

Veterans Who Struggle with Substance Abuse

Honor Bell III, Emma Dukes, Makaila Harrell,
Sofiya Honcharova, and Travis Raymer

SOW 3322



Defining the Problem

6% of the United States population is made up of military veterans - 18.3 million as of 2023

12% of United States veterans have a substance use disorder including alcohol and illicit substances

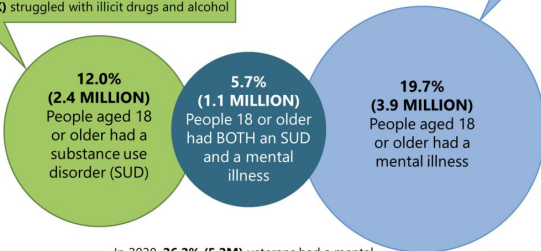
Substance abuse disorders often develop as a coping mechanism for mental health issues including troubles reintegrating into civilian life

Mental Illness and Substance Use Disorders in America in the Past Year: Among Veterans Aged 18+

PAST YEAR, 2020 NSDUH, Veteran 18+

Among veterans with a substance use disorder:
4 IN 10 (41.9% or 1.0M) struggled with illicit drugs
7 IN 10 (70.1% or 1.7M) struggled with alcohol use
1 IN 8 (12.0% or 290K) struggled with illicit drugs and alcohol

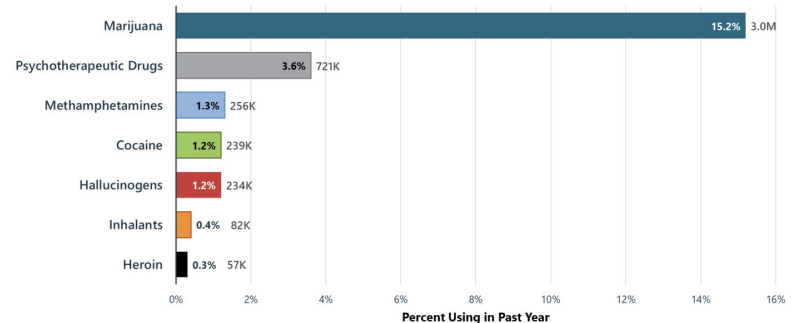
Among veterans with a mental illness:
1 IN 3 (34.0% or 1.3M) had a serious mental illness



In 2020, 26.2% (5.2M) veterans had a mental illness and/or substance use disorder.

Illicit Drug Use in Past Year: Among Veterans Aged 18+

PAST YEAR, 2020 NSDUH, Veteran 18+





Forming the Group & Screenings

Forming the Group

- Open versus closed?
- Court mandated participants?

How We Would Go About Screening:

- With reported rates of illicit drug use increasing once active duty personnel leave military service, we agreed that disclosing the character of a former service member's discharge is not required. Though, it is required for members to be former military and be seeking assistance for substance abuse issues.



Initial Stages

- Warm-up phase
 - Can be awkward for some, this can be mitigated by having drinks or small snacks available
 - Introduce any new group members but put no pressure on them. A simple "hello I'm __", and let the others acknowledge them.
 - The Name Round, the names and possible additional information is shared
- Goal of the group
 - Even though function similarly to A.A., this is an secular group, the meaning of higher power could be different to everyone.
 - Provide help to those who suffer with addiction. To provide a safe place for them
 - The program welcomes Veterans at any point in their journey.
 - There are no fees, but donations are welcome, all you need is a desire to recover
- Introduction of the group rules and any guidelines
 - Be respectful to others



Treatment Modality

- Within this meeting we use the 12 Steps as the roadmap for recovery
 - 1) We admit that we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.
 - 2) We came to believe and accept that we needed strengths beyond our current awareness and resources to restore us to sanity
 - a) Do not have to be religious, simply something or someone that can ground you and help you to keep going
 - 3) Made a decision to turn our will and our lives to the collective wisdom and resources of those who have searched before us
 - a) Let go of your ego
 - 4) Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves
 - a) Self-examination, your emotional state and your mental state
 - 5) Admit to yourselves and to others the exact nature of our wrongs
 - a) Owing up to past mistakes with humility
 - 6) We became ready to accept help in letting go of all our defects of character
 - 7) With humility and openness, we sought to eliminate our shortcomings.



Treatment Modality Cont.

- 8) We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all
- 9) Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others
- 10) Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it
 - a) Continued self-analysis of behaviors, thoughts, and actions
- 11) Sought through meditation to improve our awareness and our understanding of the N.A. way of life and to discover the power to carry out that way of life
- 12) Having had an awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.



Transition Stages

Storming - The phase as when interpersonal conflicts arise just as tasks and processes are beginning to form

Norming - The phase when new processes and ways of being together begin to become routine after conflict and tensions are resolved.



Transition Stages Cont.

