

For Veterans and Families:

UNDERSTANDING PTSD AND SUBSTANCE USE

for Veterans, General Public, Family and Friends



Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

(PTSD) can occur after someone goes through combat, physical or sexual assault, terrorist attack, serious accident or natural disaster. Symptoms of PTSD can include feeling keyed up, having flashbacks of the event, or feeling numb to things you used to enjoy.

What is Substance Use Disorder (SUD)? 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? Almost 1/3 of Veterans seeking treatment for SUD also have PTSD and more than a quarter of Veterans with PTSD also have SUD. VA has made it easier to get help. It is important to know that treatment can help and you are not alone.

What treatments are available for co-occurring PTSD and Substance Use Disorder? Evidence shows that in general 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



27% of Veterans in VA care diagnosed with PTSD also have Substance Use Disorder (SUD)

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 VA health 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 VA provider can help you get started.

When should a person get evaluated for co-occurring PTSD and SUD? 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, learn more about the options. Life can be better! Talk to a VA professional to discuss choices for getting started.

“It was a big deal for me to enter treatment. I was so close to hitting bottom. I wasn’t sure I’d last. But I’d learned to tough it out, and that was helpful.”

STEVE, OEF VETERAN

“I entered treatment in 2009, after maybe 2 really bad years of PTSD and alcoholism. The VA staff was amazing. It’s a whole new day for me.”

JOE, IRAQ VETERAN



VA Medical Centers and Treatment

The VA wants you to have the best possible care for co-occurring PTSD and SUD. Each VA medical center has SUD-PTSD Specialists trained in treating both conditions in order to promote the best health outcomes. If there are signals you are at risk for both disorders, you will be encouraged to talk to a provider about how best to support your recovery. There are treatment resources at every VA medical center.



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