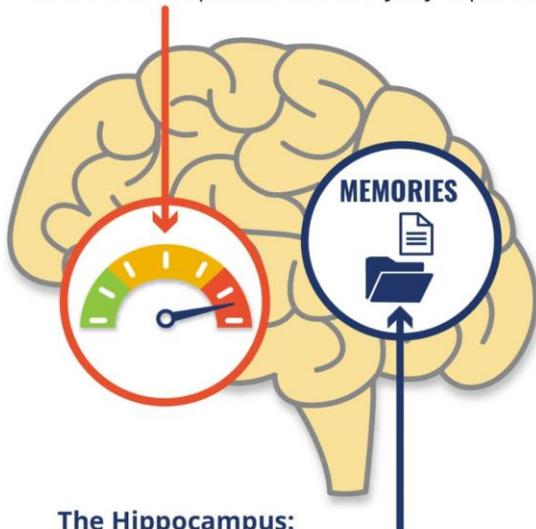
## Learn more about PTSD and the brain

As you explore the brain before and during trauma, begin with the Amygdala before reading about the Hippocampus.

### The 'Everyday' Brain

#### The Amygdala:

The brain's alarm system (the amygdala) is activated when we are faced with a potential threat (such as an unexpected loud bang). Providing nothing too distressing occurs, it will work alongside other areas of the brain to process our everyday experiences



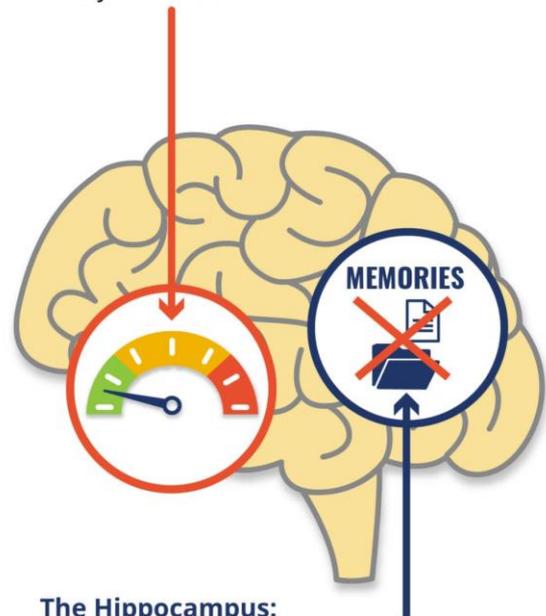
#### The Hippocampus:

Memories are processed in the brain and stored in the normal way through the hippocampus

### The Brain During Trauma

#### The Amygdala:

The threat level is so high that the amygdala is fully activated and overwhelms the brain



#### The Hippocampus:

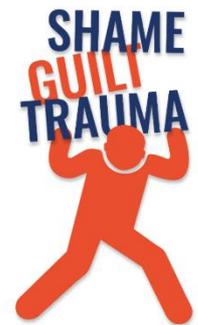
The hippocampus shuts down and can't store memories in the normal way

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## WHY MIGHT VETERANS STRUGGLE WITH PTSD?

**PTSD often occurs alongside other difficulties.**

The symptoms of PTSD can arise following exposure to a single trauma or multiple traumas. Being in the military increases the likelihood that you will have experienced a traumatic event or faced multiple traumas. Some of the things you've seen or had to do might also have breached your ethical code, leaving you with feelings of guilt and shame.



Military culture also means you're less likely to talk about the impact of trauma and its emotional impact. Whilst the event may be a distant memory, for some the impact can remain for months, or even years after leaving the forces.

Many veterans avoid certain reminders of their trauma to prevent unwanted trauma memories. These are just a few examples of some of the ways veterans might try to control the symptoms of PTSD:

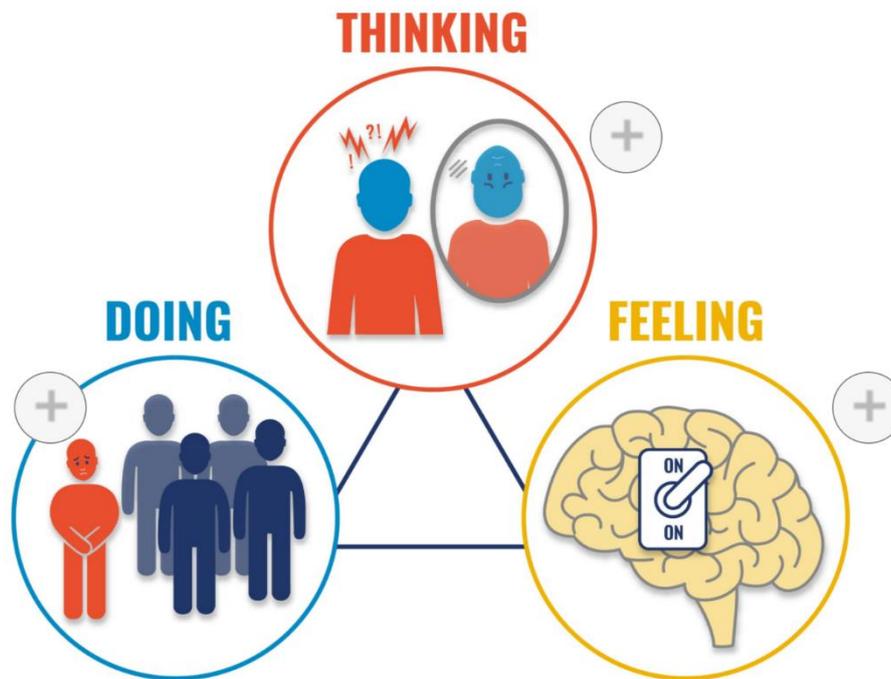
- Withdrawing from military friends
- Hiding your medals away out of sight
- Leaving the room at certain points in a film or TV programme
- Only going out when it's quiet
- 'Self-medicating' with alcohol or drugs to block out difficult feelings

