

# Substance Misuse Self-Help Guide

## SECTION 1: WHAT IS IT?

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

Many veterans have been through very hard and traumatic experiences during their service in the military. Turning to any form of substance misuse is often a coping mechanism to the trauma.



## Using illicit substances or overusing medication

Use of substances varies from illicit drugs, alcohol, opiates, overuse of prescribed medication as well as overuse of 'over the counter' medicines. Unfortunately using illicit drugs or overuse of medication can, depending on the substance used, lead to worsening of symptoms such as anxiety, low mood, poor sleep poor motivation. Perhaps you, a friend or relative has noticed some of these symptoms becoming worse.

If you are overusing medications or using illicit substances – here are some questions you might ask yourself:

- Have you noticed you are feeling less motivated to wash, dress, eat, exercise, engage with others?
- Are you feeling more irritable and anxious?
- Has anyone else commented that you are becoming angry, having outbursts or lack of empathy?
- Do you feel you are not accomplishing anything day to day?
- Have you notice you have difficulty in concentrating?
- Do you crave for a drug?
- Are you hiding your use?
- Are you using your prescribed medication in higher daily amounts and then finding yourself short before your next collection date and having to phone up and get more?



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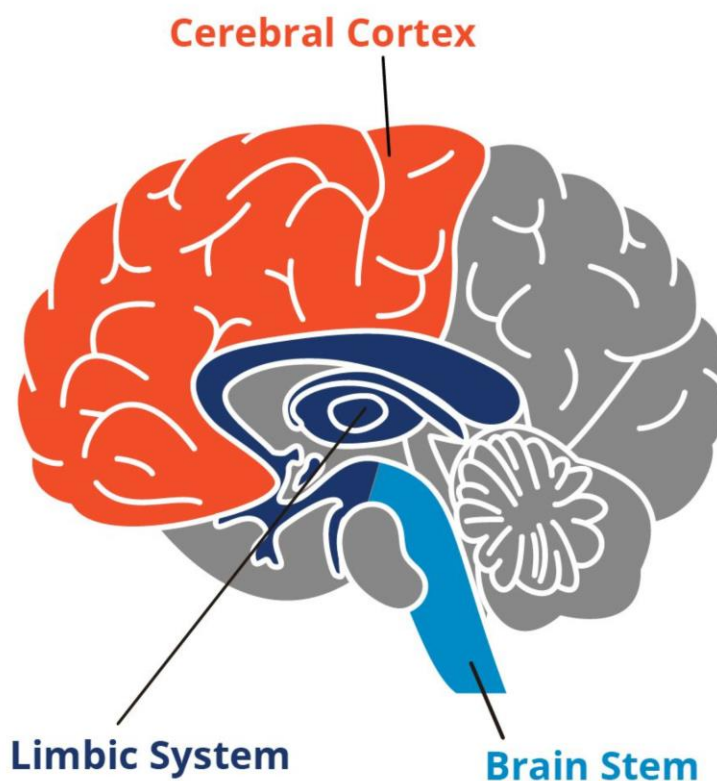
## How can drugs affect you?

Self-medicating with illicit drugs or using prescribed drugs more than advised may lead to escalation of the symptoms. The symptoms of depression, anxiety and/or insomnia tend to become worse after use because of the biological processes in the brain are put off balance meaning that the initial high is followed by a long time low in the recovery period.

Examples of negative effect of substance misuse include:

- Having sleep problems - for example you may struggle with falling asleep or waking up a lot during the night. Substance abuse in this situation can alter the quality of sleep and disturb daily functioning.
- Feelings of anger, irritation, or feeling numb or/and depressed - the use of substance misuse can increase these symptoms.
- Struggling to concentrate and be productive

Drugs affect three primary areas of the brain - this means the symptoms already being felt can be dampened or heightened. This can muddle your thoughts and it can be hard to maintain clear thinking to solve even relatively simple problems.



