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Substance Abuse in the Military: “Attention!”

Darryl Hagar

Enlistees in the U.S. military expect to lead a disciplined life, respecting the honor and traditions of their service branch. Unfortunately, one of those time-honored traditions is substance abuse – and plenty of it.

The Cost of Substance Abuse in the Military

Staff Sgt. Kathleen T. Rhem from the [Armed Forces Press Service](#) put out these numbers, and if this doesn't sound Reveille in the minds of military brass, nothing will. Check it out:

- 21% of military personnel admit to drinking heavily and you know that number goes up significantly during periods of leave. Time to blow off a little steam by hoisting tequila shooters.
- Despite training and substance abuse awareness, the military has not been able to lower that 21% figure over the past 20 years.
- The DoD estimates \$6,000,000 in lost productivity due to substance abuse in the ranks, but you have got to believe that the number is much higher. The military wants to put up a strong front, but \$6 mil is a drop in the bucket when it comes to lost productivity.
- The DoD spends \$132,000,000 on the care of babies born with fetal alcohol syndrome, a devastating birth condition that occurs when the mother drinks during pregnancy.

These figures are based on alcohol abuse alone. When you factor in the use of pot, speed, coke, crack and other abused substances, you begin to develop a clearer picture of just how widespread the substance abuse problem is in the branches of military service.

The Life and Death Liabilities of Military Substance Abuse

Too many to list in this short piece, but some of the more obvious liabilities occur in work areas where information or ordinance is the target of the enemy.



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For example, would you want a substance impaired director manning the flight deck of an aircraft carrier? How about the guy who's hooking up a 5K bunker buster, or the radar operator who misses some incoming because she nodded off.

Indeed, not all liability is so dramatic with exploding ordinance and other tragedies. But today's military is on the move. That's why military officials are seeing more DUI infractions. No different from the civilian population. But when you add the danger layer of live ordinance and your buddy working next to you, workplace substance abuse does take on a life or death aspect.

So, what steps can military officials take to help mitigate the substance abuse problems in the service. The plan has already been launched with much fanfare and success.

The DoD Alcohol Abuse and Tobacco Use Reduction Committee

Recognizing that the problem is NOT going away, Defense has begun an aggressive campaign to get alcohol and substance abuse under control, not just to save the costs of caring for abusers and their family, but to save lives.

In areas of combat, stress is the norm. Danger and death are possible with every IED roadside. So, when these combat vets get some R & R, they tend to let loose big time. Binge drinking is common in these situations – something that can very quickly turn to a daily drinking problem.

Lt. Col. Wayne Talcott, an Air Force psychologist, who's also co-chair of the substance abuse reduction committee, put it like this: "We're trying to prevent [our] people from having to see a specialist [in substance abuse treatment]. If you want to decrease prevalence, you need to have policies and programs in place across the spectrum to discourage heavy drinking."

The colonel continued, "...the committee wants to help service members understand the liabilities associated with heavy drinking."

And the liabilities, especially in critical service positions can mean the difference between life and death. Incidences of DUI, suicides, crimes and domestic violence skyrocket when alcohol is involved and the military is going totally pro-active in providing counseling and education to raise awareness of the dangers of heavy drinking both short- and long-term.



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What Makes The Military's Approach So Effective?

In the past, the military has offered a series of programs to educate the serviceperson on the dangers of alcohol and substance abuse – a practice that's been going on for as long as there have been militaries. The services' current approach takes a different tact.

Lt. Col. Talcott explains, "This is very different from previous approaches. You typically have program offices that largely are designed to treat people [who already have] alcohol problems.

Rather than waiting for people to develop severe problems, we want to build into the system ways to get the right messages to help our young people make better decisions about their drinking behavior.

It's not the use, it's alcohol abuse that gets people into trouble," Talcott concluded