



Essential Veteran Services

EVALUATIONS & NEXUS LETTERS

VETERAN-LED • INDEPENDENT • CONFIDENTIAL

Buddy Letters for VA Mental Health Claims

What They Are, Why They Matter, and How to
Write One That Helps

A practical guide to understanding, requesting, and writing strong
supporting statements for VA mental health claims.

01 Understanding

02 Requesting

03 Writing

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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.

Your Buddy Letter Checklist

Before asking someone to write a Buddy Letter (or reviewing one that you have already received), use this checklist to make sure the statement includes the details that can help make it clear, specific, and useful.

Keep this page handy as you work through the rest of this guide. Each item below corresponds with a section that explains why it matters, what to include, and how to approach it.

A STRONG BUDDY LETTER SHOULD:

☐ Identify the writer and their relationship to the Veteran

☐ Explain what the writer has personally observed

☐ Describe noticeable changes or symptoms

☐ Include specific, real-life examples

☐ Provide a timeline when possible

☐ Explain how the symptoms affect daily life

☐ Stay within the writer's personal knowledge

☐ Use honest, natural language

☐ Avoid exaggeration or generic template language

☐ Include the writer's name and closing information

Before You Submit

Read the Buddy Letter one more time and ask:

“Could someone who has never met me read this statement and understand what this person has actually witnessed?”

If the answer is “yes,” then you are on the right track.

What Is a Buddy Letter?

A Buddy Letter — sometimes called a “lay statement” — is a written statement from someone who has personally observed a Veteran’s symptoms, behavioral changes, or challenges over time.

These statements can come from spouses or partners, friends, family members, fellow service members, coworkers or supervisors, roommates, or caregivers, among others.

BUDDY LETTERS ARE COMMONLY USED IN VA MENTAL HEALTH CLAIMS INVOLVING:

PTSD

Anxiety

Depression

Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

Panic symptoms

Sleep disturbance

Emotional numbness

Social withdrawal

Irritability or anger

Functional decline

Not a Medical Opinion

It is important to understand that Buddy Letters are not medical opinions, and the person writing the letter does not need to diagnose anything or use clinical language. Instead, these statements focus on what the writer personally observed.

Examples Include

- “He stopped spending time with friends.”
- “She began having nightmares several times a week.”
- “I noticed he became much more isolated after deployment.”
- “She seemed constantly on edge in crowded places.”
- “He struggled to focus and became forgetful at work.”

The strongest Buddy Letters are honest, specific, and grounded in real-life observations.

Why Buddy Letters Matter

Many Veterans assume that medical records alone should be enough to explain what they are experiencing, but mental health symptoms are often complicated, deeply personal, and difficult to fully capture in appointments, evaluations, or paperwork — and that is where Buddy Letters can help.

For mental health claims especially, Buddy Letters can help paint a clearer picture of:



**Personality or
behavior
changes**



**Emotional
withdrawal or
isolation**



Sleep disruption



**Anxiety or
hypervigilance**



**Anger or
irritability**



Panic symptoms



**Memory or
concentration
issues**



**Changes in
work,
relationships, or
daily life**

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MOST IMPORTANTLY

*Buddy Letters help show that the impact of a condition is real,
observable, and affecting everyday life.*

What Makes a Strong Buddy Letter?

Strong Buddy Letters often include:

01

Specific Examples

INSTEAD OF

“He struggles with PTSD.”

TRY

“After returning home, he stopped attending family gatherings and spent most evenings isolated in the garage.”

Specific examples create a clearer picture of how symptoms affect real life.

02

Observable Changes

Strong letters focus on things the writer personally witnessed:

Sleep problems

Anxiety

Emotional withdrawal

Panic symptoms

Irritability

Anger outbursts

Hypervigilance

Memory or concentration issues

Changes in social behavior

Increased isolation

Difficulty functioning day to day

03

Timeline Awareness

Helpful Buddy Letters often explain:

- What the Veteran was like before
- When changes became noticeable
- How symptoms progressed over time

04

Honest, Natural Language

The letter does not need medical terminology or dramatic language. It should sound human, because the strongest statements are often the ones that feel sincere, grounded, and personal.