### 3 areas affected by drug abuse

#### Brain Stem

Controls functions critical to life. I.e. heart rate, breathing

#### Limbic System

The brain's reward circuit. It is highly implicated by emotions

#### Cerebral Cortex

Controls specific functions. It enables us to see, feel, hear and taste. The frontal cortex is the reasoning centre of the brain.

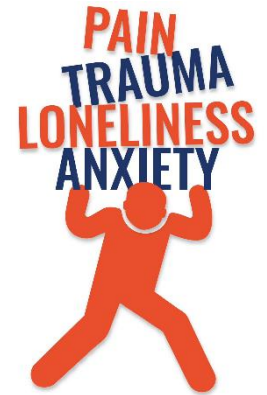
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## Why might veterans use illicit substance or overuse prescribed / non-prescribed medication?

Although substance misuse in service life does occur, the routine, the safety element of the job and the frequency of compulsory drug testing means it is probably far less prevalent in those who serve than those in civilian life.

However, in civilian life drugs/medications may seem useful to veterans in a number of ways. For instance, some veterans may turn to drugs/medications to:

- ease their symptoms from a trauma they have experienced during their military life or other life experiences.
- help sleep, deal with loneliness or anxiety
- try and fit in with civilian life
- feel confident
- feel the positive excitement and rush they may have experienced at times whilst serving
- manage physical or psychological pain



Further reasons include:

- Feeling they cannot speak to anyone about their trauma or experience, or feel they cannot go back to the GP if the medication has stopped working or hasn't worked.
- For some veterans, social pressure may be a factor.

Due to the addictive nature of the majority of illicit drugs and prescribed medication coupled with what feels like a positive outcome for the veteran, the use which starts off as a quick fix for the veteran to ease symptoms can quickly get out of control, having a negative effect for the veteran.

**Remember, you should never stop using illicit drugs or prescribed medication without medical advice and should always seek medical advice.**

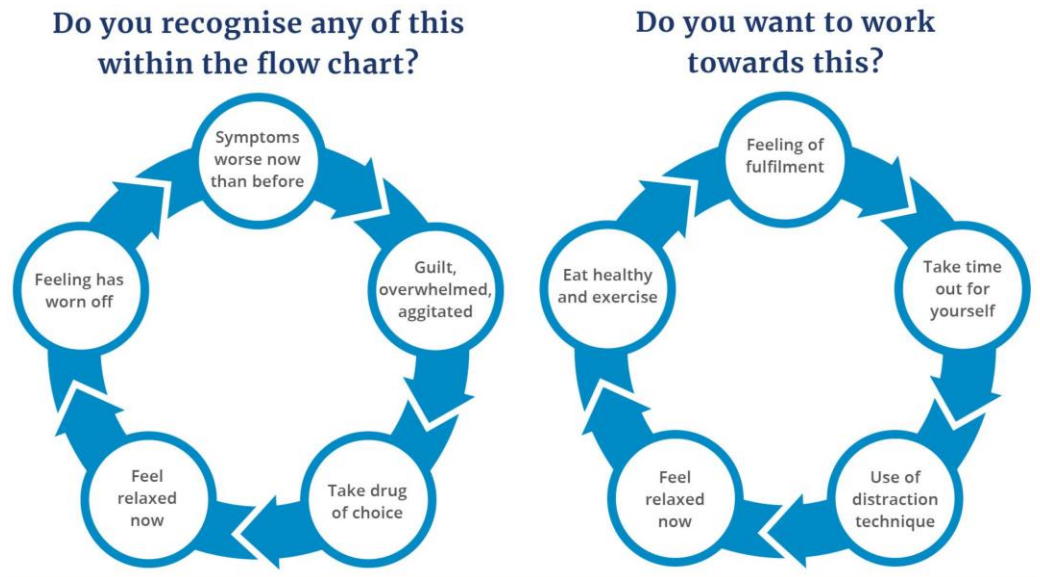
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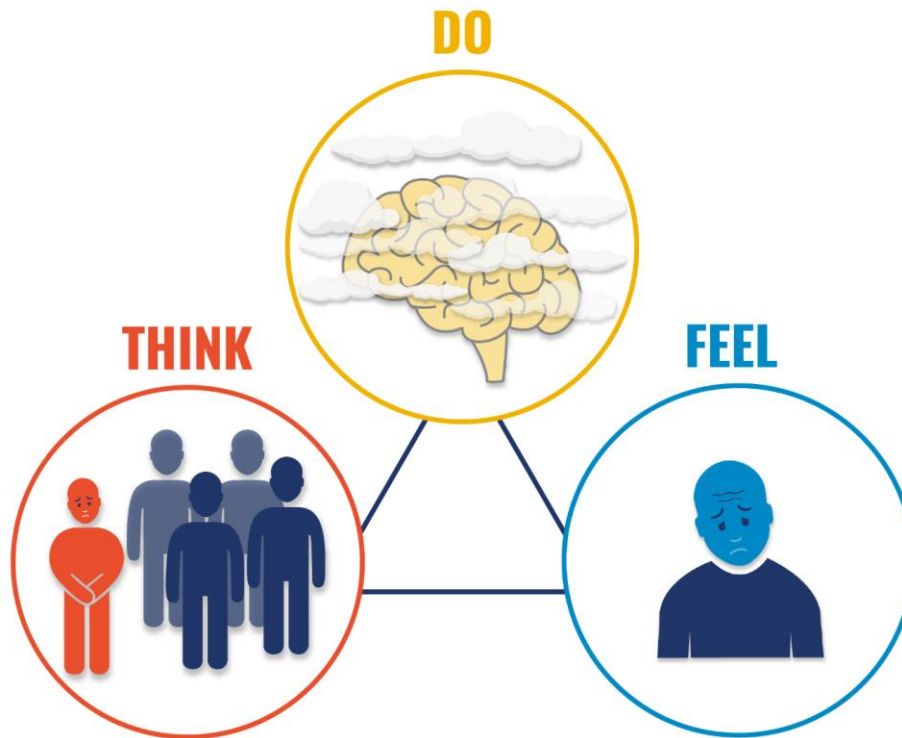
## SECTION 2: HOW THIS RELATES TO YOU

