

Veterans and Addiction Examined

By Jim Rachels



Substance abuse issues in veterans have been well-documented for quite a long time. And for many veterans, they are turning to drugs and alcohol because they are self-medicating for their PTSD. That is a topic we will touch on in this article but that is significant enough to be an article all in itself.

But if we are going to write a piece on addiction and veterans, PTSD is something that must be discussed.

This is from the Mayo Clinic:

“Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts about the event.”

Many combat veterans are facing issues with this. PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that happens when people go through a traumatic life event. These can be things like rape or an attack, a natural disaster, and combat during wartime. There are other causes these are just some of the most common ones out there. And PTSD does not discriminate it can happen to anyone surviving a tragic life event.

People with PTSD suffer from vivid memories of their past traumatic events and many things can trigger this. It could be the sight, the smell or the sound of something that sets off an episode. Another problem that arises from this is that we never know when something might happen to set someone off. It can be at a public event where they are around a lot of people. And that can turn out to be a dangerous event for all involved including the veteran.

Some of the other symptoms of PTSD are relationship issues, aggressive behavior, trouble remembering things and trouble sleeping. There are many more but these are just some of the most common ones. And it is estimated that more than 20% of veterans who suffer from PTSD also suffer from addiction issues. Statistically speaking it is harder to overcome an addiction issue when you have PTSD.

PTSD can happen within a month of the incident or it may not surface until years later. Everybody reacts differently to their trauma. And this exposure to trauma and PTSD can lead someone to full-blown addiction. Many people are simply trying to forget the terrible things they went through and saw. Many veterans have witnessed terrible things on the battlefield. They have seen friends maimed, and killed and have even had injuries themselves. And these incidents that took place on the battlefield follow these soldiers home in their memories.

Once the person has been triggered they go into a different state of mind. They sometimes even hallucinate and see and hear things that are not there. Sometimes this happens in the middle of the night and it's even been reported that some people have choked their spouses after waking up in a troubled state of mind from the PTSD. So PTSD can be dangerous to not only the person going through it but also those around them.

And many addicts have trouble admitting that they are facing issues and need help. Many fear the reaction of their friends and family and also are afraid of the stigma surrounding addiction. So there are resources for those suffering from addiction while on active duty but many do not utilize these tools out of fear of being stigmatized.

Another reason they do not come forward many times is if someone is battling addiction the military can discharge them for that. And for many servicemen, this is their life and they intend to make careers of this and this can ruin those chances so they never come forward to get the help they so desperately need.

Another extremely stressful time that leads to addiction is when someone is being deployed. They are going to be traveling to a foreign country in which they don't know anyone or anything really about the country as in most deployments it's the first time that person is traveling to that part of the world. And above and beyond that they are going to extremely dangerous places sometimes and they will be in fear for their life every day of their deployment. This is something that weighs heavy on a person.

Another scary statistic I found while doing my research is that in 2017 almost 17 veterans per day were committing suicide. A total of 730,000 were battling mental health conditions because of their tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For many, they are using in secrecy trying to not let anyone know about the illegal drugs they are using or prescription drugs that they abuse. But when it comes to drinking it's viewed in a very different light than that of illegal street drugs. Drinking can be seen as almost a tradition in some settings. Drinking is just another part of being a soldier to some people. So the relationship to alcohol is a much different relationship than one to an illegal drug. Alcohol is accepted and illegal drugs are not. So right there you can see where some people would say I guess it's ok to be drinking and still consider myself sober. For some, this is ok, for an addict it is not.

Many of these veterans are taking drugs and alcohol to go back and feel the way they did before they were deployed. Many of these soldiers have seen terrible things that have contributed to their problems. They are simply trying to numb themselves to what they are feeling at the moment. And

sometimes the memories can be too much to handle and you feel like you need more and more drugs or alcohol to help numb you from that terrible pain you are feeling inside.

There was a study done around 3 to 4 months after returning from a deployment it showed that 27% met the criteria for alcohol abuse. These behaviors can also lead to dangerous things like going out and using illegal drugs that are dangerous or even driving while intoxicated.

Addiction can also lead to people losing their way and who they truly are. Many people are doing things that they would've never imagined doing while sober. Many people will go through friends' prescriptions to see if there was anything to take. Some will even break into businesses and houses looking for drugs. Then there is also stealing stuff from people to pawn and get money that way for their substance of choice. Many times they are doing these things to the people closest to them.

Many veterans are also facing mental health issues. This is being brought up because many veterans are self-medicating for diagnosed or sometimes undiagnosed disorders. They seek out relief from their mental health condition and that is when they turn to drugs, alcohol or compulsive actions.

Many veterans are also living on the streets. So not only are they facing addiction issues but they don't even know where their next meal will be coming from or where they are going to sleep that night. This is an extreme amount of pressure that is difficult for many of these veterans to deal with and this in turn leads them to drugs and alcohol to numb themselves from the pain they are experiencing. I think if we were able to solve the homeless epidemic we would drastically cut down the number of veterans using drugs and alcohol. Getting sober and staying sober while fighting homelessness is an extremely difficult thing to ask of a person. But the good news is that it is possible, it's been done before and can be done again.

And the sad truth is the problem is not going away anytime soon. It keeps getting worse and worse year after year. According to the Military Times veterans make up 6% of the population in America while they account for 8% of the country's homeless population. This shows the sad state of affairs and it is showing how we are failing our veterans when it comes to the housing crisis. I believe if we were able to address this the addiction rate among veterans would go down dramatically.

The good news for veterans is the VA (Veteran Affairs) has treatment options for people facing addiction issues. They are aware that this is a problem among veterans and they are doing all they can to help with this situation. Unfortunately, they have had issues in the past with assisting

veterans with their claims and complaints. But this is something that they are always trying to improve and should in no way deter someone from going and seeking the help they need.

This VA offers help in the form of detox services, and drug substitution programs like methadone and suboxone, and can even help with nicotine replacement services as well. They also do inpatient and outpatient treatment programs. They also marriage and family counseling services. All of these things are extremely important when trying to get sober and most of all stay sober. This is something that is much more successful with the right help and with family involvement. So there is hope. This is something that with the right help and determination this is something where symptoms can be managed.