

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Filing a Depression Claim

File a depression claim, whether direct or secondary to another service-connected condition.



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A FWD Assist HQ Field Guide

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This guide is education, not representation. It explains how part of the VA system works so you can handle your own business with confidence. It is not legal or claims advice, and reading it does not create any representative relationship between you and the author. The author is not affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and nothing here is endorsed by the VA.

This guide prints no live VA dollar figures and no rating percentages on purpose, because they change. Before you make a decision based on any number, check the current figure at va.gov. No book can promise you a rating; the evidence in your file decides the result. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Officer is always free.

In crisis? Call the **Veterans Crisis Line**: dial **988**, then press **1**. You can also text **838255** or chat online at veteranscrisisline.net. It is free, confidential, and available 24/7.

Filing a Depression Claim

File a depression claim, whether direct or secondary to another service-connected condition.

Companion to *VA Mental Health Claims Beyond PTSD*.

This is general education, not legal or claims advice, and not guidance for your specific claim. It cannot promise you a rating or an outcome, and no one can. For help with your own claim, see a free accredited representative (see [the back of this guide](#)). Nothing here creates a representative relationship.

Current as of October 2026. Rules, forms, and figures change. Check current details at va.gov.

THE BEST WAY TO USE THIS GUIDE

The strongest position is to be your own informed advocate and to work with a free accredited representative. An accredited Veterans Service Organization, such as the DAV, VFW, American Legion, or a county or state veterans office, helps at no charge. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can help too. They can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim, and after that they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide is here so you understand your own situation and can work with them as a full partner instead of handing it over blind. If you'd rather handle this yourself, and you're comfortable doing that, the guide walks you through every step. Either way, you stay in control.

The Outcome and What You Need Before You Start

The outcome: By the end of this guide you'll file a depression claim on VA Form 21-526EZ that documents your diagnosis and, in your own words, how depression affects your work, relationships, and daily life.

This guide prepares you for the task. It doesn't and can't promise a rating, a percentage, or an outcome. The evidence in your file decides the result.

WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START

- ☐ Internet access for VA.gov, or the VA phone line at 1-800-827-1000.
- ☐ A current depression diagnosis from a licensed mental health professional, if you have one.
- ☐ A record of your symptoms: mood, sleep, energy, concentration, and how they hit work and home.
- ☐ Your service history and any in-service event, or the name of a service-connected condition that may be driving the depression.
- ☐ Statements from buddies or family about changes they've seen in you.
- ☐ Your VA file number, if you have one.

When to start: Today. Once VA has your Intent to File, you have one year to send the complete claim, and VA treats the claim as filed on the Intent to File date.

Start Here: The Basics

Depression can be service connected like any other condition. VA rates it under the General Rating Formula for Mental Disorders. Major depressive disorder is Diagnostic Code 9434, persistent depressive disorder is 9433, and unspecified depressive disorder is 9435. The rating turns on how much your symptoms get in the way of work and relationships, not on the name of the diagnosis. So the heart of this claim is an honest, specific picture of concentration, motivation, sleep, and how you hold up at work and at home.

Depression is often secondary to a service-connected physical condition, because chronic pain and lost function wear a person down. If you already have a service-connected mental health condition, like PTSD, VA gives one mental health rating for all of them. A depression diagnosis then adds symptoms to that one rating instead of creating a second one. This guide prints no percentages. See how VA rates mental health conditions at va.gov.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.130; 38 CFR § 4.14; 38 CFR § 3.310.

If your symptoms turn into a crisis, stop and call the **Veterans Crisis Line**: dial **988**, then press **1**, text **838255**, or chat at veteranscrisisline.net. Getting help is part of building your record, not a mark against your claim.

The Steps

STEP 1

File an Intent to File.

How. Submit it online through va.gov/resources/your-intent-to-file-a-va-claim, call 1-800-827-1000, or mail VA Form 21-0966. Save the confirmation.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.155(b).

Done when you have a confirmation saved.

STEP 2

Get a diagnosis from a licensed professional.

How. See a mental health provider, at VA or privately, to confirm the depression diagnosis and record your symptoms and how bad they are over time. If you don't have a diagnosis yet, you can still file, and VA will usually schedule an exam.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.125(a); 38 CFR § 3.159(c)(4).

Done when you have a current diagnosis with your symptoms written down, or you know VA's exam will address it.