It will take ~5 minutes to work through Section Two

Here are a few signs to help you identify substance misuse.



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## Thinking

Using illicit drugs or overuse of prescribed medication can change the effect of your thought process and impact on your mood as the initial high wears off and the low becomes longer to recover from.

You may also experience:

- Feeling of not accomplishing anything day to day
- Lack of concentration or difficulty in concentrating
- Feeling less motivated to wash, dress, eat, exercise, engage with others
- Feeling more irritable and anxious
- Having the feeling of low self-worth, being self-critical and/or self-punishing
- Thinking about your next use, fitting it around your day.

Before moving on, note down some of the ways your thoughts focus on the negatives about you, others or the future, and do they increase or decrease with use of illicit drugs/misuse of medication.

## Doing

Life is always full of things we want to be doing, however if you are struggling with substance misuse this can make these tasks feel unreachable.

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You might find:

- You are unable to mix with others.
- You no longer enjoy or are motivated to do the things you enjoyed before.
- You are taking less care of yourself.
- Difficulty in asking for help and/or that you are hiding your misuse from your partner or family.

Before moving on, note down some of the things that you were doing that you no longer are, or how your relationships have changed because you hiding your use of illicit drugs/misuse of medication.

## How your body feels

You may be experiencing:

- Cravings for the drug/medication
- Over or under eating
- Fatigue
- Nerve pain
- Muscle aches
- Increased heart rate/anxiety
- Inability to sleep or sleeping too much
- Feeling of despair, thinking about suicide
- Breathing difficulties new or worsening of breathing condition
- Weight gain or loss

Before moving on, pay attention to your body. What physical sensations or feelings do you feel or recognise when you want/need the drug or medication. Note how you would describe it to someone.

