

When Fireworks Don't Feel Like Freedom: PTSD Awareness and Coping During Independence Day



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For many Americans, the Fourth of July is a time for celebration—cookouts, fireworks, and a shared sense of national pride. But for some Veterans living with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), this patriotic holiday can be filled with distress, not delight.

While fireworks symbolize freedom, their sudden booms, flashing lights, and smoky trails can trigger intense reactions for those who've experienced trauma, especially combat Veterans. Loud noises may resemble gunfire. The unpredictability of neighborhood displays can shatter a Veteran's sense of safety.

What feels like a celebration to some can cause others to relive their most difficult moments.

“Veterans may find themselves feeling blindsided by fireworks they weren't expecting,” said Dr. Shawn Clark, Serious Mental Illness Program Manager and Local Recovery Coordinator at the G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center. “It's not about a lack of patriotism—it's about navigating deeply wired trauma responses and reclaiming a sense of calm in the face of distress.”

Recognizing Symptoms of Distress

During the Fourth of July, Veterans with PTSD may experience:

- Intense reactions to loud noises or bright flashes
- Feeling jumpy, on edge, or emotionally detached
- Flashbacks that make past trauma feel immediate
- Feeling unable to control surroundings
- Resorting to alcohol or drugs to dull unwanted memories

Even expected fireworks displays can lead to anxiety in the days or weeks leading up to the holiday.

Tools and Tips for Managing Fireworks

Whether fireworks are anticipated or sudden, several techniques can help Veterans ground themselves:

- **Pause and breathe.** Try box breathing: inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4.
- **Use your senses.** Eat something sour or spicy to bring attention to the present.
- **Remind yourself:** You are safe. The moment will pass.
- **Bring earplugs or noise-canceling headphones** to minimize triggers.