



VETS HELPING VETS SINCE 1974

WRITING YOUR PTSD STRESSOR STATEMENT

If you're seeking VA disability compensation for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), you may need to submit a "stressor statement"—a written account of the stressful events you experienced in the military.

You're not expected to have a perfect memory. If you can't recall something, don't hesitate to say so.

Not everyone who applies is required to write a statement. For example, if you have a Purple Heart, a Combat Infantryman Badge, or a Combat Action Ribbon, the VA may be able to process your claim without one. The VA will notify you if one is needed.

GETTING READY TO WRITE THE STATEMENT

Writing a stressor statement can itself be stressful. In many cases, you're being asked to recall—and record—events that you'd rather forget. This is true not only for veterans who served in a combat zone, but also for veterans who suffered Military Sexual Trauma.

Before you sit down to start writing, line up a counselor, a therapist, or a friend—someone you can talk with if you find yourself overwhelmed by troubling memories and emotions. Avoid writing your statement on a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, when help isn't readily available. If necessary, put your statement aside and return to it later. There's no rule that says it has to be written in one sitting.

To prepare the statement, you'll almost certainly need to have your military records at hand. These records will help you to pinpoint dates, times, and places. For information about obtaining your records, visit www.stp-sf.org/guides/records.

Your service records are only one possible source of information for your stressor statement. If you wrote letters home, now is the time to retrieve them, if possible.

Is there a trail of e-mails or text messages that would be helpful? Are there postings on Facebook or other social media? Did you keep a journal or diary? Gather these materials before you start to write.

WRITING YOUR STATEMENT

If possible, type your statement on a computer; otherwise, make certain your handwriting is legible. At the top of each page, type or print your full name, your Social Security Number or VA file number, and the page number.

Start your statement by introducing yourself to the reader. For 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].

*A PTSD stressor
statement tells a story
about change.*

Next, describe the stressful events in chronological order. For each event, give the date and place it occurred, and the name of the unit you were attached to. Tell what happened in as much detail as possible, **and** tell how you felt about what happened. Were you angry? Fearful? Sad? Numb?

You're not expected to have a perfect memory. If you can't recall something, don't hesitate to say so. But do include as much detail as you can. Are there specific sights and sounds you can't forget? If so, write about them.

If you don't remember precisely when something happened, do your best to give the VA an approximate time frame. They'll need it if it becomes necessary to verify your story by researching military records. You may be able to peg the event to another occurrence in your life. Did it happen close in time to a birthday? An anniversary? A holiday? A death?

Tell the truth. There's no need to exaggerate or embellish. The facts are powerful enough. Let them speak for themselves.

A PTSD stressor statement tells a story about **change**. You were one person before the stressful events occurred, and in some respects a different person afterward.

Once you've described the stressful events, you'll need to describe how they have affected you. Begin with 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?

*Specific examples are
more helpful than
technical terms.*

Next, tell what changed as a result of your military service. After you returned to civilian life, 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?

Continue your statement by describing your current symptoms. If you've been in treatment for PTSD, you may have learned some of the terms that psychologists use to describe the classic symptoms—hypervigilance, startle reaction, irritability, avoidance, and so on. It's good that you know these terms, because you also know that they apply to large numbers of men and women. They're a reminder that you're not alone.

But when you describe your symptoms in a written statement, **specific examples** are more helpful than technical terms. Remember, your task is to help the reader understand what has happened to you. "Startle reaction" is a dry and abstract term, but "I jumped six inches out of my chair when the firecrackers went off last July 4th" tells a story.

You **don't** need to have all of the classic PTSD symptoms in order to be "service-connected" for this condition. Don't be concerned about the symptoms you don't have; instead, describe the ones you **do** have, and tell how they continue to affect you and the ones around you—at home, on the job, and in the community.

If you have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, you may be reluctant to discuss it in your statement. Keep in mind that veterans often resort to the use of drugs and alcohol because they can't cope with the symptoms of PTSD.

We encourage you to be candid with the reader. When did you begin to use drugs or alcohol? Did your use increase after you experienced the stressful events that you described earlier in your statement? Have you been in treatment? Are you currently 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. Are you now clean and sober? If so, for how long?

Next, tell the reader about your present state of mind. Are you feeling hopeful? Angry? Discouraged? Depressed? Are you getting treatment for PTSD? 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? What are your ambitions? How close are you to realizing them?

Conclude 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 staple the pages together before you submit the statement to the VA.

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 as fully and honestly as possible.

Disclaimer

This memorandum provides general information only. It does not constitute legal advice, nor does it substitute for the advice of an expert representative or attorney who knows the particulars of your case. Any use you make of the information in this memorandum is at your own risk. We have made every effort to provide reliable, up-to-date information, but we do not guarantee its accuracy. The information in this memorandum is current as of December 2012.

© Copyright Swords to Plowshares 2012. These materials are the property of Swords to Plowshares and are made available at no charge. For parties interested in using or distributing these materials, please note that no alterations are permitted and proper attribution must be given to Swords to Plowshares.

Because our legal staff is small and our resources are limited, Swords to Plowshares can represent only a small number of veterans who seek our assistance with VA claims. Please do not appoint Swords to Plowshares to represent you before the VA without our express consent.