

FM-PTS-03

SESSION 3

COMBAT STRESS, PTSD, AND COPING STRATEGIES THAT WORK

12 Weeks to a Stronger You | Post Traumatic Strength

Downloadable slides • jpts.life

COMBAT STRESS: AN EXPECTED REACTION

Combat stress is exactly what it sounds like — stress that comes from being in combat. And here is the important word: expected. Combat stress is a normal, predictable response to an abnormal environment. When you are in a combat zone, your body and mind are under pressure from every direction.

The physical stressors alone are significant: poor nutrition, extreme temperatures, little sleep, minimal personal hygiene, and constant physical demand. Add to that the psychological weight — the constant threat of IEDs, the awareness of snipers, the deaths of people you served alongside — and it is remarkable that anyone comes back without some form of stress response. It would be unusual not to.

Combat stress shows up in many ways: difficulty sleeping, heightened alertness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, emotional numbness. These are the same symptoms we associate with PTSD. This is where the confusion happens.

The critical difference: combat stress is a reaction. Given time and some basic self-care strategies, it typically resolves. The terrible experiences and memories may always be troubling — they should be. But most veterans move through combat stress and into different phases of their lives without it defining them permanently.

WHEN STRESS BECOMES PTSD

PTSD is a higher hurdle. It is not simply stress that did not go away — it is a fundamentally different condition where the nervous system gets stuck in threat-detection mode and the brain's processing of traumatic memories is disrupted in a way that keeps them feeling present and active.

The distinction matters because the interventions are different. Combat stress responds well to self-care: rest, movement, connection, time. PTSD typically requires professional treatment. New, empirically validated therapies — like Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) and Prolonged Exposure (PE) — effectively address PTSD even for veterans of prior wars. These are not experimental. They work. But they need to be done with a trained mental health provider.

If you are unsure whether what you are experiencing is combat stress or PTSD, that conversation with a provider is worth having. You do not have to figure it out alone, and you do not have to wait until things get worse.

COPING STRATEGIES THAT ACTUALLY HELP

Whether you are dealing with combat stress, PTSD, or some combination of both, there are strategies that make a real difference. These are not magic cures — they are tools. The more consistently you use them, the more they work.

- **Physical Health:** Your nervous system lives in your body. What you put into that body matters enormously. Prioritizing nutrition, regular exercise, and sleep is not self-indulgence — it is maintenance. Cortisol and adrenaline, the stress hormones that fuel anxiety and hyperarousal, are regulated by movement and rest. If you are not sleeping, not eating well, and not moving, you are fighting your recovery with both hands tied.
- **Seeking Support:** This means reaching out — to a counselor, a therapist, a peer support group, or a veteran organization. Isolation makes everything worse. You do not have to talk about the trauma itself. Starting with someone who listens is enough. Support groups for veterans specifically offer something unique: the understanding of people who have been where you have been.
- **Relaxation Techniques:** Meditation, Pilates, music, time in nature — these activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which is your body's "rest and recover" mode. They counter the hyperarousal that keeps your system stuck in high alert. They do not require expensive equipment or a lot of time. Even ten minutes of intentional stillness has measurable effects on stress hormones.

You do not need to pick one strategy and stick to it forever. Build a toolkit. Physical health grounds you. Support connects you. Relaxation calms the system. Together, they create the conditions your brain needs to begin processing and moving forward.

COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING: CHANGING HOW YOU THINK

At the heart of this program is a concept worth understanding early: cognitive restructuring. This is the process of identifying negative, distorted, or unhelpful thoughts and replacing them with more accurate and constructive ones.

This is not about thinking positively. It is not about pretending things are fine when they are not. It is about catching the automatic thoughts that drag you down — "I am broken," "I will never be normal," "nobody understands what I went through" — and asking whether they are actually true.

This work takes discipline. It requires you to pay attention to your own thinking, which is uncomfortable at first. But this is where the real shift from victim to victor happens. You cannot control what happened to you. You can learn to control how you interpret it and what you tell yourself about it.

The path forward is not passive. It requires you to work — mentally — between sessions, during the week, throughout your daily life. That is the commitment this program is asking for.

LOOKING AHEAD

LOOKING AHEAD — SESSION 4

Next session we build on coping by exploring adaptive coping strategies in depth, and we continue the EQ journey by examining relationship management — the most challenging skill when stress is high.

Before next session, notice your automatic reactions to a stressful moment. What did your mind tell you automatically? Just observe — that is your first step toward cognitive restructuring.