



THE INSIDERS GUIDE TO DEPRESSION

THE HOLIDAY EDITION

Happy Holidays Vets!

We are all too familiar with the hardships that come during this time of year for many of you Veterans. This is why we want to provide some support. From all of us Insiders, we Invite you to contact us and the following resources to help you through any discomfort. It is okay to not be okay. You are NOT alone this holiday season.

VA Hotline

855-948-2311

Suicide Crisis Hotline

1-800-273-8255

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Introduction

A successful member of the United States military is selfless. Service members from every part of the globe pledge their lives to uphold the values of the United States constitution, and each must sacrifice something in the process.

Most service members will agree that often the biggest sacrifices are made for the men and women they served beside.

The desire not to let down the people around them is a much greater motivation than anything a service member can muster on their own. The service member that presses forward and ignores their own pain to accomplish a mission is considered honorable.

However, the mindset of selflessness that serves people well in uniform can also be a challenge when it comes to mental health. We don't want to let those around us down, so we don't talk about our own emotions openly.

The truth is, ignoring our own pain and pressing forward when it comes to mental health is a path to self-destruction. It seems counter-intuitive to admit that you are struggling. As leaders, the military instructs us to have solutions ready for our problems when they arise.

But how do we get support for mental health when we aren't even sure where to start?

This guide will show you the path to the VA benefits you earned serving selflessly.

First, recognizing the symptoms of depression is a giant step to getting the support you need.

While this is not an all-inclusive list, it is a good place to start when it comes to identifying depression.

Depression Symptoms:

- Feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- Outbursts and frequent irritability
- Loss of interest in normal activities
- Sleep disturbances, insomnia or sleeping too much
- Tiredness with lack of energy
- Reduced appetite with weight loss
- Increased cravings and weight gain
- Anxiety, restlessness, agitation
- Slowed thinking and movements
- Feelings of worthlessness, guilt or fixating on past failures
- Trouble thinking, making decisions, concentrating
- Frequent thoughts of death or suicide attempts
- Unexplained physical problems

If you experience some of these symptoms, speak to your doctor. Many times those who suffer from depression have difficulty with daily activities and are unhappy when with other people.

VA Disability Rating for Depression: Recognized Mood Disorders

According to the VA, depression is considered to be a mood disorder. The VA recognizes two different types of depression under this category. These include major depressive disorder and dysthymic disorder. Let's take a closer look at these two types of depression.

Major Depressive Disorder in Veterans

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) occurs when a person feels extreme depression and/or anxiety and has lost interest in work, life, and previously enjoyed activities.

The person has intense thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to depression-like symptoms that interfere with daily life.

A person with depression is not faking his or her symptoms. The pain and other problems are real. They may be caused by a medical problem.

But it's the extreme reaction and behaviors about his/her symptoms that are the main problem.

Having major depressive disorder is one of the two options your depression claim can fall under. In order to qualify for Veteran disability benefits, you must have two episodes of depression occurring every two weeks. This can be managed with medications and therapy. Other aspects of depression can include anxiety, PTSD, and bipolar disorder.



Dysthymic Disorder in Veterans

The second VA category for depression is Dysthymic Disorder. Those who have this disorder will often have irritable moods or mild depression in addition to feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, problems in decision making and concentrating for long periods. To receive a diagnosis for this disorder, it requires that the patient has felt this way for two or more years, and the symptoms they are suffering from are severe enough that they prevent normal functioning in the world.

VA Compensation

In order to receive compensation from the VA, there must be a couple of things in place. First, there must be a Nexus connection. This just means that there is a proven link between your depression and your service. The best way to prove service connection is through a Nexus Letter (sometimes called an Independent Medical Opinion). In this letter, the medical provider will state that in their opinion, it is more likely than not that your VA claim was caused or made worse by your active duty service. The most vital aspect that you include in your claim is medical evidence! You must have a depression diagnosis to qualify for a VA Claim!! IF you don't have your medical records then the first step is getting your butt to the doctor!!

