

USACHPPM Technical Guide 241

Battle Fatigue/Combat Stress Reaction



Soldiers can experience battle fatigue/combat stress reaction in combat and in other dangerous, stressful missions. It is essential that soldiers and their leaders know the physical and mental signs of normal, common battle fatigue/combat stress reaction, as well as the "more serious" signs.

Common Physical Signs

Tension:	Aches, pains
Jumpiness:	Easily startled, fidgety, trembling
Cold sweats:	Dry mouth, pale skin, eyes hard to focus
Heart:	Pounding; may feel dizzy or light-headed
Breathing:	Rapid, out-of-breath; fingers and toes start to tingle, cramp and go numb
Stomach:	Upset; may vomit
Bowels:	Diarrhea or constipation
Bladder:	Frequent urination, urgency
Energy:	Tired, drained; takes an effort to move
Eyes:	Distant, haunted "1000-yard" stare

Common Mental and Emotional Signs

Anxiety:	Keyed up, worrying, expecting the worst
Irritability:	Excessive complaining; easily bothered
Attention:	Poor; unable to focus on remembering details
Thinking:	Unclear; trouble communicating
Sleep:	Troubled; awakened by bad dreams
Grief:	Prolonged crying for dead or wounded
Guilt:	Excessive focus on errors or what had to be done
Anger:	Feeling let down by leaders or others in unit
Confidence	Low; loss of trust in self and unit

Many soldiers have these signs, yet still fight well and do all their essential duties. The signs are normal responses to combat danger, uncertainty and the environment.

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Warning Signs Demanding Immediate Action

- Hyperactivity
- Exaggerated startle response
- Trembling or cowering
- Loss of feeling in limbs
- Loss of mobility (total or partial)
- Spaced-out appearance
- Rapid speech
- Irritable or angry outbursts
- Reckless actions
- Poor hygiene
- Memory loss
- Speech impaired or lost
- Inability to sleep or fear of sleep
- Hallucinations
- Extreme mood changes
- Withdrawal
- Depression
- Apathy
- Hysterics or frantic, panicky behavior

Buddy and Leader Actions

- Even serious battle fatigue/combat stress reaction signs can improve in minutes if handled correctly on the spot.
- If the soldier's behavior endangers the mission, control the situation.
- If the soldier is upset, talk calmly and try to enlist the soldier's cooperation; assign a simple task.
- Make a quick check for physical injuries.
- Reassure the soldier that recovery from battle fatigue/combat stress reaction occurs quickly.
- If the soldier is no longer reliable:
 - ✓ Unload the soldier's weapon.
 - ✓ Take the weapon only if you are seriously concerned.
 - ✓ Physically restrain only if necessary for safety.
- Get the soldier to a safer place.
- Don't leave the soldier alone.
- Get the soldier to drink water, eat, and sleep if tired.
- Warm, cool, and/or dry the soldier if needed.
- Assign the soldier to appropriate, realistic tasks and, eventually, to a return to duty.
- Get a medic's advice if signs could be from injury, drugs, or disease.
- Get the soldier to talk about what happened.
- Evacuate to aid station if the soldier does not improve, but reassure the soldier of recovery and return to duty.
- If unable to evacuate, ensure the soldier's safety while continuing to treat the battle fatigue/combat stress reaction.

