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Rules for combat-related stress treatment now relaxed

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BY LAUREN FITZPATRICK

The thing about modern war is that it's more complicated than it was during World War II.

Troops get sent on tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, come home, and then they get sent back. Veterans account for one out of every five suicides.

Combat doesn't always mean firing at the enemy across a battlefield, and weapons aren't as obvious as in past conflicts, said Dr. Sudip Bose, an Iraq war veteran and former Christ Medical Center ER doctor.

So it follows that instances of post-traumatic stress disorder - what the World War II vets might have called "shell shock" - are on the rise, and it's lifesaving, Bose said, that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has relaxed its regulations for making a post-traumatic stress disorder claim for treatment.

"You can in fact have combat stress and PTSD even if you're not directly in the line of fire. This is a different war zone," Bose said, describing battles in urban streets where piles of trash can turn deadly. People fire out of buildings, chuck grenades under bridges, set bombs across roads.

"It's not force on force anymore. It's stressful even if you're just driving down the road over there," he said.

Bose spent 15 months in Iraq, during the siege of Fallujah and as U. S. forces battled the Al-Sadr militia in Najaf. Then he took a job in the emergency room at Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn, where he worked for four years and started speaking publicly about PTSD. Now he's based in Odessa, Texas, but still travels to give talks.

Previous VA rules made veterans document, in detail, the bomb explosions or firefights they blamed for stress. The paperwork was intense, took a long time and sometimes wasn't possible to complete.

As of last month, a vet has only to show that he or she went to war and did a job where PTSD stressors could have happened.

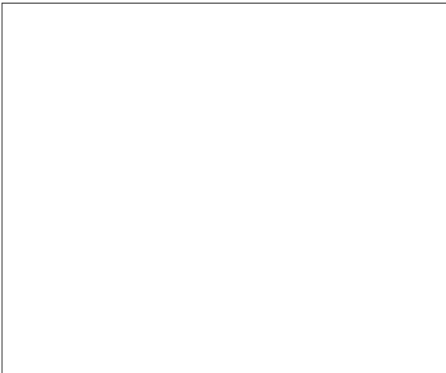
"In the combat zone is good enough," Bose said. "Basically, before, you had to prove you were in a combat situation, or you were in the line of fire."

A VA-sanctioned psychiatrist or psychologist still has to confirm that the veteran suffers from PTSD before any benefits are available. The VA believes that confirmation should weed out fake claims.

The new rules, supported by the Disabled Veterans of America and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, are retroactive. Any veteran from any past war, including those previously denied, can file a claim.

According to the VA, most veterans who had PTSD eventually got benefits, so the new rules shouldn't cost much more.

Though the new process might allow more vets to seek treatment, each case will be quicker and less cumbersome, according to the department.



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