Helping Veterans with Memories of their Military Experience at the End of Life During COVID-19
Advice from a Rural Perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic may cause some Veterans to think more about their previous military experience. For many Veterans, especially those with a serious illness, COVID-19 represents another threat to their lives. With constant reminders of the severity of COVID-19 all around, some Veterans may find that they are thinking more about their military experience.

Why Might Memories of Military Experience Emerge at End of Life?
Illness may remind people of other times in their lives when they felt vulnerable, more alone, or their life was in danger. This may recall earlier traumatic experiences in the military or at other times in one’s life. Also, at the end of life, some people may reflect on their life experiences and the role the military played in their lives.

PTSD Symptoms
Some Veterans may experience PTSD symptoms. Some may want to avoid reminders of service or they may ruminate on negative beliefs associated with service. The most frequently seen PTSD symptoms at the end of life are:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Intrusions</th>
<th>Arousal</th>
<th>Negative Thoughts And Mood</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nightmares</td>
<td>Irritability</td>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>Reminders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flashbacks</td>
<td>Trouble Sleeping</td>
<td>Distrust</td>
<td>Memories</td>
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Other PTSD-like Behaviors
Other behaviors you may see in Veterans with PTSD are:

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<tr>
<th>Agitation</th>
<th>Restlessness</th>
<th>Feeling Unsafe</th>
<th>Being Reclusive</th>
<th>Stoicism</th>
<th>Resistance To Care</th>
</tr>
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PTSD Can Make Other Symptoms Worse
The experience of PTSD is associated with worsened pain, and pain that sometimes does not respond to standard approaches of treatment.

A Desire To Talk And Make Meaning
Some Veterans want to talk. That is, rather than avoiding memories of military experience, there may be a desire to talk, disclose traumatic experiences, make meaning, and reconcile the good with the bad.
How Can I Help?

It may sound simple, but just being aware that memories of military service and PTSD symptoms may occur in Veterans at the end of life may be helpful.

Ask, “With COVID-19, some Veterans think more about their military service. Has this happened to you?”

It may be difficult, if not impossible, to offer trauma-focused psychotherapy at the end of life, but anyone can listen.

Conveying connection, being attentive, and listening without judgment are valuable techniques anyone can offer.

- Avoid platitudes or saying, “stay positive.”
- Do sit quietly, nod, and just be present.

It can be hard to know what to say if someone shares something difficult or traumatic. Some simple statements you can use are:

- “Thank you for sharing your experience with me.”
- “I can’t imagine how hard that must have been for you.”
- “I am sorry you had to experience that.”

The end of life represents a challenging time for family, especially if their loved one has PTSD symptoms and they cannot be physically present. Offering telephone or video calls and providing education can help.

Caring For Yourself

During this healthcare crisis, all of us are distressed. In particular, healthcare providers are experiencing stress and even psychological trauma as they confront caring for others in a situation that at times may feel unsafe or cause them to confront impossible choices. It is important to recognize that these experiences may be traumatic for you, and to recognize if you are experiencing symptoms of PTSD now or in the future, and if so, to seek help from a qualified professional.