



### The Relationship Between Substance Use and Combat Stress

There's a strong link between traumatic experiences and substance use problems. It is not unusual for trauma survivors to turn to alcohol or drugs for distraction or relief from stress, upsetting memories, depression, and sleep problems.

Why? Alcohol and drugs often make things *seem* better; at least momentarily: you forget your stress, the memories of your deployment seem far away, your depression is muted, you're able to fall asleep.

But drinking and doing drugs only makes things worse. People with alcohol and substance abuse problems are more likely to have difficulties dealing with stress and trauma, and it's more likely that significant parts of their lives are going to get out of control. In the long run, drinking and drugging will make it harder, not easier, to deal with combat stress, tension, sleep issues, relationships, and managing responsibilities.



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### Combat Stress Symptoms

1. **Re-experiencing the trauma:** flashbacks, nightmares, memories you can't get rid of, or having intense emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the trauma (being "triggered").
2. **Emotional numbing:** feeling distant from others, wanting to be alone, not feeling many emotions (especially positive ones), or not being interested in activities you once enjoyed.
3. **Avoidance:** avoiding activities, people, or places that remind you of the trauma, or avoiding talking or thinking about the trauma.
4. **Increased arousal:** having a hard time sleeping and concentrating, being irritable, on guard and "jumpy," or having intense startle responses (like "hitting the dirt" or reacting very strongly when surprised). Combat stress and PTSD have been called "**a normal reaction to abnormal events.**" If you're having these reactions, know that they are common and normal after what you've been through. These reactions do not mean that you're weak, crazy, or bad! There are many healthy ways you can manage or overcome these symptoms, but **please remember, using alcohol or drugs is not one of them.**



**Drinking and doing drugs only makes things worse.**



### Drinking and Using to Cope with Combat Stress

It makes complete sense that after experiencing a traumatic event, you'd want some relief; no one wants nightmares, or to feel on edge all the time, or to feel strangely numb. Self-medication can seem a reasonable choice; drinking or using drugs can in the short-term provide some apparent relief, letting you get to sleep or relax. Trouble is, using alcohol or drugs to get momentary relief from combat stress has a downside. For one thing, the relief is temporary and short-lived. For another, both alcohol and drugs contribute to many additional problems, including:

- Trouble concentrating.
- Restless sleep.
- Trouble coping with memories of trauma.
- Problems dealing with life stress.
- Nervousness and paranoia.
- Feeling numbed out.
- Fewer positive feelings.
- Not wanting to be around people.
- Feeling edgy and on guard.
- Increased anger and irritability.
- Depression.
- Increased risk for suicide.
- Conflicts with family members and friends.
- Reduced productivity at work.
- Increased risk for violence.
- Increased risk for accidents.



**Alcohol and drugs contribute to many additional problems.**

### Breaking the Connection

Maybe you're thinking, "I'm not willing to cut back on my drug or alcohol use right now – I just want to focus on getting some help for my PTSD." If that sounds like you, congratulations. It's great that you're thinking about getting some help. But here's something you've got to remember: Drugs and alcohol only make PTSD worse. When someone with PTSD self-medicates with alcohol and/or drugs, the PTSD reactions only intensify. Furthermore, if you're in treatment, self-medicating interferes with treatment efforts. Even though you may think the alcohol or drugs is making things a bit better, in the long run they're making things much worse.

### Getting Help for Both Substance Use Issues and PTSD

Because PTSD and drug and alcohol use often go hand-in-hand, it's quite common for service members to get help for both issues simultaneously. Many VA hospitals offer integrated support and treatment options for these related challenges. For information on programs that work with both substance use problems and PTSD, contact your local VA or Vet Center.