



Essential Veteran Services

EVALUATIONS & NEXUS LETTERS

VETERAN-LED • INDEPENDENT • CONFIDENTIAL

Anxiety + Depression Field Guide

Understanding How Anxiety and Depression Can Show Up in Everyday Life

Anxiety and depression do not always look like panic attacks or
overwhelming sadness.

Sometimes they look like exhaustion, irritability, procrastination,
withdrawing from people, replaying conversations, losing interest in
hobbies, struggling to make decisions, or feeling like ordinary life
takes more effort than it should.

This guide can help you recognize those experiences, understand the
clinical concepts behind them, and reflect on their impact.

01 Recognize

02 Understand

03 Reflect

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CREATED BY ESSENTIAL VETERAN SERVICES

Veteran-led, independent psychological evaluations that document the connection between military service and mental health — clearly, honestly, and in the language the VA expects.

Start With Your Experience

Do not worry about deciding whether something is “anxiety” or “depression” yet. Simply check the experiences that sound familiar.

MY EXPERIENCE CHECKLIST

- ☐ My mind often keeps working even when I desperately want it to quiet down.
Learn more: Excessive worry + anxiety — [Page 6](#)

- ☐ I think through worst-case scenarios, replay conversations, or repeatedly wonder whether I made the wrong decision.
Learn more: Excessive worry + overthinking — [Page 6](#)

- ☐ Anxiety shows up physically for me through tension, restlessness, nausea, sweating, shaking, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, or feeling on edge.
Learn more: Physical symptoms of anxiety — [Page 7](#)

- ☐ I avoid or delay things because thinking about doing them feels overwhelming.
Learn more: Avoidance + the anxiety-depression cycle — [Page 8](#)

- ☐ I frequently need reassurance before I feel comfortable with a decision or situation.
Learn more: Anxiety patterns — [Pages 6 and 8](#)

- ☐ Things I once enjoyed do not feel as interesting, rewarding, or meaningful anymore.
Learn more: Loss of interest or pleasure — [Page 9](#)

- ☐ I do what I absolutely have to do, but finding motivation for anything beyond that can be difficult.
Learn more: Depression, fatigue + motivation — [Page 10](#)

- ☐ Everyday tasks sometimes feel disproportionately difficult or exhausting.
Learn more: Fatigue + reduced motivation — [Page 10](#)

My Experience Checklist

- ☐ I become irritated or overwhelmed more easily than I used to.

Learn more: Irritability + low stress tolerance — [Page 11](#)

- ☐ My sleep has changed — I sleep too little, too much, poorly, or never feel rested.

Learn more: Sleep disturbance — [Page 12](#)

- ☐ I have trouble concentrating, remembering things, following conversations, or making decisions.

Learn more: Concentration + decision-making — [Page 13](#)

- ☐ I turn down invitations, ignore messages, or spend more time alone because interaction feels exhausting or stressful.

Learn more: Social withdrawal — [Page 14](#)

- ☐ My mental health has affected my work, relationships, responsibilities, or ability to participate in everyday life.

Learn more: Occupational + social impairment — [Page 14](#)

- ☐ I sometimes appear completely functional to other people while feeling exhausted or overwhelmed internally.

Learn more: Functional impact — [Pages 10 and 14](#)

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CHECK-IN

The three statements that felt most familiar were:

01

02

03

Mental Health Symptoms Can Hide Inside Everyday Habits

Anxiety and depression can become difficult to recognize because people adapt around them.

- You may build reminders because you forget things.
- You may stop accepting invitations because socializing feels exhausting.
- You may procrastinate until the pressure becomes unavoidable.
- You may keep functioning at work and then have nothing left when you get home.

Eventually these adaptations can begin to feel normal.

Anxiety and depression can occur separately, but they also frequently overlap.

Anxiety commonly involves excessive worry, physical tension, restlessness, difficulty controlling thoughts, irritability, sleep problems, and difficulty concentrating.

Depression may involve persistent low mood, loss of interest or pleasure, fatigue, reduced motivation, sleep or appetite changes, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, concentration problems, and social withdrawal.

When they occur together, people sometimes experience both activation and shutdown at the same time:

My brain will not stop worrying, but I cannot make myself do anything about the thing I am worrying about.

The following pages can help you put names to some of the experiences you recognized on [Page 3](#).

