

# JUST THE FACTS: Alcohol & Drugs

## SUBSTANCE USE AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS

### The Relationship Between Substance Use and Post-traumatic Stress

There's a strong link between traumatic experiences and substance use problems, which include excess alcohol use and misuse of prescription drugs. 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 can fall asleep.

But, drinking and using drugs may make things worse. People with alcohol or substance use problems are more likely to struggle with stress and trauma, and lose control of significant parts of their lives. In the long run, excessive drinking or using drugs can make it harder, not easier, to cope with post-traumatic stress, tension, sleep issues, relationships and manage responsibilities.

### Post-traumatic Stress Symptoms

1. **Re-experiencing the trauma:** flashbacks, nightmares, memories you can't get rid of, or intense emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the trauma (being "triggered").
2. **Avoiding situations that remind you of the traumatic event:** avoiding activities, people, or places that remind you of the trauma, or avoiding talking or thinking about the event.
3. **Negative mood or thoughts:** lost or distorted memories of the traumatic event; negative thoughts about yourself, others or the world; lack of positive or loving emotions; feeling distant from others or wanting to be alone; not interested in activities you once enjoyed.
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).

Many experts refer to post-traumatic stress as "**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 using drugs only make things worse.

Alcohol and drugs may make things seem better, at first, but make it harder, not easier, in the long run.

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## SUBSTANCE USE AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS



### Drinking and Using Drugs to Cope with Post-traumatic Stress

It makes complete sense that after experiencing a traumatic event, you'd want some relief; no one wants nightmares, to feel on edge all the time, or to feel strangely numb. Self-medication may seem like a reasonable choice; drinking or using drugs can provide some short-term relief, helping you sleep or relax. The trouble is, using alcohol or drugs to get momentary relief from post-traumatic 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 handling life stress**

**Nervousness and paranoia**

**Feeling numb**

**Fewer positive feelings**

**Not wanting to be around people**

**Feeling edgy and on guard**

**Increased anger and irritability**

**Depression**

**Increased risk for suicide**

**Conflict with family and friends**

**Reduced productivity at work**

**Increased risk for violence**

**Increased risk for accidents**

No one wants nightmares, or to feel on edge or numb all the time. But using alcohol or drugs for temporary relief causes more 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 post-traumatic stress." If that sounds like you, congratulations. It's great that you're thinking about getting some help. But here's something to remember: Drugs and alcohol only make post-traumatic stress symptoms worse. When someone self-medicates with alcohol and/or drugs, the symptoms only intensify. Furthermore, if you're in treatment, self-medicating interferes with treatment efforts. Even though you may think alcohol or drugs make things a bit better, in the long run they make things much worse.

### Getting Help for Both Substance Use Issues and Post-traumatic Stress Symptoms

Because post-traumatic stress and drug or alcohol use often go hand-in-hand, it's quite common for service members to get help for both issues simultaneously. Many military treatment facilities offer integrated support and treatment options for these related challenges. For information on programs that work with both substance use problems and post-traumatic stress, contact your health care provider, TRICARE provider, or call the 24/7 DCoE Outreach Center at 866-966-1020.