Common fears

- Not being a trustworthy group
- Feeling of embarrassment
- Feeling of emptiness
- Losing control of emotions
- Not having control of conversation
- Self-disclosure itself
- Taking too much of the group's time
- Being judged, challenged, singled out, or rejected

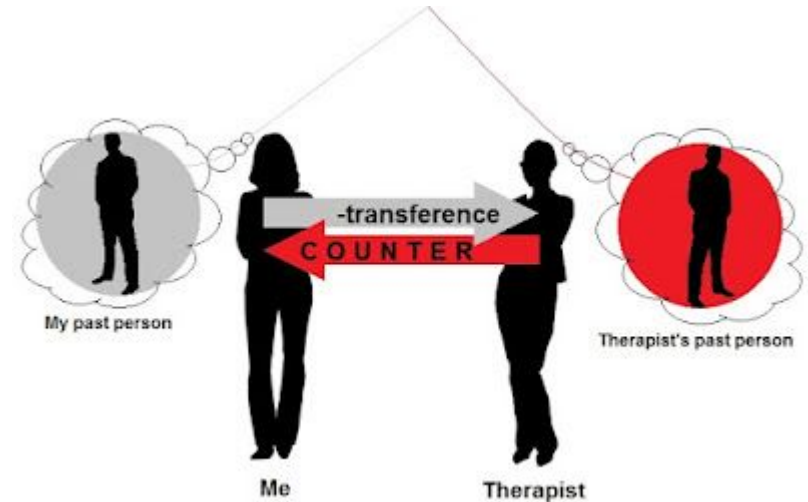
Group members will:

- Use this time to test how safe the leader and members are
- Weigh the pro's and con's of playing it safe and taking risks
- Look to the leader to determine trust level with them and the group
- Learn how to speak in a way to engage fellow members
- Learn how to handle confrontation in a healthy way

Transition Stages Cont.

Problematic styles of behaving in a group:

- Silence
- Monopolizing the discussion
- Questioning
- Giving advice
- Fake sympathy
- Superiority
- Socializing
- Intellectualizing
- Members turning into assistant leaders





Working Stages

How members may feel at this stage:

- Members may feel vulnerable and start feeling many different emotions
- Members start to open up to each other around this stage.
- Members may start to seek support from other members
- Members may express frustrations
- Members may act out

Behaviors such as these are to be expected.

Group leaders are prepared for such cases.

In case that group gets off track, leader may steer the direction of group or restate the purpose.



Working Stages Cont.

Members will start to work on activities together. These activities may include:

- Sharing the experiences they had with other members of the group.
- Roleplay scenarios
- Meditation
- Learning the science behind addiction
- Work on building coping mechanisms.
- Hands on activities

Group leaders will start to implement the 12 steps to the group.

Group will be lead by veterans who have gone through a similar experience and have completed the program.



Working Stages Cont.

Example Activities to implement the 12 steps:

- Members will admit their powerlessness
- Members will work together to identify strengths of theirs that aren't reliant on substances.
- Members will make a list of regrets/people they harmed, and share them with the group (Sharing will be encouraged but not required if members don't feel comfortable.)
- Members will have a chance to work together to break down problem behaviors caused by substances.
- Groups will have meditation together



Final Stages

Closing Phase vs Closing Stage

- Closing phase - the point of the session where the leader wraps things up
 - 1 hour session - 3-5 minutes
 - Purpose - to summarize and highlight main points, reinforce commitments, and checking for unfinished business
- Closing stage - happens during the last or the last few sessions, depending on the kind of group and the total number of sessions
 - Time allowed depends on the kind of group, its purpose, the number of sessions, and the members needs
 - Similar goals to the closing phase, but also comparing their progress from the start of the group with their accomplishments at the end, planning aftercare



Final Stages

Purpose & Goals

- Summarizing and highlighting the main points
 - This helps the Veterans remember them after the session, increasing the impact of the session on their everyday life
 - Learning what is important to others can increase trust and unity among the Veterans
- Reinforcing commitments
 - The leader reviews commitments to clarify goals and strengthen commitments
 - The leader should check for unrealistic goals and help Veterans modify them to increase the likelihood of them applying change to their everyday life
- Checking for unresolved issues
 - Issues may arise that need some additional closure as the session comes to an end



Final Stages

Ways to Close a Session

- To wrap up this 12 step meeting, the leader will emphasize certain points as well as specific comments by the Veterans to summarize the meeting. This may look like circling back to the Veterans who who displayed discomfort in being vulnerable during the group due to military culture and the exposure to stressors and trauma related to service or combat. The leader can emphasize the importance of participating and the purpose of the meeting.

Other closing examples include:

- Rounds
- Dyads followed by comments to the group
- Member summarize
- Written reactions



Final Stages Closing a Session

- Select 12-step meetings end with a prayer, but this group is secular.
- The leader may remind the Veterans of the confidentiality agreement.
- After the leaders summary, the 7th Tradition Collection is said: “Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions,” and a collections basket may be passed around, but donations are not required.
- At this point, the meeting is concluded and the Veterans are free to leave.

Questions?



References

Defining the Problem:

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Forming the Group:

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<https://www.sperorecovery.org/12-step-program-as-an-atheist/#:~:text=The%2012%20steps%20of%20AA,the%20same%20principles%20and%20steps>.

Jacobs, E., Schimmel, C., Masson, R., Harvill, R. (2016). *Group counseling: Strategies and skills*. (8th ed.). Cengage learning.

Treatment Modality:

<https://www.sperorecovery.org/12-step-program-as-an-atheist/#:~:text=The%2012%20steps%20of%20AA,the%20same%20principles%20and%20steps>

Transition Stages:

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Working stages:

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Final Stages

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