Common Mistakes to Avoid



Being Too Vague

Statements like “He struggles a lot” do not provide much detail. Instead, explain what those struggles actually looked like in daily life.



Focusing Only on Character

A Buddy Letter is not meant to prove someone is a “good person.” The goal is to document observable changes, symptoms, and functional impact.



Trying to Sound Clinical

The writer does not need to diagnose conditions or use medical terminology. Simple observations are enough.



Exaggerating Symptoms

Overstating symptoms can weaken credibility and make the statement feel less authentic.



Writing Without Examples

Specific moments, routines, or behavioral patterns help make a statement stronger and more useful.



Copying Generic Templates

A meaningful Buddy Letter should reflect the actual relationship and lived experiences between the writer and the Veteran.

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Who Can Write a Buddy Letter?

The strongest statements usually come from people who have consistently witnessed changes over time.

Spouses or Partners

Spouses or partners see day-to-day functioning closely, so their perspective can be especially valuable. They often observe:

- Sleep disruption
- Nightmares
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Emotional withdrawal
- Relationship strain
- Changes in communication or intimacy

Fellow Service Members

Fellow service members may help describe:

- Behavioral changes during service
- Deployment experiences
- Stressful events
- Personality shifts
- Emotional changes after service

Friends and Relatives

Friends and relatives may notice:

- Isolation
- Mood changes
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in activities
- Emotional distance
- Long-term personality changes

Coworkers or Supervisors

Coworkers or supervisors may observe:

- Concentration problems
- Attendance issues
- Irritability
- Stress responses
- Difficulty managing workloads
- Workplace withdrawal

Different perspectives can help create a fuller picture of how symptoms affect multiple areas of life.

A Simple Structure for Writing a Buddy Letter

Because of the potential impact, many people feel overwhelmed when trying to start a Buddy Letter, and using a simple structure can make the process easier.

01 Explain the Relationship

Start by explaining:

Who the writer is

How they know the Veteran

How long they have known them

EXAMPLE *"I have known John for 12 years and served alongside him during deployment."*

02 Describe What Changed

Explain noticeable emotional, behavioral, or functional changes. Examples may include:

Increased isolation

Anxiety

Sleep issues

Mood changes

Avoidance

Anger

Emotional numbness

03 Include Specific Examples

Real-life examples are often the most helpful part of a Buddy Letter.

EXAMPLE *"He stopped attending events he previously enjoyed and began avoiding crowds completely."*

04 Explain the Impact

Describe how symptoms affected:

Relationships

Daily routines

Work

Emotional functioning

Social interaction

05 End Honestly

The writer can close by briefly explaining why they felt it was important to write the statement. Simple and sincere is enough.

Sample Buddy Letter

Notice how each paragraph does one job. The markers on the left show which step of the structure it fulfills.

01

EXPLAIN THE
RELATIONSHIP

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Sarah Mitchell, and I have been married to my husband for nine years. I am writing this statement because I have personally witnessed significant changes in his behavior and emotional health over time.

02

DESCRIBE WHAT
CHANGED

Before his deployment, he was very social, outgoing, and involved with family activities. After returning home, I noticed he became much more withdrawn and isolated. He stopped spending time with friends, avoided crowded places, and often stayed awake late into the night because he struggled to sleep.

03

INCLUDE SPECIFIC
EXAMPLES

Over the past several years, I have also noticed increased irritability and anxiety. Loud noises startle him easily, and he appears constantly on edge. There have been many nights when he woke up from nightmares and had difficulty calming down afterward.

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04

EXPLAIN THE IMPACT

His symptoms have affected our relationship and daily life significantly. He has difficulty relaxing, struggles emotionally, and often isolates himself even from people he cares about.

05

END HONESTLY

I am writing this because I believe these changes are real and important to document.

Sincerely,
Sarah Mitchell

Before Things Changed

Mental health symptoms can become so familiar that Veterans sometimes minimize or overlook the ways those symptoms affect daily life. This exercise is designed to help you reflect on changes others may have witnessed over time.

How would people have described you before your symptoms became difficult to manage?

More social?

