PROFESSIONAL UPDATE

Problems Related to Alcohol, Other Drugs, and Violence Among Military Students

Overview
According to a Research Update from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan “continue to strain military personnel, returning veterans, and their families. Some have experienced long and multiple deployments, combat exposure, and physical injuries, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). . . . Although less common, substance abuse is also a key concern. While the 2008 Department of Defense Health Behavior Survey reveals general reductions over time in tobacco use and illicit drug use, it reported increases in other areas, such as prescription drug abuse and heavy alcohol use. In fact, prescription drug abuse doubled among U.S. military personnel from 2002 to 2005 and almost tripled between 2005 and 2008.

“Alcohol abuse is the most prevalent problem and one which poses a significant health risk. A study of Army soldiers screened 3 to 4 months after returning from deployment to Iraq showed that 27 percent met criteria for alcohol abuse and were at increased risk for related harmful behaviors (e.g., drinking and driving, using illicit drugs). And although soldiers frequently report alcohol concerns, few are referred to alcohol treatment. Research findings highlight the need to improve screening and access to care for alcohol-related problems among service members returning from combat deployments.” In addition, drug or alcohol use frequently accompanies mental health problems and was involved in 30 percent of the Army’s suicide deaths from 2003 to 2009 and in more than 45 percent of nonfatal suicide attempts from 2005 to 2009.

A 2011 Department of Defense Fact Sheet states, “After more than a decade of ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, military personnel continue to experience strain—and in addition to the physical and psychological effects of combat exposure, service members may develop problems with substance abuse and dependence.”

Military students include veterans and military service members on active duty or in the reserves who are pursuing undergraduate or graduate studies. According to Military Service Members and Veterans: A Profile of Those Enrolled in Undergraduate and Graduate Education in 2007–08, “approximately 657,000 undergraduates were veterans and another 215,000 were military service members on either active duty or in the reserves. Among graduate students, 107,000 were veterans and 38,000 were military service members. To put these numbers in context, military students represented about 4 percent of both the undergraduate and graduate student populations.”

The U.S. Department of Education’s grant program for the development of campus-based Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success encourages model programs to support veteran student success in postsecondary education by coordinating services to address the academic, financial, physical, and social needs of veteran students. These centers support transition from military life to civilian college life and provide support for continued growth in mind, body, and spirit, providing a range of support services, including counseling.

What the Evidence Tells Us
According to a study presented at the 2011 American Psychological Association’s annual meeting, veterans in college are six times more likely to attempt suicide than the typical student and more than a fifth have planned to kill themselves. In addition, universities are largely unprepared to meet the educational and mental
The Higher Education Center for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Violence Prevention
http://higheredcenter.ed.gov 1-800-676-1730; TDD Relay-friendly, Dial 711