BEFORE YOU CONTINUE

One experience I checked that I had never really considered a mental health symptom:

Something I want to understand better:

When Your Mind Rarely Turns Off

CLINICAL CONCEPT

Anxiety and excessive worry

Anxiety is not always a panic attack. For many people, it looks much quieter.

You may repeatedly anticipate problems, plan for every possible outcome, replay interactions, seek reassurance, or feel uncomfortable when you cannot control what happens next.

YOU MAY NOTICE

- Persistent worry.
- Worst-case thinking.
- Replaying conversations.
- Rehearsing future conversations.
- Difficulty tolerating uncertainty.
- Repeatedly checking decisions.
- Fear of making mistakes.
- Difficulty mentally “switching off.”
- Feeling like there is always something you should be preparing for.

WHAT OCCUPIES MY MIND?

Something I worry about repeatedly:

A situation I tend to overthink:

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What outcome am I usually trying to prevent?

How much time or energy does this pattern take from me?

When Anxiety Lives in the Body

CLINICAL CONCEPT Physiological symptoms of anxiety

Anxiety is not only a thought process. It can also affect the body.

Some people notice physical symptoms before they recognize that they are anxious at all.

THOSE EXPERIENCES MAY INCLUDE

- Muscle tension.
- Restlessness.
- Racing heartbeat.
- Sweating.
- Trembling.
- Shortness of breath.
- Nausea.
- Stomach discomfort.
- Headaches.
- Feeling keyed up or on edge.
- Difficulty sitting still.
- Feeling physically unable to relax.

BODY CHECK-IN

Where do I physically feel stress or anxiety most often?

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What happens in my body when I become overwhelmed?

Are there situations where the physical response appears before I consciously feel anxious?

When Worry and Shutdown Feed Each Other

ANXIETY CAN TELL YOU

“Something may go wrong.”

DEPRESSION CAN TELL YOU

“I do not have the energy to deal with this.”

TOGETHER THEY CAN CREATE A REPEATING CYCLE



YOU MIGHT RECOGNIZE THIS WITH

Phone calls

Paperwork

Appointments

Household responsibilities

Emails

Financial tasks

Work projects

Social commitments

Medical care

Decisions

MY REPEATING CYCLE

Something I frequently delay or avoid:

What do I think when I consider starting it?

What do I do instead?

How do I feel afterward?

What usually forces me to finally address it?

When Things Stop Feeling Like They Used To

CLINICAL CONCEPT Anhedonia and depressed mood

Depression does not always feel like profound sadness. Sometimes it feels like **less**.

Less enjoyment

Less excitement

Less connection

Less interest

Less emotional response to things that once mattered

The clinical term **anhedonia** describes reduced interest or pleasure in activities.

YOU MAY NOTICE

- Losing interest in hobbies.
- Rarely looking forward to things.
- Feeling emotionally flat.
- Spending more time passively watching television or scrolling.
- Participating in activities because you “should,” rather than because you want to.
- Difficulty feeling excitement.
- Feeling disconnected even during positive events.

WHAT FEELS DIFFERENT?

Something I once genuinely enjoyed:

How often I do it now:

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If I still do it, does it feel the same?

Something I wish I could enjoy the way I used to:

When Ordinary Life Requires Extraordinary Effort

CLINICAL CONCEPT Fatigue, reduced motivation and psychomotor/cognitive slowing

Depression can make even ordinary responsibilities feel unusually difficult.

You may still get things done. The important question is sometimes **how much effort it takes**.

YOU MIGHT EXPERIENCE

- Difficulty getting started.
- Feeling mentally or physically drained.
- Needing significant recovery time after work.
- Neglecting household tasks.
- Putting off basic responsibilities.
- Spending long periods in bed or on the couch.
- Feeling overwhelmed by tasks with multiple steps.
- Completing only what is absolutely necessary.

EFFORT INVENTORY

Something that used to feel easy but now requires significant effort:

After work or other major responsibilities, how much energy do I have left?

What responsibilities do I consistently postpone?

What might other people not realize is difficult for me?

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“I’m Fine” Until Suddenly I’m Not

Anxiety and depression can both reduce the amount of stress your system can comfortably carry. That can make normal frustrations feel much larger.

YOU MAY NOTICE

- Snapping at family members.
- Becoming frustrated by noise.
- Losing patience.
- Feeling overwhelmed by several demands at once.
- Becoming angry when plans change.
- Needing more time alone.
- Feeling mentally exhausted after interaction.
- Regretting reactions afterward.

