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Does PTSD Get Worse with Age?

Strategies that help older Veterans with PTSD

New challenges appear with age. Those challenges can make the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) more noticeable, cause them to come back after many years or even to occur for the first time.

“It really wasn’t until after I retired and moved to be with my family that the [PTSD] symptoms began to be bothersome and disrupt my life, disrupt my family’s life,” says Mary Martin, an Air Force Veteran.

Don’t assume that these changes are a given or that it’s just what happens with getting older. Memories or impacts of trauma can be addressed at any age. You’re never too old to get help, and older adults can benefit from effective PTSD treatments, even for people who experienced trauma decades ago.

It’s common for older adults to minimize and deny the pain they experience from past traumas. They’re more likely to try to cope with these issues by themselves instead of seeking mental health treatment. However, strategies that once seemed to help with PTSD symptoms can be more difficult to maintain as people get older.

Common challenges and strategies

You’re never too old to get help.

Dr. Elissa McCarthy, clinical psychologist at the National Center for PTSD, and Dr. Joan Cook, associate professor of psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine, shared some common challenges faced by older adults and strategies for how to deal with those challenges:

- **CHALLENGE:** More free time. Increased amounts of free time can make unpleasant memories more frequent.
STRATEGY: Create structure and maintain a routine or organized schedule. Spend more time on hobbies or doing other enjoyable activities that you may not have made time for earlier in life. For example, learn to play an instrument, bake, start a blog or make a scrapbook with old photos.
- **CHALLENGE:** Loss of purpose. Retirement can be challenging if work was a large part of your identity.
STRATEGY: Learn new skills or volunteer. For example, many older Veterans enjoy giving back by mentoring Servicemembers or younger Veterans.
- **CHALLENGE:** Loss of loved ones.
STRATEGY: Having a network of supportive people is important. Maintain relationships with people you care about and make new friends, too. For example, look for social groups who enjoy your hobbies or an activity you want to learn.
- **CHALLENGE:** Changes in physical ability.
STRATEGY: Replace hobbies with other similar activities. For example, if poor eyesight makes reading difficult, try audiobooks or podcasts instead. For those who are homebound or have limited mobility, there are other options, like telehealth, for receiving counseling and care from home.
- **CHALLENGE:** Medical problems. Living with untreated PTSD can make other mental and physical health issues worse.
STRATEGY: Don't assume this is how aging needs to be, be proactive in managing health conditions and get treatment for PTSD symptoms that arise.

Symptoms may worsen

As people age, their PTSD symptoms may suddenly appear or become worse, causing them to act differently. It may be unsettling to see these changes in a loved one, but it's nothing to fear. Changes are common and treatment can help. If a loved one is living with PTSD, these tips can help:

- Take time to understand what friends or loved ones went through and what they're now experiencing as they live with the symptoms of PTSD.

- Be supportive and nonjudgmental. Think about how to respond better if a loved one says they've experienced trauma or may have PTSD. Responding negatively, even unintentionally, can shut someone down. Thank them for sharing their personal story with you.
- Connect them with care. If being the main support person for a loved one becomes too much to handle, connect them to help and remain in a loving, supporting role. Don't forget that loved ones need help and support, too.
- Give hope. Understand that symptoms can come and go throughout different times in a person's life. Remind loved ones that they've successfully coped in the past, and can do it again.

Visit the [National Center for PTSD website](#) for information, videos and tools to help manage PTSD. For more information on older adults with PTSD, download the [Understanding PTSD and Aging](#) booklet.

If you care about someone with PTSD, download the [Understanding PTSD: A Guide for Family and Friends](#) booklet to learn more about how to support your loved one and take care of your own needs.

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