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DAILY NEWS

Sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder too often turn to substance abuse

[Addictions & Answers](#)

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BILL: "I've been working with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] veterans for well over three decades," reads a note from [Rev. Bill McDonald](#), Official Chaplain for the Patrick McCaffrey Foundation for [Middle East](#) veterans and himself a [Vietnam](#) vet. "Among those back from [Iraq](#)," he writes, "the rate of addiction is a huge monster that no one yet has dealt with at any level." Scary stuff, Dave. First, tell us exactly what post-traumatic stress disorder means.

DR. DAVE: PTSD is a serious mental condition where you postpone facing the anxiety that comes with a life-altering trauma event. The emotional stress is suppressed, only to re-emerge later in erratic emotions and disordered thinking. The anxiety then feeds into self-medication with booze and drugs, or medication-seeking from physicians.

BILL: "Life-altering?" I thought PTSD was about enduring enemy fire on a battlefield.

DR. DAVE: PTSD is born of any coerced act or threat to a person's physical self, including on a battlefield or from domestic violence at home, including sexual molestation or assault.

BILL: So the Rev. Bill's thoughts apply to a lot more than just veterans. Which leads me, Dave, to this. Your clinic specializes in PTSD and substance abuse for women -- some of whom have indeed seen military service. Plus, you were involved with the Vietnam veteran family work done with Army veterans at [Fort Lewis](#) Washington in the 1980s. If you were running the VA today, how would you treat returning veterans?

DR. DAVE: PTSD is like hot emotional lava running below the surface of a person's thoughts and feelings, ever ready to erupt. Any family, agency or therapist treating someone who may be affected by PTSD should own a copy of the text "The Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook." One of the best things about it is that people who suffer from PTSD can understand it as well as those working to help them.

BILL: During my boozing days I never read a book, no matter how wise, that kept me from taking a drink. There has to be more than that to help these people.

DR. DAVE: There is, and the military is actually leading the way in these efforts, setting up mental health service clinics right in the front lines. In this way, they can address the problem immediately, right where the trauma occurs. It is much easier to treat Acute Stress Disorder before it becomes PTSD.

BILL: And you feel that it's working very well?

DR. DAVE: That would be a comforting thought, Bill. But, no, the reality is that it's emotionally painful to work through the trauma at any point -- so many who need assistance actively attempt to avoid it.

BILL: Is that why, back in May, one of our own soldiers allegedly opened fire in a [Baghdad](#) mental stress clinic and killed five fellow military personnel?

DR. DAVE: The soldier, [Sgt. John M. Russell](#), 44, had been selectively ordered to undergo counseling by his commanding officer. That set him off. Police and fire departments have now made it standard procedure that everyone involved in a shooting or fire death must undergo counseling.

BILL: I hear you there -- it is hard for someone in the middle of it to see that medicating anxiety away with good Old Faithful is leading them right into alcoholism.

DR. DAVE: Alcohol is our oldest medication, the one most often self-prescribed.

Got a question about addiction? E-mail Dr. Dave and Bill at drdaveandbill@yahoo.com. Anonymity is guaranteed.