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## SECTION 2: HOW DOES PTSD AFFECT YOU?

It will take ~5 minutes to work through Section Two

### How does PTSD affect you?



### The Thinking Part

PTSD can change how you think. You might often think that something really bad is about to happen. Experiencing something traumatic can also deeply change our beliefs about ourselves, others and the world. Here are some ways your thinking might change:

- Unwanted memories of past trauma (including nightmares)
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Struggling to make decisions
- Memory problems
- Thinking about past trauma for long periods of time (it might feel like you can't stop or like you need answers)
- Having a very negative view of yourself, others or the world

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## The Feeling Part

### How your body feels

PTSD can change how you feel. It might feel like you're on standby, ready for action, and unable to switch off. You might be suddenly overwhelmed by waves of emotion like fear, anger or sadness. Here are some examples of how your body might feel:

- Feeling on edge and alert
- Finding it hard to relax
- Fatigue – being tired all the time
- Digestion problems/stomach aches
- Muscle tension
- Shakiness
- Increased heart rate
- Rapid breathing
- Feeling hot and sweaty

Before moving on, take a moment to note how you viewed yourself, others and the world prior to traumatic events. Is this the same or different to how you see things now? Did the event or events change your beliefs or confirm them to be true?

## The Doing Part

PTSD can affect the things you do (and don't do). You might start avoiding things that remind you of the trauma.

- You might avoid certain places or situations (such as crowded, noisy places)
- You might spend more time alone
- You might plan routes and exits before you go somewhere
- You might scan the environment for potential danger
- You might need to escape or get away from situations more often

Before moving on, take a moment to note how you might have learned to cope with difficult memories. Do you recognise any of the above? Can you identify the things that remind you of traumatic military experiences?

If you're reading this thinking 'that's me' you're not alone and help is available.

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## SECTION 3: WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT PTSD?

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Three

You will find below some helpful strategies to get you started. The most important thing is to give each one of these a try and remain open to testing new things out.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- What can you do about PTSD? - The doing part
- Listen to your body - What your body needs
- Get your thinking straight - The thinking part

To begin, read the rest of this section 'What can you do about PTSD' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Four: Get your thinking straight.

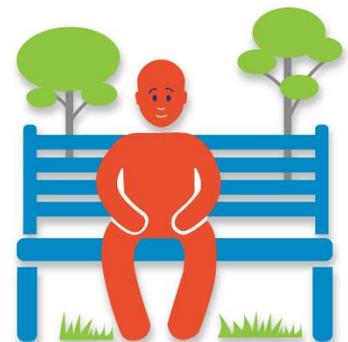
### Grounding

#### What is grounding?

Grounding techniques are simple strategies that help to keep you in the present moment and connected with your surroundings when your brain is trying to pull you back into past trauma.

These tools can be helpful in any situation of strong emotion (e.g. fear, panic, rage) and are particularly helpful for managing flashbacks.

The idea behind grounding is to remind yourself that you are safe and to bring you back into the here-and-now. Many grounding techniques involve using your mind, body and behaviour to hook your attention and interrupt the trauma memory.



### Do what matters

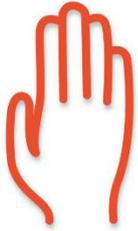
Notice your surroundings with the 5-4-3-2-1 technique.

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### What are 5 things you can see?

Tune into your surroundings and try to notice the small details such as patterns, shapes, texture and colours



### What are 4 things you can feel or touch?

This could be the feeling of your clothes, the temperature, the feeling of your feet on the ground. You could pick up nearby objects and pay attention to how they feel. Consider carrying a grounding object with you like beads, a stone or a stress ball.



### What are 3 things you can hear?

Focus on the subtle sounds we often don't notice, such as the clock ticking, the wind outside or distant traffic.



### What are 2 things you can smell?

Pay attention to any smells in the air or look around for something with a smell, like a flower, food or perfume. Consider carrying a strong smell with you on a tissue or your sleeve.



### What is 1 thing you can taste?

It can be handy to carry some gum, strong mints or sweets with you for this one.

