

PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	15
Guest:	Monica Roy, PhD & Marika Solhan, PhD
Title:	#15: PTSD and Alcohol Use

Pearl:

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to PTSD Bytes, the podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite-sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee-Vincent, and I'm a clinical psychologist at the Veteran's affairs National Center for PTSD.

Pearl:

Today, we will be discussing alcohol use and PTSD with two guests. Dr. Monica Roy is a clinical psychologist and program manager for the substance abuse, residential rehabilitation treatment program, an outpatient alcohol and drug treatment program at the Boston VA and assistant professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine. Dr. Marika Solhan is a clinical psychologist and director of the Boston Vet Center. Welcome Drs. Roy and Solhan.

Monica:

Thanks for having us on the show.

Marika:

Thanks. It's great to be here.

Pearl:

I'd like to start out by asking you how are PTSD and alcohol use related?

Marika:

Certainly. So we know that there's a really strong relationship between PTSD and alcohol use or even problematic levels of drinking. Someone with PTSD may drink to either manage their PTSD symptoms or self-medicate. For example, they might drink to help themselves fall asleep, to cope with nightmares, or to feel more relaxed in some way. Other times we see a relationship, because people who drink excessively might be more vulnerable to having traumatic experiences like assault or accidents.

Pearl:

Thank you. And do you have any general guidance about how much drinking is too much?

Marika:

Generally we consider problematic drinking to be when someone is having more than three or four drinks per sitting. For men over the course of a week, we'd be looking at whether or not they're drinking in excess of 14, 15 drinks per week. For women, the level's a little lower, healthy drinking is less than seven drinks per week. We also start to consider whether they're having other consequences related to their drinking, such as being late to work, having difficulty keeping up with schoolwork, conflict with friends or family legal consequences, or even medical problems that might be related to their drinking. Any of those things might signal problematic drinking that could benefit from a reduction.

Pearl:

Thank you. I want to go back and clarify one thing that you said, because I think it's important. If drinking excessively can lead to trauma, does that then mean that it's the person's fault for drinking too much, that they experienced a trauma as a result?

Marika:

That's a great point. It's definitely not the case that drinking, makes a trauma experience somebody's fault. But much like living in a neighborhood with a high crime rate may make us more susceptible to experiencing crime, drinking may make us more exposed or vulnerable to experiencing certain kinds of trauma experiences. It doesn't make it our fault, it doesn't mean that the drinking caused it. But it increases our vulnerability or exposure to those kinds of events.

Pearl:

Thank you. Sometimes I have heard people say I'm struggling with PTSD and I drink and it helps with insomnia, or it helps me feel better. What do you say to those folks?

Monica:

I think it makes a lot of sense. When it comes to alcohol use, it can help take the edge off of anxiety and stress. Unfortunately, however, we know that while using alcohol can help to provide some short-term relief, we actually know that using alcohol in the long run can lead to PTSD symptoms getting worse.

Pearl:

And what would you say to someone who is listening, who is using alcohol to cope with PTSD, or maybe a family member, a friend who's concerned that someone they care about is using or misusing alcohol, and they're just not sure where to start. What words would you offer them?

Marika:

So for any individual or family member who might be concerned about alcohol use and PTSD, I would say that there are many, many resources out there for ways to get help. For Veterans in particular, there's a lot of outpatient or residential services through VA and through Vet Centers. There are also a lot of digital resources though for anybody out there, including friends and family members, that can provide a lot of education, knowledge and coping skills to help folks manage both of these difficulties. One of them is the app and website called VetChange, that offers a lot of coping skills around problem drinking particularly in the context of PTSD.

Pearl:

What would you say to our listeners who might have experienced trauma and have a sense of guilt or shame, and also potentially with alcohol use where that can be a real stigmatized condition as well, to the point where it can be hard to even talk about it or admit that they might need help?

Monica:

I think that's a really great question because this is actually something I often see in my clinical work. And one thing I often mention to them is that trauma is very prevalent and that PTSD is often a response that may be natural for the brain and body to develop these symptoms. And that it may make sense to want relief from that because as human beings, we often don't want to feel pain and alcohol is a way to

numb that pain initially. However, please keep in mind that there are other ways to be able to work on the trauma, that there are other ways of coping as well.

Pearl:

Thank you. I think a lot of our listeners will find those words helpful to hear. And if somebody is ready to seek treatment, are PTSD and alcohol problems typically treated together at the same time or do you treat one and then the other?

Marika:

Ideally, given the very strong relationship between PTSD and alcohol use, we like to treat those two things at the same time. Occasionally, if someone's drinking is intense enough might need to work on reducing their alcohol use, they may require medical assistance in doing so. So that may need to happen prior to working on the PTSD. But for the vast majority of people, these are two difficulties that can be and should be treated at the same time. The good news is that we know that reducing drinking helps reduce PTSD symptoms and vice versa.

Pearl:

Thank you. Can you say more about medical interventions for alcohol use and when that might be needed?

Marika:

While alcohol is prevalent in everyday life, when someone drinks at such a level where they become physically dependent on it, it can actually be quite dangerous to suddenly stop drinking. So some of the things that folks should be mindful of if they drink at a pretty high level, is that if any time they reduce or discontinue their drinking and they begin to become physically ill, they might want to consider being evaluated for whether a medical detox may be necessary.

Pearl:

What can you tell our listeners about treatment options for alcohol?

Monica:

So there can be a lot of different options for treating alcohol used, including outpatient options, intensive outpatient options and residential options. Most VA medical centers and Vet Centers also have therapists that can help with Veterans to manage their problematic drinking. There are also some self-help and support groups in the community like AA or Al-Anon for family members or SMART recovery. There's also digital resources like the VetChange app and the website, that can help to provide self-guided skills for managing alcohol use.

Pearl:

Thank you. That's very helpful. So if one of our listeners downloads the VetChange app and they open it up, what would be your tips to make the most of their experience with the app?

Monica:

So when a user opens up the VetChange app, the first thing that they'll be asked is a few short questions about their alcohol use. And they'll be given personalized feedback about how their drinking fits in with

the general population. Some of the other features in the app include building motivation and maintaining motivation to change behaviors to healthier alcohol use, looking at ways of being able to cope with trauma symptoms without using alcohol, to cope with urges to drink when someone is trying not to drink. So one of the great things about VetChange is that you have all of these coping skills and all of this information just in the palm of your hands, whenever you need it.

Pearl:

For our listeners who are struggling with PTSD and alcohol use, it may feel like there isn't a lot of hope or like recovery is too hard. What would you tell our listeners about alcohol use and PTSD in terms of recovery?

Marika:

PTSD and alcohol use are incredibly difficult things to struggle and live with. And recovery from both in a long-term way is very possible. We have excellent treatments for both conditions. So while it's true, that painful memories will always remain, PTSD symptoms specifically can be greatly reduced with proper treatment. Similarly, folks can learn to reduce or even stop their drinking and maintain these changes long term, and live long fulfilling lives with both of these conditions managed. There's a lot of great options out there and long-term recovery is very possible.

Pearl:

Thank you, Drs. Roy and Solhan for joining us and sharing this valuable information on PTSD and alcohol use issues that so many Veterans, service members and members of the community struggle with.

Marika:

Thank you. It's been really great to be here.

Monica:

Thank you so much for having us on today.

Pearl:

To our listeners, if you are interested in checking out the VetChange app, you can download it for free wherever you get your apps. Find out more about VA mental health mobile apps at va.ptsd.gov/mobile.

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes, the podcast that delivers bite-sized expertise on issues related to PTSD, mental health and technology catch new episodes every other week by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Thank you for joining us.