



# SELF-HELP EXERCISE: WHY USING DRUGS AND ALCOHOL DOESN'T WORK

## INTRODUCTION

**Veterans have always borne the physical and mental wounds of war and done their best to move ahead with their lives, scars and all. But no one is unchanged by war.**



It will take time to make sense out of what you saw and did and to appreciate how it has shaped the person you have become. You may have grown and matured, but you may also have mental scars. Like physical wounds, most mental and emotional scars heal over time, but some of these wounds need special attention and care over the long haul.

Some people try to hide their scars with alcohol and drug use. This is a very unhealthy and potentially destructive strategy. Alcohol and drugs may seem to help in the short run, but they make things worse over time.

It's natural to want to avoid painful memories and feelings and the situations that evoke them. If you spend a lot of your time and energy trying to bury or suppress certain memories or feelings connected to your deployment experiences, you may also be turning to alcohol or drugs to help you manage or avoid them (often by numbing your emotions).



The more you use alcohol or drugs to avoid upsetting thoughts and feelings, the greater your risk of developing a serious drug or alcohol problem. In addition, because drugs and alcohol reduce your ability to control your behavior, your risk for harming yourself and others (e.g., driving while intoxicated) dramatically increases. Alcohol and drugs prevent effective coping and undermine your long-term recovery.

A beer or glass of wine from time to time is not unhealthy, but if you are regularly drinking or using drugs to help you relax or sleep, chances are you're using them rather than developing your own coping skills. If you rely on the substance as a "coping crutch" to help you each time you feel stressed and need to relax, this is a warning sign.



Another downside of using alcohol or drugs is that over time, this coping strategy "teaches" your body and mind that you can't handle challenges on your own. You not only become physically addicted to drugs and alcohol, you become mentally addicted to them as well. If you avoid painful memories and feelings time and time again, you may become mentally addicted to the point that you convince yourself you can't handle things any other way.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO

### Limit use

Just like exercise and eating well, limiting alcohol and drug use is part of self-care. Limiting alcohol and drug use will help you stay healthy and maintain the energy you need to recover from your wounds and to help others with their mental wounds.

### Avoid temptation

One powerful tool for limiting your use of alcohol and drugs is to reduce your exposure to them. The old saying “out of sight out of mind” really works! The sight and smell of alcohol can trigger cravings. The easiest way to reduce temptation is to stay away from these substances by getting rid of the supply in your house and staying away from places (e.g., bars, aisles in stores where alcohol is sold) or people (e.g., drinking buddies) where you know you’ll be tempted.

### Plan ahead

It may also help to plan another activity for the times you would normally drink or use drugs. Make a game plan for distracting yourself when you’re feeling really tempted to use alcohol or drugs. Write down a list of distracting activities and carry it in your wallet so you will be able to look at it every time you start thinking about using.



#### Examples of distracting activities:

- ★ Exercising or doing PT
- ★ Listening to or playing music
- ★ Talking to someone you care about
- ★ Talking with someone who understands what you’re dealing with
- ★ Going to some form of entertainment (e.g., a movie)

### Reach out

If you believe that you may have a drinking or drug problem and need support to quit, there is help out there. Please visit [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov) to find local treatment resources, or [www.aa.gov](http://www.aa.gov) to find an AA group in your community.

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Over the next couple of weeks, make an effort to talk to others you trust. You may not feel ready yet to talk about your combat experiences, but try to reach out to your friends and family by initiating a conversation about a topic you feel comfortable with. Your family and friends care a lot about you and will feel relieved that you are reaching out in any way.



Always remember – getting things off your chest, no matter how difficult, almost always feels better in the long run. If there are certain experiences that are especially difficult for you to talk about, you may want to try sharing with someone else before you talk about them with your friends or family. Talking with a counselor or support group, conferring with another veteran, writing in a journal, or blogging can help you practice sharing about painful experiences until you feel more comfortable.



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