

PORTRAYING PTSD: BEST PRACTICES FOR THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

National Center for

PTSD

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER





NATIONAL CENTER FOR PTSD PRODUCTION TOOLKIT

Interested in including a Veteran or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)-related storyline in your television show or movie? The National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD) Production Toolkit offers resources and guidance on how to accurately discuss and portray PTSD in a way that does not perpetuate myths and empowers and encourages those experiencing symptoms of PTSD to seek treatment.

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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF NCPTSD

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a serious mental health problem that affects around eight million people, both Veterans and civilians, in the United States each year. PTSD can disrupt a person's life and have a negative impact on their work, their relationships and their physical and mental well-being. The good news is that there are effective treatments for PTSD.

At the VA's National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD) we are working to reduce the stigma associated with mental health conditions like PTSD, and to help connect people with resources and hope. We are asking you to join us in serving as an advocate for Veterans and others who are experiencing symptoms of PTSD by portraying their stories and experiences accurately and showing that PTSD treatment is available and effective.

NCPTSD is the world's leading research and educational center of excellence on PTSD and traumatic stress. Our website (www.ptsd.va.gov) is the best place to get started learning about trauma, PTSD and PTSD treatment options. We also provide a range of electronic and print materials, videos, mobile apps and other resources for anyone interested in learning more about PTSD.

On behalf of NCPTSD, I'd like to thank you for addressing trauma survivors in your work, and ask that you please use this toolkit as a starting point for ensuring that you are portraying their experiences in a way that does not perpetuate myths or reinforce the stigma often associated with PTSD and other mental health concerns. Working together, we can increase awareness and support those who have PTSD by spreading the message that help is available and PTSD treatment works.

Sincerely,

Paula P. Schnurr, Ph.D.

Executive Director, National Center for PTSD

BEST PRACTICES FOR ADDRESSING PTSD

How we talk about and portray PTSD and PTSD treatment matters. Here are some best practices to follow when covering/portraying PTSD in a storyline:

✓ DO

- Show that seeking help reflects strength.
- Share stories of hope and successful treatment outcomes.
- Help people understand that treatment works. PTSD is not an untreatable disorder.
- Promote evidence-based psychotherapy treatments, such as Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Prolonged Exposure (PE) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), as the best treatment options available for those with PTSD.
- Promote evidence-based medications; specific antidepressants can help improve PTSD and are an effective treatment option.
- Differentiate between PTSD treatment and strategies used to promote wellness. Although yoga, meditation and service animals may help people cope with symptoms of PTSD, they are not treatments that improve symptoms overall.
- Verify that any information you share about PTSD or PTSD treatment is accurate by consulting reliable sources, like the [VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline](#) for PTSD or NCPTSD.

X DON'T

- Use stigmatizing or judgmental language, such as saying someone with PTSD is weak or crazy.
- Portray someone with PTSD as dangerous or violent.
- Overgeneralize – most people who have served in the military or who have experienced trauma do not develop PTSD.



"In the beginning it was hard because I was never on foreign soil, and so sometimes there's that, 'well you weren't overseas' or 'you weren't a war Veteran,' so that was a little bit of a difficulty for me, being classified with PTSD. But when I went to the MST [military sexual trauma] PTSD group then that was no longer a stigma because everybody was in the same situation that I was in."

– Kathleen Dardis, US Army Veteran

THREE WAYS YOU CAN HELP

The way that people with mental health conditions, like PTSD, are portrayed in the media can have a large impact on public perception and beliefs. The entertainment industry is in a unique position to help move the conversation around PTSD in a positive direction. Join us in reducing the stigma associated with PTSD and helping those dealing with PTSD get connected to resources and care:

DEBUNK PTSD MYTHS:

x MYTH #1: Only Servicemembers and Veterans get PTSD

✓ **FACT:** In addition to combat, anyone who has experienced a traumatic event, including a natural disaster, a car accident, or sexual assault, can develop PTSD. In the United States, about eight million adults have PTSD during a given year.

x MYTH #2: PTSD always occurs immediately after the traumatic event

✓ **FACT:** Sometimes PTSD symptoms appear right away, but some people may go months or even years before symptoms start to appear or begin to negatively impact their life. As people age, it's also common for PTSD symptoms to worsen or to appear for the first time.

x MYTH #3: Everyone who experiences a trauma gets PTSD

- ✓ **FACT:** Going through trauma is common but experiencing a trauma doesn't always lead to PTSD.
- o About 14 million adults have PTSD during a given year or about 4.7 out of every 100 people (or 4.7%). This is only a small portion of those who have experienced a traumatic event.
 - o About 6 out of 100 people (or 6% of the population) will have PTSD at some point in their lives.
 - o Women are about twice as likely to have PTSD than men. About 6 out of 100 women (or 6%) and 3 out of 100 men (or 3%) have PTSD in the past year. About 8 out of every 100 women (or 8%) develop PTSD sometime in their lives compared with about 4 out of 100 men (or 4%).

x MYTH #4: People with PTSD are weak or broken

✓ **FACT:** PTSD can happen to anyone. It is not a sign of weakness. Several factors can increase the chance that someone will develop PTSD, many of which are not under that person's control.



