Substance Use & Self-Medication

The Search for Relief

OPERATION INJURED SOLDIERS | PARTICIPANT WORKSHEET

Everybody Seeks Relief

Sometimes we seek less pain, a quieter mind, better sleep, connection, or a sense of normal. Needing relief does not make you weak.

When life gets heavy, what do I reach for?

What am I hoping to feel less of - or more of?

Understand My Pattern

PAIN > RELIEF > REPETITION > RELIANCE

One possible pathway: something changes how I feel, I repeat it, and an option begins to feel necessary. This is not everyone's experience.

What does my current coping strategy do for me in the short term?

What might it be costing me over time?

Reflect privately. Sharing is optional. Taking medication as prescribed is not automatically misuse or addiction. This worksheet is educational, not a diagnostic test.

The Brain Remembers Relief

Dopamine, cues, and the needs beneath the pattern

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Dopamine & Reward Learning

Dopamine helps with motivation, reinforcement, and learning. Addiction also involves stress and self-control systems. It is not simply "too much dopamine."

CUE > ANTICIPATION > USE > SHORT-TERM EFFECT > LEARNING

Wanting and liking can separate: I may feel pulled toward something even when I enjoy it less. A cue can be a time, place, person, feeling, or routine.

What tends to happen right before I want relief?

What Is Beneath the Surface?

Circle any needs that may be part of your experience:

Pain / Poor sleep / Anxiety / Grief / Loneliness / Shame
Relationship strain / Trauma reminders / Loss of purpose / Other

If this coping strategy disappeared, what might still need care?

What has my brain learned to expect from this pattern?

Dopamine is necessary for normal functioning. A "dopamine detox" does not remove dopamine. The useful goal is to change unhelpful patterns and build other sources of satisfaction.

From Reliance to Support

Notice the cost and build a bigger relief toolbox

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A Personal Check-In

Mark what deserves an honest conversation. These prompts do not diagnose a disorder.

- ☐ **CONTROL** | Am I using more than I intend or struggling to cut back?
- ☐ **COST** | Is this affecting my health, money, relationships, or presence?
- ☐ **CONSEQUENCES** | Am I continuing despite harm or missed responsibilities?
- ☐ **CONCEALMENT** | Am I hiding or minimizing the pattern?

You do not have to hit rock bottom before asking for help.

My Relief Toolbox

BODY
Movement, sleep support, physical therapy, appropriate pain care

MIND
Counseling, grounding, trauma treatment, trigger awareness

RELATIONSHIPS
Veteran peers, trusted friends, support groups, chaplains

PURPOSE
Hobbies, service, mentoring, meaningful work, faith if meaningful

PROFESSIONAL CARE
Medical assessment, substance-use treatment, medication support

Write one support to try on each line. Coping tools complement treatment; they do not replace needed medical or withdrawal care.

My Next Supported Step

Relief, connection, and a practical plan

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Pause | Name | Connect | Choose

For coping with urges - not for managing medical withdrawal.

When this cue or feeling shows up...

What I need - and one additional support I can use...

The person or professional I will contact, and when...

Helping Someone I Love

NOTICE changes. **ASK** with care. **LISTEN** for the need. **CONNECT** with support.
"I have noticed things seem harder lately. How are you doing?"

One caring statement or healthy boundary I can practice:

Make Change Safely

Abruptly stopping alcohol after heavy, regular use or stopping benzodiazepines can cause dangerous withdrawal. Seek medical guidance before stopping or making major reductions. Do not change prescribed medication on your own.

Next steps: Contact your clinician, local VA, or the Operation Injured Soldiers team for connection to support. VA treatment information: mentalhealth.va.gov/substance-use

For suspected overdose, trouble breathing, seizures, or immediate danger, call 911.