Irritability may sometimes be the symptom that other people recognize before you do.

STRESS THRESHOLD CHECK

What overwhelms me most quickly?

Who usually sees that side of me?

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How do I usually react?

How do I feel afterward?

When Your Brain and Body Do Not Reset

CLINICAL CONCEPT Sleep disturbance

Both anxiety and depression can significantly affect sleep.

Anxiety may keep the mind active when you are trying to fall asleep. Depression may contribute to insomnia, excessive sleep, difficulty getting out of bed, or sleeping without ever feeling restored.

Poor sleep can then make anxiety, depression, concentration, motivation, and irritability worse.

MY SLEEP CHECK

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Trouble falling asleep. | ☐ Difficulty getting out of bed. |
| ☐ Racing thoughts at bedtime. | ☐ Feeling tired despite sleeping. |
| ☐ Waking during the night. | ☐ Needing naps. |
| ☐ Waking earlier than intended. | ☐ Daytime functioning is affected. |
| ☐ Sleeping significantly longer than I used to. | |

Average hours of sleep: — ESSENTIALVETERANSERVICES.COM

How rested do I usually feel from 1–10?

The biggest impact of poor sleep on my day is:

When Your Brain Feels Full

CLINICAL CONCEPT Difficulty concentrating and cognitive impairment

Anxiety can consume attention with worry. Depression can affect energy, processing speed, motivation, and concentration.

Together, they can make everyday thinking surprisingly difficult.

YOU MAY EXPERIENCE

- Forgetting appointments.
- Losing track of conversations.
- Reading the same information repeatedly.
- Forgetting why you entered a room.
- Difficulty following multi-step tasks.
- Decision fatigue.
- Starting tasks without finishing.
- Making avoidable mistakes.
- Difficulty focusing at work.
- Heavy reliance on calendars, notes, alarms, or reminders.

DAILY FUNCTION CHECK

Something I forget more often now:

A task I struggle to concentrate on:

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A decision I recently found unusually difficult:

A workaround I rely on to stay functional:

Symptoms Matter Because of What They Change

Anxiety and depression can affect relationships, friendships, employment, education, household responsibilities, recreation, and community involvement.

You may still be functioning. That does not necessarily mean symptoms are not affecting you.

SOCIAL IMPACT MAY LOOK LIKE

- Declining invitations.
- Ignoring calls or messages.
- Losing friendships.
- Needing more time alone.
- Emotional distance.
- Relationship conflict.
- Difficulty participating in family activities.
- Avoiding crowds or unfamiliar situations.

OCCUPATIONAL IMPACT MAY LOOK LIKE

- Difficulty concentrating.
- Increased mistakes.
- Conflict with coworkers.
- Avoiding interaction.
- Reduced productivity.
- Missing work.
- Difficulty adapting to change.
- Changing jobs because stress becomes overwhelming.
- Using enormous emotional energy simply to appear okay.

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MY IMPACT INVENTORY

My relationships have been affected by:

Something I no longer participate in as often:

My work or responsibilities have been affected by:

Something that takes more effort than other people realize:

Your Daily Experience Tells the Story

Words such as “anxiety,” “depression,” “fatigue,” and “isolation” are useful but they do not always explain what life actually looks like.

INSTEAD OF

“I have anxiety.”

A REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE MIGHT BE

Before appointments, I repeatedly check the time and directions, arrive extremely early, and cannot concentrate on anything else until the appointment is finished.

INSTEAD OF

“I isolate.”

A REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE MIGHT BE

I regularly decline invitations because socializing feels exhausting, and several friendships have faded because I rarely participate anymore.

The goal is never to make symptoms sound more severe than they are. The goal is to recognize their real impact.

MY FIELD GUIDE SUMMARY

The three patterns that affect me most are:

01

02

03

The area of my life most affected is:

Something I had been minimizing or dismissing is:

Something I want to better understand is:

NEXT STEPS

Essential Veteran Services

Essential Veteran Services provides independent mental health evaluations for Veterans seeking greater clarity and documentation regarding mental health conditions and their impact.

Every Veteran's experience is different. An EVS evaluation considers individual history, symptoms, records, experiences, and occupational and social functioning.

Sometimes understanding your mental health begins by noticing how much of your life you have quietly reorganized around it.

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