## SECTION3: WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Two

What to do to stop your illicit drug intake or get back on track with your prescribed medication and improve your overall wellbeing.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

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The recommended strategies include:

- The doing part - Understanding urges and triggers
- The thinking part - Get your thinking straight
- What your body needs - Listen to your body

To begin, read the rest of this section 'The doing part' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Four: Get your thinking straight

## The doing part

### Understanding triggers and urges

You can use a mood diary - if this is something you would like to do click on the link below. You can reflect at the end of each day or weekly with this diary and look to see if there anything that has increased your urges, such as the news, hunger, tiredness. It may also be that drinking alcohol has triggered your urge to use drugs etc.



What did you do that helped? Can you plan what helped into your day?

## What else can you do?

- Talk to your family and friends – be honest.
- Talk to your GP, your medication may need adjusting or your substance use may be affecting your physical health.
- Start an online course; there are many free online.
- Plan your week, you have lived with routine for years within your military career and routine gives stability and control day to day.
- Read a book or take up a hobby.
- Make positive plans for the day or days ahead.
- Place a band on your wrist. If you feel the urge ping it 4 times, repeat as you feel necessary.
- Breathing – 4,4,4. Breathe in for 4, hold for 4, release for 4. This is a great way to help with anxiety that builds when you are trying to distract yourself through an urge. Why not try following the breathing exercise on the left.

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Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

## **SECTION 4: GET YOUR THINKING STRAIGHT**

**It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four**

**The following sections will offer you some helpful strategies to get you started. The most important thing is to give each one of these a try and remain open to testing new things out.**

**We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.**

**The recommended strategies include:**

- **The doing part - Understanding urges and triggers**
- **The thinking part - Get your thinking straight**
- **What your body needs - Listen to your body**

**To begin, read the rest of this section 'Get your thinking straight' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Five: Listen to your body**

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Remember, you should never stop using illicit drugs or prescribed medication without medical advice and should always seek medical advice

## The thinking part

### Give yourself a break!

Using your diary look at what you have learnt to understand as a trigger to increasing your intake e.g. if its boredom why not start up a new skill try a creative pursuit such a painting, photography, cooking or writing.

Ask for help if you feel that you need it.

Veterans are frequently self-critical when things are not going how they feel they should be. However, you can learn to be constructive with this - this will help you better manage critical thoughts and can therefore, in turn, improve and reduce your substance use.



Below is a link for you to click on if you want to learn more about the 5 steps to wellbeing.

#### 5 steps to Wellbeing.

- Connect
- Keep learning
- Be active
- Give to others
- Be mindful.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

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## **SECTION 5: LISTEN TO YOUR BODY**

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Five

**Remember, you should never stop using illicit drugs or prescribed medication without medical advice and should always seek medical advice.**

**We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.**

**The recommended strategies include:**

- **The doing part (Understanding urges and triggers)**
- **The thinking part (Get your thinking straight)**
- **What your body needs (Listen to your body)**

**To begin, read the rest of this section 'Listen to your body' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, review how you feel, go back to previous methods, and take the time to notice any changes in yourself as you begin to implement this final stage of the resource.**

### **What your body needs**

**Every type of drug can affect the brain in one way or another and affects how the brain will communicate with the rest of the body.**

**Most drugs interact with serotonin and dopamine.**

**Serotonin causes the feeling of happiness to be affected - sometimes this can be hyper happiness where others can fall into depression.**

**When dopamine is affected, this will affect motivation, motor functions, sense of pleasure and how the person is affected by events.**

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## Serotonin

The chemical serotonin is directly affected through drug addiction and becomes erratic. Illicit drugs cause a fluctuation in serotonin levels and although this is an initial feel good factor it can potentially lead to behaviour changes such as obsession of the substance, denial of the behaviour and an increase in anxiety or anger



Here are a few ideas to natural increase your levels of serotonin.

- Exercise. This can be going for a gentle run to a full workout.
- Go out for a walk in the countryside or the beach if you've one nearby.
- Write down in a journal a positive thought for the day or something that made you laugh.
- Add almonds, cashew nuts or pecans to your diet. Fish is also good.

