§ 3.343  Continuance of total disability ratings.

(a) General. Total disability ratings, when warranted by the severity of the condition and not granted purely because of hospital, surgical, or home treatment, or individual unemployability will not be reduced, in the absence of clear error, without examination showing material improvement in physical or mental condition. Examination reports showing material improvement must be evaluated in conjunction with all the facts of record, and consideration must be given particularly to whether the veteran attained improvement under the ordinary conditions of life, i.e., while working or actively seeking work or whether the symptoms have been brought under control by prolonged rest, or generally, by following a regimen which precludes work, and, if the latter, reduction from total disability ratings will not be considered pending reexamination after a period of employment (3 to 6 months).

(b) Tuberculosis; compensation. In service-connected cases, evaluations for active or inactive tuberculosis will be governed by the Schedule for Rating Disabilities (part 4 of this chapter). Where in the opinion of the rating board the veteran at the expiration of the period during which a total rating is provided will not be able to maintain inactivity of the disease process under the ordinary conditions of life, the case will be submitted under §3.321.

(c) Individual unemployability. (1) In reducing a rating of 100 percent service-connected disability based on individual unemployability, the provisions of §3.105(e) are for application but caution must be exercised in such a determination that actual employability is established by clear and convincing evidence. When in such a case the veteran is undergoing vocational rehabilitation, education or training, the rating will not be reduced by reason thereof unless there is received evidence of marked improvement or recovery in physical or mental conditions or of employment progress, income earned, and prospects of economic rehabilitation, which demonstrates affirmatively the veteran’s capacity to pursue the vocational or occupation for which the training is intended to qualify him or her, or unless the physical or mental demands of the course are obviously incompatible with total disability. Neither participation in, nor the receipt of remuneration as a result of participation in, a therapeutic or rehabilitation activity under 38 U.S.C. 1718 shall be considered evidence of employability.

(2) If a veteran with a total disability rating for compensation purposes based on individual unemployability begins to engage in a substantially gainful occupation during the period beginning after January 1, 1985, the veteran’s rating may not be reduced solely on the basis of having secured and followed such substantially gainful occupation.
§ 3.344 Stabilization of disability evaluations.

(a) Examination reports indicating improvement. Rating agencies will handle cases affected by change of medical findings or diagnosis, so as to produce the greatest degree of stability of disability evaluations consistent with the laws and Department of Veterans Affairs regulations governing disability compensation and pension. It is essential that the entire record of examinations and the medical-industrial history be reviewed to ascertain whether the recent examination is full and complete, including all special examinations indicated as a result of general examination and the entire case history. This applies to treatment of intercurrent diseases and exacerbations, including hospital reports, bedside examinations, examinations by designated physicians, and examinations in the absence of, or without taking full advantage of, laboratory facilities and the cooperation of specialists in related lines. Examinations less full and complete than those on which payments were authorized or continued will not be used as a basis of reduction. Ratings on account of diseases subject to temporary or episodic improvement, e.g., manic depressive or other psychotic reaction, epilepsy, psychoneurotic reaction, arteriosclerotic heart disease, bronchial asthma, gasteric or duodenal ulcer, many skin diseases, etc., will not be reduced on any one examination, except in those instances where all the evidence of record clearly warrants the conclusion that sustained improvement has been demonstrated. Ratings on account of diseases which become comparatively symptom free (findings absent) after prolonged rest, e.g., residuals of phlebitis, arteriosclerotic heart disease, etc., will not be reduced on examinations reflecting the results of bed rest. Moreover, though material improvement in the physical or mental condition is clearly reflected the rating agency will consider whether the evidence makes it reasonably certain that the improvement will be maintained under the ordinary conditions of life. When syphilis of the central nervous system or alcoholic deterioration is diagnosed following a long prior history of psychosis, psychoneurosis, epilepsy, or the like, it is rarely possible to exclude persistence, in masked form, of the preceding innocently acquired manifestations. Rating boards encountering a change of diagnosis will exercise caution in the determination as to whether a change in diagnosis represents no more than a progression of an earlier diagnosis, an error in prior diagnosis or possibly a disease entity independent of the service-connected disability. When the new diagnosis reflects mental deficiency or personality disorder only, the possibility of only temporary remission of a superimposed psychiatric disease will be borne in mind.

(b) Doubtful cases. If doubt remains, after according due consideration to all the evidence developed by the several items discussed in paragraph (a) of this section, the rating agency will continue the rating in effect, citing the former diagnosis with the new diagnosis in parentheses, and following the appropriate code there will be added the reference “Rating continued pending reexamination _______ months from this date, § 3.344.” The rating agency will determine on the basis of the facts in each individual case whether 18, 24 or 30 months will be allowed to elapse before the reexamination will be made.

(c) Disabilities which are likely to improve. The provisions of paragraphs (a) and (b) of this section apply to ratings which have continued for long periods at the same level (5 years or more). They do not apply to disabilities which have not become stabilized and are