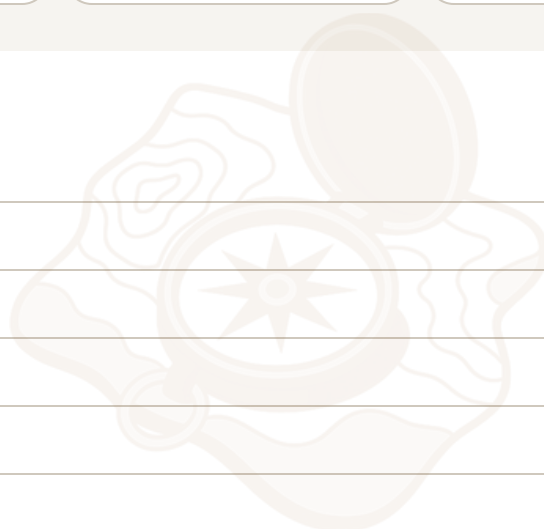
More patient?

More emotionally available?

More motivated?

More relaxed?

WRITE A FEW THOUGHTS BELOW:



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Changes Others May Have Noticed

Have people commented on changes involving:

Isolation

Irritability

Anxiety

Sleep

Emotional numbness

Drinking habits

Avoidance

Mood swings

Concentration

Memory

Hypervigilance

WHAT EXAMPLES COME TO MIND?



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Daily Life Impact

What parts of life became harder over time? Consider:

Relationships

Parenting

Work

Friendships

Motivation

Social interaction

Emotional regulation

REFLECT HERE:



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Who Has Seen the “Behind the Scenes” Version?

Who in your life has witnessed these changes most consistently?

- ☐ Spouse or partner
- ☐ Friend
- ☐ Fellow service member
- ☐ Parent or sibling
- ☐ Coworker
- ☐ Supervisor
- ☐ Caregiver

Sometimes the people closest to us notice the weight we are carrying long before we know how to explain it ourselves.

REFLECT HERE:

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How to Ask Someone to Write a Buddy Letter

Many Veterans feel uncomfortable asking for help with this process, and that is completely understandable. The good news is that Buddy Letters do not need to be perfect, and most people simply need a little guidance and reassurance.

HELPFUL TIPS

01

Keep It Simple

You do not need to overexplain the VA process. A simple request is enough.

02

Ask for Honesty

Real observations matter most.

03

Give Them Time

Some people may need time to think through what they have witnessed and how to put it into words.

04

Offer Prompts

If they feel stuck, you can encourage them to think about:

What changed

When they noticed it

Specific examples

Daily life impact

EXAMPLE SCRIPT

“The VA allows statements from people who have personally witnessed how my mental health has affected me over time. Would you feel comfortable writing about what you’ve observed?”

Buddy Letters and MST Claims

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) claims can be especially difficult because many survivors never formally reported what happened at the time, but that does not mean their experiences are any less real.

In MST-related claims, Buddy Letters may help provide important context around behavioral or emotional changes that others witnessed over time.

THESE CHANGES MAY INCLUDE:

Withdrawal or isolation

Anxiety

Panic symptoms

Depression

Changes in mood or personality

Increased fear or hypervigilance

Sleep problems

Relationship difficulties

Avoidance behaviors

Sometimes friends, family members, or fellow service members noticed these changes even when the Veteran was not ready or able to talk openly about the trauma itself.

Buddy Letters cannot replace medical evidence, but they may help support the broader picture of how trauma affected someone's life and functioning.

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IF YOU ARE PURSUING AN MST-RELATED CLAIM, KNOW THIS

You do not need to have handled trauma “perfectly” for your experiences to matter.

Support is available 24/7 — call 988, then press 1 · text 838255 · VeteransCrisisLine.net

NEXT STEPS

Need Additional Support?

At Essential Veteran Services, Dr. Sheena Glover provides mental health evaluations, Nexus Letters, and DBQs designed to help Veterans clearly document the impact of service-connected mental health conditions.

Our goal is not to overwhelm Veterans with the claims process but to provide informed, compassionate support while helping Veterans feel heard, understood, and better prepared to navigate the next steps.

CONNECT WITH US TODAY



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