Depression is often masked, and it is often not as easy to spot. Many events can trigger depression. Everyone is unique, and the things that might cause depression in one person might affect another person in a different way.

If you are suffering from depression now, consider some of the events that occurred while you were on active duty and whether one of those may have been your trigger event.

When filing for your depression VA claim, you will need to know the trigger that caused the depression (otherwise known as a stressor). This knowledge will be KEY when getting your nexus and during your C&P exam.

How to Qualify for a VA Rating for Depression

To qualify for a VA disability rating for depression, the event that caused the depression will need to have happened while you were on active duty.

However, this does not mean that it necessarily had to occur while you were in the line of duty. It could be entirely unrelated to your experience in the military but happened while you were on active duty.

For example, you may have had an incident occur while you were in the line of duty, such as being in a firefight or having another service member die in front of you. You might have even had a loved one die while you were overseas. These all qualify for a depression claim!



Circumstances on active duty that can qualify for a Depression VA rating:

- **Death in the family (or among troops)**
- **Divorce**
- **Failing to get promoted**
- **Stress from the job**
- **Training, deployments, and separation from family and friends**
- **Giving birth to a child**

You may still be asking yourself what happens if you have been living with depression and then join the military? It is possible to file a VA claim for depression, however, there must be a stressor (incident) in the military that shows that the depression was made worse. This is known as aggravation of a pre-service disability condition. And you will still need proof of service connection once you were in the military.

How to Establish Service-Connection for Depression

One of the important things to remember is that the only way to qualify for a VA rating for depression is to show evidence that the depression directly stems from service. This logical link or “connection” is otherwise known as a Nexus. Naturally, the easiest way to show that you are clinically depressed is with your medical records (service treatment records, VA medical records, and/or private treatment records). The easiest way to prove service connection is through your active duty service records. But as you know, most veterans did not go to the doctor during service. Don’t worry though, you still have options.

If you do have the information in your service records, it can go a long way in proving the depression occurred during or shortly after active duty due to service.

If you don't have active duty records that prove depression, personal statements and buddy letters can be monumental to fill in the gaps for what happened. These statements should include when the depression began, what caused it, and how the depression has progressed.

Veterans should consider getting a Medical Nexus Letter from a qualified medical professional or an Independent Medical Opinion (IMO) that attests that they, as a medical provider, believe that the condition was “at least as likely as not” caused by service in the military.

Secondary Service Connection for Depression

In some cases, a Veteran may qualify for VA disability benefits for depression if the depression is the result of another condition connected to their service, otherwise known as a secondary claim.

For example, one scenario could be you were injured while in the military.

Years later, dealing with pain from that previous injury has led to a host of additional problems. Over time, due to the pain from your injury and the impact that it has had on your day-to-day life, depression could become triggered as a secondary outcome.

In addition, depression could also cause or aggravate another disability. For example, the medication that you are taking for your back pain could have the secondary effect of depression.

Even with all of this, you must still prove this connection through medical evidence to show the correlation to your service

Eligibility Requirements for a Depression VA Claim

- 1. Medical diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder or other mental health condition (e.g., Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Major Depressive Disorder)**
- 2. The Major Depressive Disorder was caused or made worse by your active duty military service (“Nexus”) OR another service-connected disability (e.g., chronic neck pain, back pain, migraines) with an Independent Medical Opinion (IMO)**
- 3. Persistent and recurrent symptoms of Major Depressive Disorder or other mental health condition(s) into the present day (severity of symptoms).**

Evidence Requirements for Major Depressive Disorder

Before you file, here are six options that will be helpful for filing a successful VA claim!

- 1. In-service stressor(s) – what are they for you?**
- 2. When did your Major Depressive Disorder begin and how is it service-connected?**
- 3. Statement in Support of Claim for Major Depressive Disorder – VA Form 21-4138**
- 4. Buddy letter(s) HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!**
- 5. C&P Examv preparation**
- 6. Independent Medical Opinion or Psych Eval**

Crucial Considerations for Your VA Major Depressive Disorder Claim

When the VA is rating your claim, there are a few things that they will take into consideration before giving you a final rating.