## Get Moving

The 54321 technique is all about using your external senses for grounding. However, using our internal senses through movement can also be used for grounding and bring you back to the present. Here are some ideas to try:

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- Going for a brisk walk
- Stamping your feet hard on the ground
- Skipping/jumping
- Do some heavy work like cleaning or raking

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

## **SECTION 4: THE THINKING PART?**

**It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four**

Veterans are incredibly positive in the belief that if they stick to their drills and training the 6 Ps, then they'll succeed. Try out the following skills and drills and stick with them until you find one that works for you.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- The doing part (What can you do about PTSD?)
- What your body needs (Listen to your body)
- The thinking part (Get your thinking straight)

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Get your thinking straight' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Five: Listen to your body.

## **GET YOUR THINKING STRAIGHT**

**Focus on the differences between 'then' and 'now'**

This strategy helps you break the connection between past trauma and present-day reminders.

The key is to focus on the differences between then (at the time of the trauma) and now.

Use this strategy if you have just woken from an upsetting nightmare or you feel yourself slipping into re-experiencing a trauma memory.

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For example, if the sound of a helicopter is a strong reminder for you, try focusing on the differences using all your senses for the best chance of success (see below):

THEN	NOW
Then Waiting with an injured comrade as the helicopter arrives to evacuate him	Now Walking to the local park with my son as a helicopter flies overhead
It was circling ready to land	This one is flying past
I could see desert and dirt tracks with mountains in the distance	I can see green trees English road signs and modern roads
I was wearing body armour	I am wearing civilian clothes
I felt hot and was sweating	I feel warm but comfortable
I was alone	I am next to my son holding his hand
I could hear people shouting and buildings collapsing in the distance	I can hear traffic and my son laughing
I could smell sewage and my own sweat	I can smell car fumes and my aftershave

Don't forget, no matter how bad it feels it is a memory and not actually happening again.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

## SECTION 5: LISTEN TO YOUR BODY?

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four

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The recommended strategies include:

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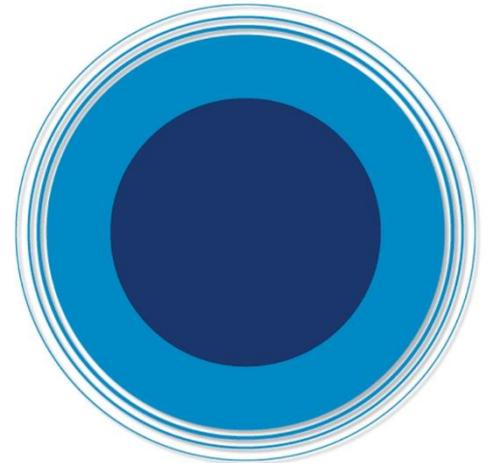
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To begin, read the rest of this section 'Listen to your body' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Six.

## Regulating your breathing

When we feel stressed or anxious, our breathing becomes faster. In order to relax our body, we need to slow our breathing down. Try 'box breathing':

- Breathe in for 4 seconds
- Hold it for 4 seconds
- Breathe out for 4 seconds
- Hold it for 4 seconds



Repeat the above until your body starts to feel calmer.

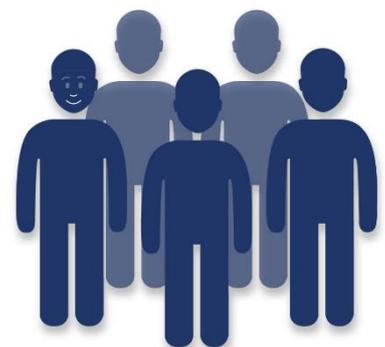
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## SECTION 6: HOW HAVE YOUR FEELINGS CHANGED?

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Six

Have you noticed any changes in your mood?

- Are you noticing any differences?
- Has anything shifted?
- What helped?



## What to do next

Before moving on to your next resource, it's important you take time to reflect on what you've learnt here and take time to implement your new methods. Give yourself time to adjust to your 'new normal' before moving on.

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## Some questions you might have

### What to do if I'm still struggling with PTSD?

It might take some time to start reaping the rewards of your efforts. As with any new skill, keep at it and you will find it easier to use these skills when you need them. While these resources aim to give you some tools to manage your difficulties in-the-moment, for many of you this will only be the beginning. With this in mind, Combat Stress also provides specialist treatment programmes to help you tackle the past and take on the future. If you would like to know more, you will find the details of our 24-hour helpline below.

### How do I know what resource to do next?

You may remember when you first began these self-help guides, you filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire enables us to guide you to the resources that will be most helpful to you. You'll find links to other guides in this series at <https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/>

### Is there someone I can contact if I need more help or information?

If you're a veteran and need to talk to someone, or you're a family member/carer worried about the mental health of a loved one who has served, please call our Helpline.

The Combat Stress 24-hour Helpline provides free confidential advice and support to veterans and their families. Don't struggle in silence.

Call 0800 138 1619

### Are there any other resources that may help me?

- US dept. of Veteran Affairs (VA) PTSD Coach app: <https://mobile.va.gov/app/ptsd-coach>
- Veterans' Gateway website: <https://www.veteransgateway.org.uk/>

### Urgent help

If you require more urgent help, either yourself or a member of your family feel unsafe, please contact your GP or telephone 111.

This information was publishing on 30 October 2020.

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