"I never felt safe. I was always looking over my shoulder. I definitely had triggers and nightmares going on and I just never really knew what it was. I didn't know that I had PTSD. I just had all of these things going on, behaviors that I felt were abnormal and kind of baffling. I didn't really know why I did some of the things that I did, prior to my diagnosis of PTSD. Once I was diagnosed it really came together and I was able to say, 'Wow – that was why I did that.'"

**– Yvonne Grissett,
US Army Veteran**

x **MYTH #5: Everyone with PTSD has flashbacks, is angry, can't sleep, has nightmares, etc**

✓ **FACT:** PTSD can look different in different people. People with PTSD experience symptoms that fall into the following four categories:

- o **Reliving or re-experiencing the event** – examples include nightmares, flashbacks and memories brought on by triggers
- o **Avoidance** – staying away from situations or people that trigger memories of the traumatic event, avoiding thinking or talking about the experience
- o **Hyperarousal or being on guard** – feeling jittery or always alert and on the lookout for danger, or suddenly becoming angry or irritable
- o **Negative changes in beliefs and feelings** – thinking more negatively about yourself, others and the world in general after the trauma

x **MYTH #6: If you have a diagnosis of PTSD, your symptoms will improve over time**

✓ **FACT:** Without treatment, many people will continue to experience PTSD symptoms.

x **MYTH #7: PTSD can't be treated**

✓ **FACT:** There are effective treatments for PTSD that can help people live a happier, more productive life.

SHOW THAT PTSD TREATMENT WORKS

When portraying Veterans or other individuals experiencing symptoms of PTSD, you can help spread a message of hope by showing that treatment for PTSD is available and that it works.

- **There are several effective, evidence-based treatments for PTSD:**
 - o Trauma-focused psychotherapies (talk therapies) are the most effective treatment option for PTSD. These include Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Prolonged Exposure (PE) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)
 - o Antidepressant medications can also help people dealing with PTSD
- **PTSD Treatment can help people:**
 - o Make sense of their trauma
 - o Learn skills to better handle negative thoughts and feelings
 - o Reduce PTSD symptoms
 - o Reduce symptoms of depression
 - o Improve sleep
 - o Reconnect with people they care about
 - o Set goals for activities, like work or school
 - o Improve their quality of life



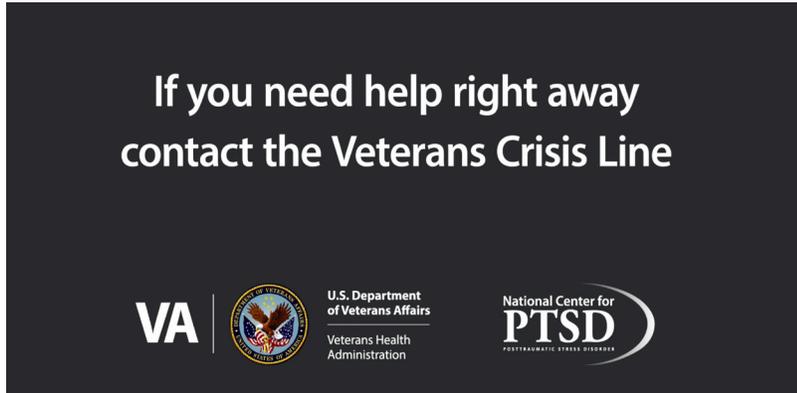
"[Veterans] are afraid they're going to be looked at as some kind of freak, or weak. There's nothing weak about a man who has been in combat. He's an extremely honorable, brave human being. But survivors like myself have such serious guilt about making it through. It's extremely hard to reach the point where you can sit down with someone and talk about this stuff."

– Craig "Stu" Shipley, US Marine Corps Veteran

SHARE A TITLE CARD FROM NCPTSD

When airing a storyline that addresses trauma or PTSD, please consider including one of the ending title cards included with this toolkit to direct people to helpful resources where they can learn more about PTSD and get connected to care.