- Service connection, is the Nexus clear?**
- Do you have pre-existing issues?**
- Do you have a medical diagnosis?**
- Are you actively seeking treatment?**
- Do you take any medications?**
- What is your level of occupational and social impairment?**

How to Understand the VA's Ratings for Depression

After you submit your VA claim for depression for approval, the condition of depression is calculated using the General Rating Formula for Mental Disorders on the VA Rating Schedule.

The VA rates mental health conditions using percentages of 0%, 10%, 30%, 50%, 70% and 100%.

This rating helps the VA to determine how the mental health claim affects the Veteran's occupational and social impairment.

Those who have higher social and occupational impairment will have a higher rating and vice versa.

Those who have a VA disability rating for depression of 100% have difficulty functioning socially or in a job.

A rating of 0 would mean that the Veteran would still be able to receive healthcare for the condition, but they would not qualify for a VA claim for depression that resulted in monetary compensation. The severity and the types of symptoms help the VA to determine the rating for each of the Veterans who have depression.

A Veteran does not need to have all of the symptoms associated with the condition or at a certain rating level to qualify. The system is meant to be a guide for the VA to help place the Veteran in the appropriate rating category.



VA Disability Rating Percentages for Depression and Other Mental Health Disorders Explained

The following list provides a better understanding of what each VA disability rating percentage means:

0% Depression Rating

Those who have a 0% VA rating for depression can still have a diagnosis of depression. A rating this low, however, determines that the symptoms are not causing any interference with work or with the ability to function socially. Additionally, these patients are not taking any medication for depression. The Veterans are still fully functional, and they can receive treatment for their depression, often in the form of therapy.

10% Rating for Depression

The Veteran will have mild symptoms of depression and may undergo periods of high stress. These stressful periods could cause issues at work and in social settings. With a rating of 10%, patients will often be taking medication that can help to control the symptoms. Medication is used at all of the following ratings to help control depression, as well.

30% Rating for Depression VA Claim

Veterans who have a 30% VA disability rating because of a mental health disorder like depression will often have occasional impairment at work and in social settings. Additionally, you might find that the symptoms of depression are causing problems with your efficiency at work and at home. Some of the common symptoms of patients at this percentage include anxiety, panic attacks, and even mild memory loss.

50% Depression Rating

At this VA disability rating for depression, regular impairment interferes with performing duties at work, working with other people, and being able to handle social situations. The symptoms become difficult to handle. Efficiency at work will suffer even more so at this stage. The symptoms tend to be more severe, as well. Panic attacks are not occasional, and they can often happen more than once a week. Some patients might also have trouble understanding and following complex commands. Short-term and long-term memory can be affected, and a person's judgment may be impaired.

70% Rating for Depression

Veterans who are rated in the 70% VA rating for depression find that many aspects of their life are impaired. They are not able to function properly at work or in social settings, even with the family in many cases. School settings can suffer, as well. Patients will often have impaired judgment and cognitive abilities, and they may also have severe moods. Those who are in this percentage are at a higher risk to be thinking about suicide. They may also become obsessed with rituals to help them get through the day. Panic attacks are often more severe and more frequent, and the depression deepens.

100% Depression VA Claim Rating

This is the highest VA disability rating, and it means that the Veteran is considered to be fully disabled. They are not capable of functioning in work or social settings. The symptoms are similar to those discussed in the lower percentage ratings, but they tend to be more severe. They may have impaired thoughts and trouble

communicating. They may have memory issues, trouble performing common daily functions, and they could suffer from delusions depending on their diagnosis. At this stage, there is a chance that the patient is a danger to themselves and others.

C&P Exam for Major Depressive Disorder Tips

Your C&P exam is arguably the most important day of your entire VA claim process. Yet most Veterans do not go into the exam PREPARED...before walking into your C&P exam, make SURE that familiarize yourself with these 6 very important things.

