

Addiction and Suicide Amongst Veterans: Did You Know...? *Finding Hope In The Darkness*

⌘ While the use of illicit drugs is lower among military personnel than civilians, that alcohol, OTC drug use, & smoking are significantly higher.
 ⌘ Stress is a major contributor to both the onset and exacerbation of substance abuse and mental health problems.
 ⌘ Research has demonstrated a link between PTSD and substance abuse disorders among veterans.

The following article, by DrugRehab.org, is larger than we have space for here. But it's got some REALLY important information. So we are getting you started & then including the link to be able to read the complete report online, at www.drugrehab.org/addiction-suicide-veterans/ It will also be added to our 'Seamless Transition' webpage. B&B

Many brave men and women who serve our country live through traumatic experiences during deployment. Today, there's more awareness about the many veterans who struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their experiences, yet much work remains. PTSD is one of the primary reasons veterans may turn to drugs or alcohol – as a coping mechanism to deal with the traumatic memories, feelings of depression, and anxiety resulting from PTSD – particularly if the disorder is inadequately treated or, in the worst-case scenario, undiagnosed or untreated at all.

At first, the occasional drink (or the occasional use of recreational drugs) to relax and escape from traumatic memories or to cope with the challenges of re-entry into civilian society seems harmless, but when the underlying stress or other cause isn't addressed, this behavior can quickly escalate to addiction. Combined with depression, PTSD, or any other underlying mental health condition, addiction increases the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

The complexity of these diseases and comorbidity (co-occurring disorders, or two or more disorders present at the same time) presents a serious risk for veterans. We've created this comprehensive guide to shed light on the issues facing many veterans including the risk of addiction, suicide, and other contributing factors such as PTSD, and to provide resources and information to give veterans and those who love them a renewed sense of hope for regaining their sense of normalcy and achieving well-being.

What You'll Find in Their Online Guide:

at www.drugrehab.org/addiction-suicide-veterans/

Information on Substance Abuse Among Veterans
 The Link Between PTSD and Substance Abuse Among Veterans
 Addiction and Suicide Among Veterans
 Coping with PTSD
 Overcoming Addiction and Suicide

Information on Substance Abuse Among Veterans

The following resources offer information on the rates of substance abuse and addiction among veterans as well as contributing factors that increase the risk of addiction and underlying reasons for substance use and misuse among veterans.

A 2011 article in *Psychiatric Times* reports on the high rate of substance abuse among veterans, noting that veterans may return from combat with "a co-occurring triad of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and pain, which complicates the problems with substance abuse." This article presents findings from several surveys and reports including data illustrating alarming findings regarding the rates of substance use and abuse among veterans including:

- ♦ 27% of veterans recently deployed to Iraq screened positive for alcohol misuse (survey sample size: 6,527).

- ♦ 25% of recently deployed soldiers screened positive for alcohol misuse in another study, as well as 12% for alcohol-related behavioral problems (survey sample size: 1,120).

- ♦ In a sample of recently deployed military personnel with combat exposure, one study found a binge drinking rate of 53%.

- ♦ The rate of frequent, heavy drinking in the military ranges between 15% and 20% in one large-scale survey conducted prior to extensive deployments to areas such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

- ♦ A subsequent large-scale survey of 88,205 soldiers who had recently been deployed to Iraq found that 12% to 15% screened positive for alcohol problems.

- ♦ These findings are alarming and may not even illustrate the true depth of the substance abuse problems among veterans. But the widespread prevalence of substance use and misuse clearly points to the need for better interventions and preventative measures such as treatments to enable veterans to overcome PTSD and more comprehensive screenings and interventions for addiction.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) states in a March 2013 report that the rate of illicit drug use is lower among military personnel compared to the general population. However, "heavy alcohol and tobacco use, and especially prescription drug abuse, are much more prevalent and are on the rise."

Military service members who have experienced multiple deployments and exposure to combat situations have the greatest risk of developing substance abuse problems. "The stresses of deployment during wartime and the unique culture of the military account for some of these differences," the NIDA explains. "Zero-tolerance policies and stigma pose difficulties in identifying and treating substance use problems in military personnel, as does lack of confidentiality that deters many who need treatment from seeking it."

According to the National Research Action Plan, created by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense, Department of Human Services, and the Department of Education in August 2013 in response to the executive order, *Improving Access to Mental Health Services for Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families*, "Military service exposes service members to a variety of stressors, including exposures to death, risk to life, sustained threat of injury or actual injury, and the day-to-day family stress inherent in all phases of the military life cycle and its transitions. Stress is a major contributor to both the onset and exacerbation of substance abuse and mental health problems and is related to a variety of negative physical health outcomes."

