

A successful claim needs a **current mental-health diagnosis**, a valid path to service connection, and evidence showing how the condition affects work and social functioning.

01 START WITH THE MEDICAL FOUNDATION



STEP 1
CURRENT DIAGNOSIS

A qualified clinician documents a condition that meets the applicable DSM-5 diagnostic requirements.



STEP 2
FUNCTIONAL RECORD

Treatment notes, examinations, and lay evidence document the frequency, severity, duration, and effects of symptoms.

The diagnosis identifies the condition. The rating turns primarily on occupational and social impairment, not the diagnosis label alone.

02 CHOOSE THE SERVICE-CONNECTION PATH



DIRECT

Evidence links the current condition to symptoms, events, or circumstances during service.

Current disability + in-service event + nexus



SECONDARY

A service-connected disability or its treatment caused the mental-health condition.

38 CFR § 3.310(a)



AGGRAVATION

A service-connected disability increased the severity of an existing mental-health condition.

38 CFR § 3.310(b)



TRAUMATIC EVENT

Claims based on an in-service traumatic event may require specific stressor or alternative-evidence development.

Use the PTSD or MST guide when applicable

03 BUILD ONE CONNECTED RECORD

1

DIAGNOSTIC EVALUATION

Current diagnosis, differential diagnosis, and relevant testing.

2

TREATMENT RECORDS

Therapy, medication, hospital care, response, and side effects.

3

SERVICE AND MEDICAL HISTORY

Symptoms, events, diagnoses, treatment, and a consistent timeline.

4

LAY EVIDENCE

Specific observations from the veteran, family, friends, or coworkers.

5

MEDICAL NEXUS

A reasoned opinion addressing the exact service-connection theory.

DOCUMENT REAL-WORLD IMPAIRMENT

SHOW WHAT SYMPTOMS DO,
NOT ONLY WHICH SYMPTOMS
EXIST

- Reliability, productivity, and attendance
- Judgment, thinking, mood, and communication
- Relationships and social functioning
- Self-care and activities of daily living
- Periods of worsening and their duration

The listed symptoms in the rating formula are examples. VA must evaluate the overall disability picture.

04 CURRENT MENTAL-HEALTH RATING LADDER

100%

Total occupational and social impairment.

70%

Deficiencies in most areas, such as work, school, family relations, judgment, thinking, or mood.

50%

Reduced reliability and productivity.

30 / 10 / 0%

Lower levels reflect occasional, mild, controlled, or noncompensable impairment under the current formula.

Most mental disorders use one General Rating Formula. Multiple diagnoses usually produce one evaluation for overlapping manifestations rather than separate ratings for the same impairment.

05 BEFORE YOU FILE

- ✓ Current diagnosis documented
- ✓ Service-connection path identified
- ✓ Treatment and medication history collected
- ✓ Symptom timeline reviewed for consistency

- ✓ Work and social effects described specifically
- ✓ Relevant lay statements prepared
- ✓ Nexus addresses the claimed pathway
- ✓ Safety concerns disclosed honestly to clinicians

