



NATE'S STORY

Nate was a well-respected man who had been in the Marines for fifteen years and experienced many things during his time in the military. After his last deployment, Nate began to suffer from PTSD. He also suffered a minor injury, so he was prescribed painkillers to help while things were healing.

Eventually, Nate got to the point where the only time he felt good was when he was taking his meds. He began abusing his prescription medication just to escape from it all, making up excuses to get more painkillers and taking larger and larger doses to get the same effect. If he went even a single day without them, he would be in so much physical and emotional pain that he couldn't stand it.

Finally, Nate realized he had a serious problem. He reached out to his doctor and got the professional help he needed. Nate was lucky because things could have ended very badly had he continued down that path of abuse, but with guidance from professionals, he was able to get back on his feet.

SAFER CHOICES

Dealing With Stress

- **Physical Activity:** Regular exercise or sports provide healthy releases of endorphins and lower stress.
- **Connection:** Talk to friends, family, or trusted peers about what you are experiencing.
- **Professional Support:** Work with a military counselor or behavioral health specialist trained in trauma-informed care.

PLACES TO FIND HELP

It is easy to feel helpless, but there is help out there, and you should never feel alone. It is never too late to get help.

Here's where you can find it:

- Veterans & Military Crisis Line: Dial 988, then Press 1 (or Text 838255)
- Military OneSource: 1-800-342-9647
- SAMHSA National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

IN THE MILITARY



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STAY SAFE SERIES

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THE WAR WITHIN

ALCOHOLISM AND BINGE DRINKING

A Slippery Slope

Alcohol is a drug and just like any other drug, it's possible to become addicted. The problem is, alcoholism may not be obvious at first, especially if you drink regularly. Some signs of alcoholism include:

- You feel like you need alcohol to get you through the day
- You feel sick when you go without drinking
- You can't have just one drink - you have to keep going
- It's hard to get a buzz, you have to keep drinking to feel anything

More than half of all military members have admitted that they have abused alcohol and over forty percent say that they struggle with it.

Binge drinking is consuming several drinks in a very short period of time. When you drink a beer, a glass of wine, or a mixed drink, alcohol gets into your bloodstream and heads to your liver, which is the organ responsible for filtering harmful toxins out of your body. Your liver can process about one drink an hour. When you drink more than one drink, your liver has a hard time keeping up. You stumble and slur your words.

That "drunk" feeling is your body's way of telling you that you've had too much alcohol. If you keep drinking, you're putting yourself at risk for some very serious health problems. That's why binge drinking or drinking several drinks in a very short period of time can be just as risky as getting behind the wheel when you feel drunk or buzzed.



WHAT IS SUBSTANCE ABUSE?

Substance abuse occurs when prescription drugs, alcohol, or other substances are used outside their intended purpose or recommended guidelines, leading to dependence or addiction. Addiction is a medical condition that makes stopping difficult without proper support. Many service members turn to substances to handle high stress, trauma, or physical pain, often believing they can control it until physical dependence sets in.

Because the military maintains a strict zero-tolerance policy for illegal drugs, the most commonly misused substances among service members are alcohol, tobacco, and prescription medications. Misusing these legal substances can lead to severe career and personal consequences.

TOBACCO

THE HIDDEN HAZARD

Many service members start smoking or chewing tobacco to calm the stress of their duties. When you use tobacco, the nicotine immediately courses through your body and into your brain. It then causes your brain to release dopamine, a chemical that your brain releases when you do something fun.

The nicotine in tobacco quickly becomes an addiction and makes it difficult to stop. When you're addicted to nicotine, you have to keep using tobacco every time you want to feel the happy effects of dopamine. The more addicted you become, the more you'll have to use tobacco to get the same effect.

Some people think that cigars are safer than cigarettes, but that's just not true. Just one cigar can contain as much nicotine as an entire pack of cigarettes. That means that cigars are addictive, too. Pipe smokers face the same risks as cigarette smokers. When you use a pipe, you still breathe in a harmful amount of nicotine and other cancer-causing chemicals.

PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Use as Directed

Prescription medication misuse, including opioid painkillers and central nervous system depressants or stimulants, can lead to dependence. Misusing prescription drugs includes taking higher doses, taking medication prescribed to someone else, or using pills to cope with emotional distress.

Long-Term Effects of Prescription Drug Misuse:

- Organ damage and impaired cardiovascular health
- Weakened immune system response
- Severe withdrawal symptoms
- Increased depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation
- Career disruption and discharge

PTSD AND SUBSTANCE MISUSE

Unhealthy Choice

Many military members who have served on active duty suffer from PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder. Experiencing combat and intense operational strain can make you feel isolated, like you have nowhere to turn. Many who feel this way turn to substance abuse, such as heavy drinking or misusing prescription meds, to escape or self-medicate.

In all actuality, substance abuse worsens the symptoms of PTSD. It disrupts brain chemistry, intensifies emotional distress, and leads to further depression and suicide. It is far better to seek help from a professional who understands what you are going through than to put your life at greater risk.

