

STRESS, TRAUMA, AND ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE A NATIONAL CENTER FOR PTSD FACT SHEET

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Drinking to Reduce Stress

Many military personnel experience stress related to their deployment, service, and return home. These quite natural stress reactions can range from mild to severe and may be either short-lived or persist for a very long time. One common approach to managing stress that seems a simple and easy solution is use of alcohol or drugs. Military personnel, like civilians, may use alcohol and drugs as a way to relax or reduce anxiety and other bad feelings. In some cases, alcohol and drugs are not only used to decrease stress but also to manage severe symptoms that can arise from a traumatic experience in the warzone. You might find yourself drinking or using drugs for a variety of reasons when under stress or after trauma, including to:

- Help yourself sleep
- Relax
- Decrease emotional pain
- “Drown” your worries
- Escape present difficulties
- “Shake off” stress
- Decrease sadness
- Help yourself be around others
- Increase pleasurable experience
- Keep upsetting memories from coming to mind
- Calm anxiety

Becoming Dependent on Alcohol/Drugs

Initially, alcohol and drugs may seem to make things better. They may help you sleep, forget problems, or feel more relaxed. But any short-term benefit can turn sour fast. In the long run, using alcohol and drugs to cope with stress will cause a whole new set of very serious problems, as well as worsening the original problems that lead you to drink or use. Alcohol and drug abuse can cause problems with your family life, health, mental well-being, relationships, finances, employment, spirituality, and sense of self-worth.

Think about family impact as an example. It’s difficult to create good relationships when you are regularly drunk or high. Being intoxicated decreases intimacy and creates an inability to communicate well. Family members can feel rejected by someone who is always under the influence. In addition, witnessing someone's behavior while under the influence can be distressing. Children may not understand the aggressive behavior, the shutting down, or the hiding out that can occur along with substance use. The fallout from an accident or an arrest can have a long-lasting impact on a family. Alcohol and drug problems are dangerous for loved ones, because they are often linked with family violence and driving while intoxicated.

When is Use of Alcohol a Problem?

It is often hard to decide whether alcohol or drug use is becoming a problem. It can happen gradually, and sometimes can be hard to notice by the person who is using. Here are things that people sometimes say to themselves to convince themselves that they do not have a problem. Do you recognize any?

- "I just drink beer (wine)"
- "I don't use hard drugs"
- "I'm not an alcoholic"
- "I gave it up for 3 weeks last year"
- "I don't drink every day"
- "I've never missed a day of work"
- "I don't need help, I can handle it myself"

Alcohol or drug use can be considered a problem when it causes difficulties, even in minor ways. Here are some questions that you can ask yourself to see if you are developing a problem:

Have friends or family members commented on how much or how often you drink?

Have you have found yourself feeling guilty about your drinking or drug use?

Have you found yourself drinking (using) more over time?

Have you tried to cut down your alcohol (drug) use?

Does your drinking (using drugs) ever affect your ability to fulfill personal obligations such as parenting or work?

Do you drink (use) in situations that are physically dangerous such as driving or operating machinery while under the influence?

Have you found that you need more alcohol (drug) to get the same effect?

If you find that you are answering "yes" to one or more of these questions, perhaps it is time to re-evaluate your use, cut back, and seek help from friends, family, or a professional.

What to Do if Alcohol or Drugs are Causing Problems

If you think that that alcohol (drug) use has become (or is becoming) a problem for you, there are number of things that you can do. First, recognize that you are not alone and that others are available to lend support. Second, find help. Getting help is the most useful tool in decreasing or stopping problem drinking or drug use, even if you have doubts about being able to quit or if you are feeling guilt about the problem. Call your health provider, contact a physician or therapist, call your local VA hospital, or contact your local Alcoholic's Anonymous for guidance in your recovery. These contacts can help you on the road to the life you want.

Listed below are some useful websites if you are looking for more information about alcohol and drug use or about how to get help.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse Information and Resources: <http://www.alcoholanddrugabuse.com/>

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: Frequently Asked Questions: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/faq/faq.htm>

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator: <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

Alcoholics Anonymous Homepage: <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/>