STEP 3

Pick the service-connection path that fits your facts.

How. Depression can be direct, tied to an event or the conditions of your service, or secondary to a service-connected physical condition.

If a service-connected condition, like chronic pain or a disfiguring injury, weighs on your mood, **then** claim depression as secondary and name that condition. **If** you had depression before and a service-connected condition made it worse, **then** that's aggravation, and VA needs medical evidence of how bad it was before it got worse, or the earliest medical evidence from after it started getting worse. **If** it traces to something in service, **then** claim direct service connection. **If** you aren't sure, ask a free accredited representative.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.303; 38 CFR § 3.310(a) and (b).

Done when you've picked your path.

STEP 4

Describe the impairment in concrete terms.

How. Write, in your own words, how depression affects getting to work, finishing tasks, sleeping, and being present with your family. Ask people close to you for short statements about the changes they've seen. VA Form 21-10210 works for their statements.

Done when you have a plain, specific account of how depression limits your work and home life.

STEP 5

Get the medical opinion your path needs.

How. Ask your provider to explain whether your depression is at least as likely as not related to service, or caused or made worse by the service-connected condition you named. VA may also get an opinion at your C&P exam.

Done when you have a written opinion that matches your path, or you know VA will get one at the exam.

STEP 6

File the 21-526EZ and name the path.

How. List depression by its diagnosis and say how it connects, for example "major depressive disorder, secondary to service-connected low back condition." Attach your diagnosis, statements, and any opinion.

Done when the claim names depression and the path you're using.

STEP 7

Get ready for the mental health C&P exam.

How. Describe your symptoms as they really are, including how often your bad days come and how long they last. Don't play them down, and don't stretch them. VA looks at how often, how bad, and how long, across your whole record, not just how you feel the day of the exam.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.126(a).

Done when you're ready to describe your symptoms honestly and fully.

STEP 8

Submit and confirm.

How. File online at [VA.gov](https://va.gov) or mail it to Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444. Keep the receipt. About 10 days later, check VA.gov or call 1-800-827-1000 to confirm every document is in your file.

Done when the claim is filed and you've confirmed VA has everything.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Filed an Intent to File and saved the confirmation.
- ☐ Have a current diagnosis, or know VA will examine me.
- ☐ Picked my path: direct, secondary, or aggravation.
- ☐ Described the impairment at work and home, with buddy or family statements.
- ☐ Got a medical opinion that matches my path, or know VA will get one.
- ☐ Filed the 21-526EZ naming depression and my path.
- ☐ Ready to describe my symptoms at the C&P exam as they really are.
- ☐ Submitted the claim and confirmed VA has everything.

Reminder: rules and rates change. Check any current figure at va.gov. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide prepared you for the task. The evidence in your file decides the result.

Get Free, Accredited Help

For anything about your own claim, talk to an accredited representative. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Free help is available through Veterans Service Organizations such as the DAV, VFW, and American Legion, and through county and state veterans offices.

To find one near you, visit va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative. Representation begins only when you sign VA Form 21-22 (for a Veterans Service Organization) or 21-22a (for an individual agent or attorney). With one rare exception for a single unpaid case, only accredited people can represent you before the VA, and only an accredited agent or attorney can charge you a fee. Nothing in this guide creates that relationship.

A warning about claim sharks. Anyone who offers to file your initial claim for a fee, or who guarantees you a rating or a percentage, is selling something you shouldn't buy. Accredited Veterans Service Organizations help at no charge, and accredited claims agents and attorneys may charge only after VA issues its initial decision, within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Report predatory companies to the VA Office of Inspector General at 1-800-488-8244.

Keep Going: The Full Guide

This field guide is the short, do-this-now companion to the book *VA Mental Health Claims Beyond PTSD*. See every FWD Assist HQ title that is out now at fwdassisthq.com/books.

Current as of October 2026. Rules, forms, and figures change. Check current details at va.gov.

About the Author

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J. Erickson is a service-disabled Air Force veteran. He served as a military firefighter and as a veteran service officer, where he spent years walking veterans through the same claims process he writes about now. He holds an MBA and writes plain-language guides for veterans who want to understand the system without a translator.

He writes the For the Rest of Us series at fwdassisthq.com. This guide is published by FWD Assist HQ as a veteran education resource. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.