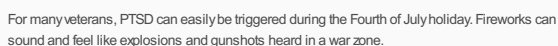


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CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. — Independence Day makes most think of fireworks, cookouts and long weekends spent with friends and family.

The loud booms and cracks the fireworks make usually bring "oohs" and "ahhs" from the crowd as expressions of delight light up their faces.

But for others in Clarksville, the fireworks can bring back flashbacks of war-torn countries and memories of gunfire and combat. Most of those people are the same ones who fought to preserve the freedoms the holiday celebrates – veterans who are affected by post-traumatic stress disorder.

Some spend days or weeks preparing mentally to withstand the typical holiday barrage of fireworks.

According to [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#), Vietnam veterans are the most likely to suffer from PTSD with an estimated 30% experiencing the disorder at some point in their lifetimes.

Expecting it until it's unexpected

Army retired 1st Sgt. John Brown still enjoys the 4th of July fireworks — on his own terms.

Brown saw combat in Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom and served for 23 years before retiring in 2011. He served four tours in combat.

He will go to fireworks shows with his family this time of year, and for him the awareness that he is in an environment with loud noises makes a difference.

In his neighborhood close to home — where he is not always expecting it — is another story.

"Initially, until I figure out it's just fireworks, it's pretty weird," Brown said. "Once I come down from that trigger — once I realize it's just fireworks — I work through the issue."

It can take him five minutes or up to an hour to calm down after hearing an unexpected firework.

In the time leading up to the 4th of July, Brown begins to mentally prepare himself for the possibility of unexpected fireworks.

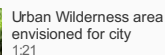
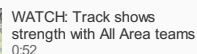
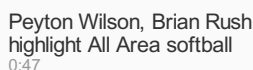
"They (civilians) just have to understand in a community like this with a lot of veterans the loud noises replicate the sounds of war," Brown stresses. "That could be a trigger for a lot of people. All too often people hear those four little letters 'PTSD' and they automatically think bad things. Anyone can have PTSD. It's just more military members who have been deployed are at higher risk of having higher traumatic events."

Brown does not want people to stop having fun and celebrating this time of year, however,

"This time of year, everyone is celebrating. It's a patriotic day. If they have the time, it would be courteous to let the veterans in the community know that they are going to be launching fireworks," he said.

Triggers can vary

TOP VIDEOS



Retired Army 1st Sgt. David Ross is a part of that percentage also. A Vietnam and Desert Storm veteran, Ross retired from the military in 1995 and still battles PTSD to this day.

Ross has not watched a fireworks show with his family since 1996 — the year after he retired.



(Photo: Ayrika Whitney / The Leaf-Chronicle)

He was a veterans service officer at the Montgomery County Veterans Service Organization from 2003 until he retired in 2014 helping others in a similar situations overcome the disorder themselves.

"With PTSD, you have triggers. Certain noises. Certain smells. Certain things you see make you anxious, nervous — however you want to describe it," said Ross.

Unexpected explosions, like the sound of fireworks launched at people's homes, can be a trigger for some veterans.

"If I go to the fireworks, as long as I am far enough away and I see and expect it, it doesn't have that much of an effect because you know it's going to happen," he said. "The unexpected fireworks. The unexpected noises and so forth can get you really anxious and excited."



(Photo: Ayrika Whitney / The Leaf-Chronicle)

He still remembers how uneasy he felt at the last fireworks show 20 years ago.

"We stayed until the end but I could have left real quick," he said.

Awareness of not only a veteran's surroundings but what triggers PTSD-related episodes is crucial.

"Over a period of time, you have got to learn what your triggers are," he said. "That's the hardest part about dealing with PTSD is identifying your triggers, how to handle your triggers, how to avoid your triggers and so forth."

Though hearing fireworks when not anticipating it can make Ross anxious, he said he would not ask his neighbors or friends to not enjoy them.

"If I go visit some people and they are going to set off fireworks, that's fine," he said. "I may say 'I'm out of here,' excuse myself and take off."

Inside an episode

Retired Sgt. 1st Class Don McCasland has been a readjustment counselor for the Department of Veterans Affairs for almost a year and has been working with other veterans for almost 5 years.

With fireworks, McCasland states the veteran maybe be fine at first until they hear the first explosion or see a flash.

"It reminds them of explosions from mortars or IEDs or other explosions like that," he said.

IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, have been used by enemy forces in many wars but have been seen extensively in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Once PTSD is triggered, the body begins to shut down and go into fight, flight or freeze mode, McCasland explains.

Parts of the brain that control emotional responses are "taken out of the equation completely because of what you have learned in combat or in training for combat" as the body focuses on defending itself from a potential threat. This can include a rush of adrenaline, increased heart rate and rapid breathing.

Christopher Boily, a retired Sgt. 1st Class and public relations officer for the local chapter of Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association has also seen the effects of PTSD through members of the group.

He served 22 years in the Army.

Boily says the disorder is more of a spectrum rather than a one-size-fits-all diagnosis. Though he himself has PTSD, he considers it controlled and uses medication to help him live with his condition.

"I might jump, but not to the point of where people will see me react," he said of his experiences of fireworks with the disorder.

Still, he feels more comfortable with fireworks if he is the one launching them.

Boily has seen older members of the association who suffer from what was called "shell-shock" in their day, dive to the floor at a sudden sound.

"It's very unnerving for them because it puts them back in combat," he says.

Their "animal instinct," as Boily describes it, to survive kicks in involuntarily and he has seen veterans go into combat roles if something drops to the ground unexpectedly.

They immediately go into a defensive mindset, become agitated and experience an extreme adrenaline rush, according to Boily. He said he has seen it take up to three days for someone to come down from that rush.

He states if someone sees a veteran going into a PTSD episode, the best thing they can do is comfort them from afar and reassure them of their surroundings.

What people can do

People who want to have their own fireworks show and have combat veteran neighbors can help their neighbors by just making them aware of when and where they will be launching the fireworks.

Veterans who have identified fireworks as a potential PTSD trigger can request a sign for their yard to make neighbors aware.

A group called Military with PTSD started a movement called [An Explosion of Kindness](#) to provide yard signs that say "A combat veteran lives here. Please be courteous with fireworks."

McCasland explains the best way for family or bystanders to help the person experiencing the episode is to reassure them of their surroundings. The grounding technique uses all five senses to remind the veteran they are not in combat and helps keep them from "being pulled into a past event."

Abiding by the City Ordinances relating to when fireworks can be launched will also help combat veterans who are affected by PTSD.

According to the city's code of ordinances, fireworks are only allowed to be exploded from July 1 through July 5 from 6 p.m. - 10 p.m.

Preparedness helps a veteran expect a potential trigger and find ways to overcome it or gives them time to remove themselves from the situation all together.

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