

Addiction and Alcoholism in Vietnam War Veterans

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Addiction and alcoholism among Vietnam veterans has traditionally been very high since the conflict ended in 1975. War is extremely traumatic and often causes soldiers to develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD – a condition that frequently co-occurs with addiction or alcoholism. But while any war can cause a soldier or sailor to turn to drugs or alcohol in order to self-medicate their pain and stress, Vietnam veterans were subject to a hostile return when the war was over. Instead of being treated like heroes as their fathers were after World War II, Vietnam veterans were shunned, ridiculed and expelled from their customary peer groups. Additionally, these veterans found it difficult to reintegrate into a workforce that largely had no use for their military skills. Consequently, many of America's most courageous veterans became disillusioned addicts and alcoholics with few opportunities to better their lives.

PTSD is widely considered the most common cause of addiction or alcoholism among Vietnam veterans. This disorder occurs after a person has been exposed to some type of severe trauma – physical, mental, emotional, or a combination of all three. PTSD can cause feelings of anxiety, isolation, depression, suicidal ideations, rage and panic. In order to cope with these feelings, many turn to drugs or alcohol:

“. . .examining the longitudinal course of the onset of psychiatric disorders in Vietnam combat veterans seeking psychiatric treatment, found that PTSD was the most common disorder, although there was a high rate of comorbidity. PTSD was the first disorder to develop after the war in most patients, followed soon after by generalized anxiety disorder and alcoholism. . . “(1)

Because the average age of the Vietnam combat soldier was so young and impressionable and the war so violent, many men developed symptoms of PTSD and subsequently alcoholism or drug addiction. And because this condition was not understood then as well as it is today, treatment methods were often inefficient or in some cases non-existent despite the high prevalence of this condition – and especially this condition when co-occurring with addiction or alcoholism. According to the Vietnam Veterans of America;

“As many Vietnam veterans know, substance abuse often goes hand in hand with PTSD. Among Vietnam veterans seeking treatment for PTSD, 60 to 80 percent have alcohol-use disorders.” (2)

Some estimates place the total number of veterans that actually experienced combat in Vietnam at around 1.5 million. If we assume that only 10% of those veterans developed PTSD, then the total number of Vietnam war combat veterans suffering from both PTSD and alcoholism or drug addiction likely numbers in excess of 100,000. A great deal of this has been attributed to the fact that these vets were given little to no time to readjust to civilian life after intense periods as a ground troop. Thomas Brinson and Vince Treanor describe this in detail in a 2005 article in the VVA Veteran;

“ . . . the individual rotation pattern utilized during the Vietnam War prevented soldiers from effectively working through their combat experiences before being plunged back into American society.” “Most soldiers in Vietnam . . . were individually assigned as green newcomers to units in the field from Replacement Battalions. After surviving their year’s tour of duty, they were sent home alone on a commercial airliner, often wearing jungle fatigues freshly covered with mud. Literally, within a brief 24-36-hour period, a combat soldier could be plucked away from his buddies in the middle of a firefight and deposited into the chaos of an urban traffic jam with no accommodations for jet-lag, much less for the culture-shock of readjustment to American life.

(3)

In effect, the reception public of and attitude toward Vietnam veterans after they returned from combat is partly to blame for the results of the traumatic conditions they suffered – especially PTSD. Thankfully, public views on this matter have changed and today there is a wealth of treatment options available for Vietnam veterans suffering from alcoholism or addiction. These include:

Residential Inpatient Treatment

Outpatient Treatment

Day/Night Treatment or Partial Hospitalization Programs

In order to learn more about our substance abuse treatment programs near you, call the number at the top of your screen right now for a free, confidential consultation. Finding a qualified and comprehensive [alcohol abuse treatment center](#) near you is just a call away.

(1) Bremner, Douglas J. M.D., Southwick, Steven M. M.D., Darnell, Adam, M.D., Charney, Dennis S. M.D.

Chronic PTSD in Vietnam Combat Veterans: Course of Illness and Substance Abuse

(2) Berger, Tom TBI, Suicide, and Substance Abuse Vietnam Veterans of America

(3) Brinson, Thomas Treanor, Vince Vietnam Veterans and Alcoholism The VVA Veteran March/April 2005