



FOR SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS AND FAMILIES

# Understanding PTSD and Substance Use

## Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

can occur after someone goes through combat, physical or sexual assault, terrorist attack, serious accident, natural disaster, or other traumatic event. Symptoms of PTSD can include feeling keyed up, having flashbacks or avoiding reminders of the event, losing interest in things you used to enjoy or avoiding being around other people.

## What is substance use disorder?

Some people try to cope with their PTSD by drinking heavily, using drugs or smoking too much. Eventually, the overuse of these substances can develop into substance use disorder (SUD), and treatment should be given for both PTSD and SUD to lead to successful recovery. The good news is that treatment of co-occurring (happening at the same time) PTSD and SUD works.

## How common is co-occurring PTSD and substance use disorder?

About 13 percent of service members and more than 25 percent of veterans with PTSD also have a substance use disorder.

## What treatments are available for co-occurring PTSD and substance use disorder?

Evidence shows that most people have improved PTSD and SUD symptoms when they are provided treatment that addresses both conditions. This can involve:

- Individual or group cognitive behavioral treatments;
- Specific psychological treatments for PTSD such as Cognitive Processing Therapy or Prolonged Exposure;
- Behavioral Couples Therapy with your spouse or significant other;
- And/or medications that may help you manage the PTSD or SUD symptoms.

Treatment for specific symptoms such as pain, anger or sleep disturbance should also be discussed with your provider.

## What else should I know about treatment?

There are many levels and types of treatment options available. The first step is to talk to a health care professional and ask for more information. There are successful treatments for co-occurring PTSD and SUD. Recovery is achievable; you can have a life without your symptoms. Your provider can help you get started.

## How can I find out if I need help?

If you continue to be troubled or distracted by your experiences for more than three months or have questions about your drinking or drug use, seek help by contacting a mental health professional. Online resources and anonymous self-assessments are also available at [AfterDeployment.dcoe.mil](http://AfterDeployment.dcoe.mil).

*"I entered treatment in 2009, after maybe two really bad years of PTSD and alcoholism. The VA staff was amazing. It's a whole new day for me."*

— JOE, IRAQ VETERAN

## GETTING HELP

To talk with a health care professional, there are several options:

**Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury Outreach Center**  
866-966-1020

**Military & Veterans Crisis Line**  
800-273-8255

**Military OneSource**  
800-342-9647

**Military Sexual Assault Safe Helpline**  
877-995-5247

**Contact a TRICARE authorized provider**  
[tricare.mil](http://tricare.mil)  
North: 877-874-2273  
South: 800-444-5445  
West: 877-988-9378

**Find a VA medical treatment facility**  
[va.gov](http://va.gov)  
[vetcenter.va.gov](http://vetcenter.va.gov)  
800-827-1000

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