



## **Wounded Spirits, Ailing Hearts 3 Alcohol and Depression Written Video Transcript**

Late 1996, my colleagues and I at the National Center for American Indian and Alaskan Native Mental Health Research in Denver completed a major study of PTSD. We looked at PTSD and related psychiatric disorders among Vietnam combat veterans [00:00.20.00] in several of the largest tribes in the country. The American Indian Vietnam Veterans Project was carefully designed, interviewing 621 Vietnam combat veterans from reservation communities in the Northern Plains and Southwest. As you can see, almost 27% of the Southwest and [00:00.40.00] 31% of the Northern Plains veterans suffered PTSD at the time they were interviewed. This is twice the rate reported by white Vietnam veterans in a previous study. Forty five percent of the Southwest and 57% of the Northern Plains veterans experienced PTSD at some time [00:01.00.00] in their lives. For Southwest veterans, this is more than twice the rate found among white veterans and nearly triple among Northern Plains veterans. Combat-related trauma and PTSD are linked [00:01.20.00] to other psychiatric disorders and to suicide. At the time of our interviews more than 70% of the participants were classified as abusing or dependent upon alcohol. This rate is two to six times greater than in other groups of Vietnam combat veterans. Lifetime rates of alcohol abuse [00:01.40.00] and dependence mirrored a similar pattern, exceeding 80% among the men in the American Indian Vietnam Veterans Project.

(Spiro), these statistics are certainly consistent with my clinical experience. What are the underlying causes of this high rate of alcohol abuse and dependence?

Peter, we all [00:02.00.00] know heavy drinking is a part of the military culture. It's tied to definitions of manliness, worth and status. So, when these veterans return from military service, they were already socialized into a drinking lifestyle. It reinforced a central aspect of their identity.

If you're a Green Beret you have to outdrink the Marines. You have to outdrink the Navy and the [00:02.20.00] Air Force and all the infantry units and everybody in-between. Oh, they've got the Army Rangers. They've got Navy SEALs, Air Commanders. You have to be able to hold your own and drink them under the table. There's that expectation. And so you do that. Every time you do a good job, you're given a drink. Every time you meet a buddy, he buys you a beer. Every time [00:02.40.00] you go in the field, you come back out, and you're okay, you celebrate, you celebrate somebody's birthday, Christmas, national holidays, anything there's always a six pack of beer there. You go to a briefing. When it's over, there's a big trash can full of beer iced down for you. Fourth of July celebrations, there's a big truckload of beer there. [00:03.00.00] It's beer, beer, beer everywhere you go. I couldn't believe they thought of my drinking as a problem because it was a manly thing to do. It was the



soldierly thing to do was to drink everybody else under the table. And of course, I've been arrested a few times. But that was okay, too. You (go out) there. You fight with the cops. You fight with the MPs. It's part of the lifestyle. You show what [00:03.20.00] a big man you are to everybody else and so it's part of the routine. And if you did that often enough, you got to be a legend in your own time. And so if you're a living legend, you have something that you have to, you have to maintain that image.

Also, alcohol is the drug of choice in Native communities that [00:03.40.00] is deeply entrenched in matters of sociability. We should recognize as well that a bitter history still resonates in native communities. The names and places are infamous. Wounded Knee, the Long Walk, the Trail of Tears, the Sand Creek Massacre. The atrocities visited on Native Americans by the US government [00:04.00.00] are still a part of the collective memory. Alcohol has become one means of coping with that history.

This has certainly been true in regard to past as well as more recent trauma among the Indian veterans whom I've cared for. When alcohol mixes with PTSD [00:04.20.00] the result is often disturbing and difficult. Many Indian veterans have told me they drink to blunt the pain and dull the unwanted memories. They use alcohol as a form of a self medication.

I was doing self medicating and letting all this [00:04.40.00] shame and all this guilt and this fear and things like that get to me because I didn't want to have to deal with it. I didn't want to be sober and have to try to deal with it.

(Ever) since 1971, you know, I started. [00:05.00.00] I drank to forget a lot of things.

And even in sobriety it got worse. Without the medication, minus the medication and running around, you know, stark raving sober, as I like to call it. Stark raving sober [00:05.20.00] presents a lot of problems, even if you have the spiritual concept tied down. It still makes holes in it. [laughs] It is that powerful. And I always was uncomfortable. In fact, I've lost more jobs in sobriety than when I was drinking. [00:05.40.00]

I did a lot of drinking just to forget all this. And I did a pretty good job of forgetting it. And I paid the price, of course, because I was—I drank too much. The drinking, I guess, was (it helped) a lot because it would kill some of the guilt feelings [00:06.00.00] of being a survivor when all my men got hurt, you know. My buddy died. It was really bad. I kept wanting to die. I didn't want to live.

But as one Native American told me the cure was worse than the disease. Alcohol triggers and intensifies the rage associated with PTSD and because [00:06.20.00] alcohol diminishes inhibitions, acting out that rage often means veterans lose their jobs and abuse their loved ones. In this cycle of misery they also lose their sense of coherence and self worth. Eventually, Native American veterans with PTSD become isolated. At this point [00:06.40.00] they also cut themselves off from the family support that is one of the great resources of Native cultures.



It was almost like I wasn't—I don't know how to explain it. I wasn't there. I mean, I was there, but he didn't really want to include me. Like I wasn't part—like he didn't want me [00:07.00.00] to know what was wrong with him or ... and so it was kind of strange. Like I was—I just drove somebody that I didn't even know to a hospital appointment. And I kind of resented that because I was his wife and I thought I should know [00:07.20.00] some of these things, but I didn't.

I was hurting so much inside and physically and mentally and spiritually. I had to find out, you know, what was inside of him, what was going on in his mind and in his body, why he was just turning away from me. I could, I knew he loved me and I knew he loved the kids [00:07.40.00] but for some reason there was a dark side.

Because of his pain he doesn't like to listen to a lot of noise. My kids turn on the radio, TV. He doesn't like that. He'd rather be by himself, no noise, nothing. [00:08.00.00] So, my family and I we drove away and spent some time somewhere else where my kids would have (free) time. It's very hard to live with a person like him.

Tragically, depression and suicide become more likely.

Oh, yeah. [00:08.20.00] In my lifetime, I attempted suicide several times too. You know, I couldn't live with myself. And alcohol was probably the only Band Aid, numbing agent, anything that could numb my mind, you know.

It got so bad, you know. I just wanted to—[00:08.40.00] that's where all these suicidal thoughts sort of come into my mind and I just can't take this shit no more and I want to end it now, you know.

I have an uncle who committed suicide and he's a Vietnam veteran and it was so hard to know what help [00:09.00.00] there was out there that could have, like, helped him and his family. And it was just so sad to actually have my brother and sister experience that when their father left.

In the American Indian Vietnam Veterans Project, nearly 9% of the veterans reported [00:09.20.00] that they currently suffer from major depression. Twelve percent had suffered depression at some time in their lives. Almost half of the Native American veterans we interviewed said they had attempted suicide. Others had taken their own lives before this project began. [00:09.40.00]

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