Animated Title Card

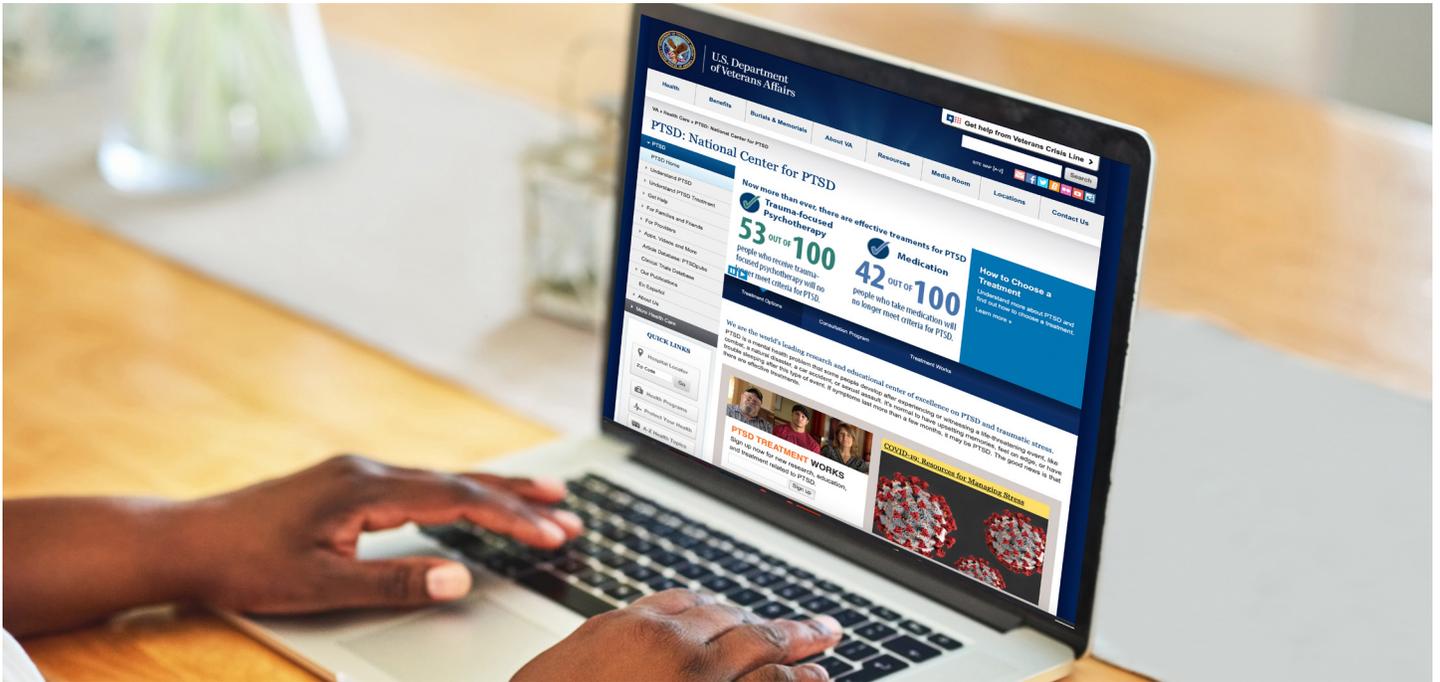


Unanimated Title Card



“Treatment, in my case, has helped a great deal. It’s an ongoing process – nothing like this happens overnight. You don’t just go to treatment one day and then all of a sudden, boom, you’re better. You have to work really hard to want to get as well as you possibly can. You have to want it and you have to work for it because one of the hardest things to deal with is posttraumatic stress disorder.”

– Chris Antonio, US Army Veteran



HELPFUL RESOURCES FROM NCPTSD

Please reference, use or share any of the information and resources available on our website:

- Want to learn more about PTSD and evidence-based treatment options? Visit the NCPTSD website: www.ptsd.va.gov
- Need inspiration for PTSD storylines, or interested to hear Veterans and their families talk about the impact that PTSD has had on their lives? Explore the AboutFace video series: www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/aboutface
- Looking for readymade materials you can share? Check out our online resources: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/publications/print/index.asp>
- Interested in joining the conversation on social media?
Follow us on Facebook and Twitter for information and sharable resources:
 - o Facebook: [@VAPTSD](https://www.facebook.com/VAPTSD)
 - o Twitter: [@VA_PTSD_Info](https://twitter.com/VA_PTSD_Info)

CONTACT US

For more information about PTSD, please contact NCPTSD at ptsd@va.gov.