The Link Between PTSD and Substance Abuse Among Veterans

Research has demonstrated a link between PTSD and substance abuse disorders among veterans. While it's not clear whether PTSD is the direct cause for substance use or abuse or the two are consequences of a single underlying cause (the latter is the current hypothesis generally accepted among researchers), there is a clear link between the two pointing to the need for more robust approaches to mental health services for veterans.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), "18.5% of service members returning from deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression." Yet only approximately half of veterans who require mental health treatment seek it, and among them, just over half of those who receive treatment receive adequate care.

A 2014 article in *Psychology Today* points out that PTSD and addiction are typically viewed not as being directly related to one another, rather as two consequences arising from the same root cause. In the case of veterans as well as any other individuals having endured traumatic experiences, trauma is believed to be the underlying cause of both PTSD and addiction. Richard Taite, author of the article, explains, "For returning veterans, it is the power of these overwhelming experiences that create PTSD and it may be the same power that drives addiction, with or without the two occurring together. From combat or car crash or abuse, trauma creates addiction."

According to the National Center on PTSD, the incidence of PTSD and substance abuse comorbidity is high among veterans. More than two out of ten veterans with PTSD also have SUD (substance use disorder), and one out of every three veterans seeking help for SUD also has PTSD. Additionally, war veterans with both alcohol problems and PTSD tend to be binge drinkers, which is believed to be in response to traumatic memories in attempt to drown

out visions and memories of these experiences.

Addiction and Suicide Among Veterans

In addition to the link between PTSD and substance abuse, research has also demonstrated an increased risk of suicide among veterans as a whole but in particular those with substance abuse disorders or addiction. The following resources offer information on recent data regarding addiction and suicide risks among veterans.

In 2012, the number of US veterans who died by suicide exceeded the number of deaths in combat. According to the Department of Defense Suicide Event Report for 2014, "269 Active Component deaths and 169 Reserve Component deaths were attributable to suicide." Additionally, 1,126 suicide attempts were reported, and, "The most common method of attempting suicide was the use of drugs (illicit or prescription) and/or alcohol." Previous reports can be found at the National Center for Health & Technology website.

DrugFree.org reports on findings from several studies that point to the high rates of substance abuse, alcohol use, and suicide among veterans and active service members alike. One study found that the suicide rate among active-duty service members reached an all-time high in the previous year, and also notes, "Research indicates that as many as 43 percent of active duty soldiers reported binge drinking within the past month, according to the report."

"A number of studies have shown that there are links between veteran substance abuse, depression, and suicide. In one study that involved roughly 600 veterans who were deployed to either Afghanistan or Iraq, 39% of the vets were screened and showed positive for probable alcohol abuse. Three percent of the vets screened were positive for probable drug use," explains Lifeline for Vets. "A larger study that involved more than 675,000 active duty personnel determined that the rate of both substance use disorders and depression has increased among active members of the military. Another study determined that the rate of suicide across all military services in the USA increased between 2005 and 2007."

Brandon Caro, author of a 2015 novel called *Old Silk Road*, offers personal insight into the issue in his compelling account of his own struggle and suicide attempt following his experience as a Navy corpsman (a combat medic) for *The New York Times*.

Coping with PTSD

Coping with PTSD is a key element of successful transition back into civilian life as well as long-term well-being for veterans who experience stress, anxiety, and other symptoms of PTSD as a result of experiences in combat or other trauma exposure. The following resources offer valuable information on the resources, approaches, and services available to help veterans cope with and overcome PTSD.

The National Center on PTSD outlines a few treatment options that hold promise for veterans suffering from PTSD, including those who also have a comorbid substance use disorder, including:

- ♦ Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) – a therapeutic approach to changing the way a person thinks about their previous traumatic experiences and the aftermath of those experiences.

- ♦ Cognitive processing therapy (CPT) – an approach designed to help people with PTSD develop new ways to cope with their distressing thoughts and memories using skills to reshape the way they think about themselves, the world, and others.

- ♦ Prolonged exposure therapy (PE) – an approach that helps to decrease the distress associated with certain trauma-related thoughts, feelings, and situations through gradual, prolonged, and repeated exposure. [to be continued ...]

There is more of this presentation to be read at www.drugrehab.org/addiction-suicide-veterans/

We hope that any of our readers who may know someone for whom this information may be helpful, will pass it along. It is tragic what is allowed to happen to our GIs and Vets... both physically & mentally, after their 'boots on the ground' service is complete.

To Begin Your Journey On A Successful Recovery Program, Call 1-800-717-4921