

The evidence needed to establish a PTSD stressor depends on **which rule applies**. Start with the claimed event, not a generic evidence checklist.

START
WAS PTSD DIAGNOSED DURING SERVICE?

YES

IN-SERVICE DIAGNOSIS PATHWAY

If the stressor is related to that service and consistent with its circumstances, the veteran's testimony alone may establish its occurrence, absent clear and convincing evidence to the contrary.

38 CFR § 3.304(f)(1)

NO

IDENTIFY THE CLAIMED STRESSOR TYPE

Follow the branch below that best matches the event.



02 CHOOSE THE APPLICABLE STRESSOR PATHWAY

C

COMBAT

§ 3.304(f)(2)

DOES THE EVIDENCE ESTABLISH COMBAT WITH THE ENEMY?

And: Is the stressor combat-related and consistent with the service circumstances?

THRESHOLD MET

Lay testimony alone may establish occurrence, absent clear and convincing contrary evidence.

If not: develop corroborating records or other credible evidence.

F

FEAR OF HOSTILE ACTIVITY

§ 3.304(f)(3)

IS THE EVENT RELATED TO FEAR OF HOSTILE MILITARY OR TERRORIST ACTIVITY?

And: A VA or VA-contracted psychiatrist or psychologist confirms the stressor supports PTSD, relates the symptoms to it, and it is consistent with service.

THRESHOLD MET

Lay testimony alone may establish occurrence, absent clear and convincing contrary evidence.

If not: another pathway or corroborating evidence may be required.

P

FORMER POW

§ 3.304(f)(4)

DOES THE EVIDENCE ESTABLISH FORMER PRISONER-OF-WAR STATUS?

And: Is the stressor related to that experience and consistent with the circumstances of confinement?

THRESHOLD MET

Lay testimony alone may establish occurrence, absent clear and convincing contrary evidence.

If not: determine whether another stressor pathway applies.

A

PERSONAL ASSAULT / MST

§ 3.304(f)(5)

IS THERE AN OFFICIAL REPORT OR SERVICE RECORD?

If no: Evidence outside service records may corroborate the event, including medical or counseling records, statements, and behavior changes.

MARKERS MAY MATTER

Transfer requests, work decline, substance use, unexplained anxiety or depression, and social or economic changes are listed examples.

Important: VA must advise the claimant about alternative evidence before denying on this basis.

O

OTHER EVENT

General rule

ACCIDENT, DEATH, TRAINING INCIDENT, DISASTER, OR OTHER NON-COMBAT STRESSOR?

Usually: credible supporting evidence must corroborate occurrence; testimony alone generally is not enough.

POSSIBLE SOURCES

Unit or personnel records, incident investigations, deck logs, medical records, police reports, news reports, and lay statements.

Match the evidence to the event, unit, location, and approximate date.

03 THEN ASK: IS THE STRESSOR SUFFICIENTLY ESTABLISHED?

YES

CONTINUE BUILDING THE CLAIM

The record still needs a current PTSD diagnosis and medical evidence linking symptoms to the established stressor.

NO / UNCLEAR

DEVELOP THE MISSING PROOF

Narrow the event details, request the most relevant records, and use lay or marker evidence where the applicable rule permits it.

Use the path that fits the facts. Do not force an event into a special rule or assume every PTSD claim needs the same evidence.