1. Know what is in your medical records.
2. Review your Independent Medical Opinion (IMO).
3. Review the eCFR, Title 38, Schedule 4 for MAJOR DEPRESSIVE DISORDER and other mental health symptoms and ratings.
4. Do NOT have your best day.
5. Be uncomfortably vulnerable.
6. Know your true story cold...and potential in-service stressors that caused or made your Major Depressive Disorder and/or other mental health conditions worse.



Are Compensation & Pension Exams a Requirement for a Depression VA Rating?

The VA will typically schedule a Compensation & Pension examination, (also known as a C&P exam) before awarding your rating. This could take place at a private facility, a VA medical center, or online through a telehealth conference. The examiner will ask you a series of questions to get a better understanding of how this disability affects your day to day life and then determine the rating.

What happens after my Depression C&P exam?

To view a copy of the exam after, you can request a copy from the regional VA office or by running a new report from My HealthVet. The VA does not provide copies of the exams to you unless they are specifically requested.

It is always a good idea to do a follow-up and get the information, so you can look at it yourself and see what was provided to the VA. What happens if the C&P exam does not show that the Veteran has depression or that the depression is not shown to be as severe as you believe it to be?

In those cases, the Veteran will need to provide evidence that counters what was written in the exam. Many different types of evidence could suffice, but the more you have, the better off your chances of receiving a VA disability rating. You could include additional medical evidence, lay evidence, and other arguments that are in your favor.

Filing for Total Disability Based on Individual Unemployability with Depression

In some cases, a Veteran might not be able to find and maintain a job due to depression connected to their service in the military. In those cases, it could be possible that the Vet will be able to receive total disability based on individual unemployment, also known as TDIU. Typically, the VA will consider these benefits when they examine the claim for depression. However, the Veterans will also have the option of filing for TDIU as a claim on its own, or as part of an increased rating claim if needed.

Temporary Disability Ratings Due to Hospitalization

There is also the possibility that a Veteran might receive a temporary VA rating for depression if they are hospitalized. If you are hospitalized for 21 days or longer because of depression, it is possible to receive a rating of 100% temporarily.

The only way that you can qualify for this is if you are getting your treatment at a VA medical center or a VA approved hospital. Those who receive the temporary VA disability rating will find that it begins on the date that they started their continuous stay at the hospital. The benefits will continue up until the last day of the month at which time they no longer receive care for the service-related conditions. If a Veteran has been hospitalized for longer than six months, the claim will be “referred to the rating activity for consideration of a schedular 100% rating according to 38 CFR § 4.29.”

What is the Appeals Process for a Depression VA Claim?

As a Veteran, you have the right to appeal the exam, but you need to understand the rules for submitting evidence under the Appeals Modernization Act. When you appeal, you will be able to choose between three different review options.

- A high level review**
- A supplemental claim**
- An appeal to The Board of Veterans Appeals**

An appeal to The Board of Veterans Appeals

With a high-level review, the Veteran will not be able to supply any additional evidence. This is why it's important when you submit your initial claim to getting all relevant information and pertinent evidence submitted.

Those who choose the supplemental claim route can submit evidence, but only if it is considered new and relevant evidence to the case at hand. Some examples of this include a new buddy letter, a new statement in support of a claim from themselves, including migraine buddy logs, new and relevant medical evidence, or evidence of prescribed medication.

An appeal to the Board is your final effort in getting your claim approved. However, with this option, you could wait anywhere from six months to a year just to see a judge. You could choose to appear in person, to have the board review your case without you there, or you could choose a lawyer to represent you in front of the board.

We understand that both coming to terms with depression, and filing a disability claim with the VA can be very challenging.

If you are looking for an Independent Medical Opinion to help service connect your depression VA claim, the VA Claims Insider Elite Program utilizes a proprietary education-based process to identify gaps in your record to ensure the following:

- 1. Service-connection of your current disabilities**
- 2. The highest rating possible under the law.**

If you have been denied before or are currently underrated and need to service-connect your depression VA claim, [click here](#) for more information about the VA Claims Insider Elite Program.



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