## Dopamine

People often ask why do they have the craving for drugs even if not used daily? This is because dopamine, known as the motivational chemical, is boosted with drug use and this is our reward system.

The brain is tricked into thinking it's feeling great and over long term use the structure of the brain changes causing you to crave alcohol or drugs and sets a foundation for dependency. Dopamine is also produced less at this point.



Here are a few ideas to increase your dopamine levels.

- Try to do things you enjoy, maybe start up a hobby you have been saying you will for a while, pleasure increases your dopamine and will help to lift your mood.
- Exercise, this will also increase blood flow to the brain giving you an added memory booster.
- Listen to music you enjoy stimulating dopamine release in your brain.
- Meditate, this can be through mindfulness.
- Sunshine or being out in daylight, try and get at least 30 minutes outside a day.

**Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.**

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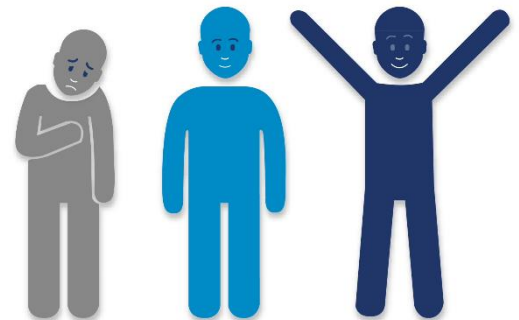
## SECTION 6: HOW HAVE YOUR FEELINGS CHANGED?

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Five

Remember, you should NEVER stop using illicit drugs or prescribed medication without medical advice and should ALWAYS seek medical advice.

### Have you noticed any changes?

- Are you noticing any differences?
- Has anything shifted?
- What helped?



### What to do next

Before moving on to your next resource, it's important you take time to reflect on what you've learnt here and take time to implement your new methods. Give yourself time to adjust to your 'new normal' before moving on.

### Some questions you might have

#### What to do if I'm still struggling with substance misuse?

It might take some time to start reaping the rewards of your efforts. As with any new skill, keep at it and you will find it easier to use these skills when you need them. While these resources aim to give you some tools to manage your difficulties in-the-moment, for many of you this will only be the beginning. With this in mind, Combat Stress also provides specialist treatment programmes to help you tackle the past and take on the future. If you would like to know more, you will find the details of our 24-hour helpline below.

You can also speak to your GP or contact your local specialist addiction services. For help to find services near you go to [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

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## How do I know what resource to do next?

You may remember when you first began these self-help guides, you filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire enables us to guide you to the resources that will be most helpful to you. You'll find links to other guides in this series at <https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/>.

## Is there someone I can contact if I need more help or information?

If you're a veteran and need to talk to someone, or you're a family member/carer worried about the mental health of a loved one who has served, please call our Helpline. The Combat Stress 24-hour Helpline provides free confidential advice and support to veterans and their families. Don't struggle in silence.

Call 0800 138 1619

You can also contact your GP for help and advice.

## Are there any other resources that may help me?

- NHS Drug Addiction help: [www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/drug-addiction-getting-help/](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/drug-addiction-getting-help/)
- Your local specialist addiction services. For help to find services near you go to [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)
- [www.wearewithyou.org.uk](http://www.wearewithyou.org.uk) : previously known as Addaction, 'We Are With You' provide a specialist drug, alcohol and mental health programme for people from the armed forces. Named 'Right Turn'. There are now 10 Right Turn projects in place, positioned in areas of highest demand. In addition to trained staff, Right Turn also invites veterans into services to share their personal recovery tools with others and give peer support.

**You've completed the Substance Misuse self-help guide.  
Well done!**

We hope you've found this resource to be helpful and can begin to notice some changes. Make sure you take a break before beginning your next resource. We recommend waiting two weeks before moving on.

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## Urgent help

If you require more urgent help, either yourself or a member of your family feel unsafe, please contact your GP or telephone 111.

This information was publishing on 30 October 2020.

**24-hour Helpline: 0800 138 1619**

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