

The Hidden Addiction: Disordered Gambling Among Military Service Members and Veterans

November 10, 2023

Editor's Note: *In honor of Veterans Day, we share this op-ed written by Mr. Dave Yeager, an eleven-year veteran of the United States Army who is in recovery for a gambling addiction. Mr. Yeager is a member of the military committee for the National Council on Problem Gambling and currently works for Kindbridge Behavioral Health as an intake specialist and gambling recovery coach. He is also the host of Fall In: The Problem Gambling Podcast for Military Service Members and Veterans and the author of Fall In: A Veteran with a Gambling Addiction. Links to the podcast and books, and other resources for military and veterans can be found at <https://www.daveyeager-fallin.com>.*



The men and women who wear or have worn the uniform of the armed forces of the United States raised their right hand and swore to defend our nation from all enemies, foreign and domestic. They put themselves through grueling training to prepare for the possibility of war, moved every couple of years if not deployed, and left family and friends behind on a moments' notice when deployed. All of this was and is done to defend our way of life.

This warrior ethos, the notion that team, unit, service, and country come before self can come at a cost.

In many studies, gambling addiction prevalence among military service members and veterans is higher than the civilian population, often approaching twice the rate. [One study shows](#) that 32 percent of military service members and veterans were at moderate to severe risk of problem gambling compared to 17 percent of the civilian population. This is significant. But why? Why is the risk and rate so much higher among service members and veterans?

From my own experience, my upbringing, the Army, and my circumstances created a perfect storm for the development of my addiction. I came down on orders to go to the Republic of Korea for a one-year, unaccompanied tour. I was to leave in November of 2001, barely two months after the events of September 11th. I was in my first marriage with two children under the age of five. My marriage was stressed due to my orders for Korea. I grew up in an abusive household, so working through my stress and anxiety was not an option for me. I always found a way to avoid tough feelings. That, coupled with the Army mantra of mission-first, and there was no way stress would get the better of me. So, I kept it in and drove on. When I arrived in Korea, I was surprised to see that there were casino-style slot machine rooms on the bases. I started to play and quickly realized this was a great way for me to escape stress. I can still remember my first win, the very first night I was in Korea. I can remember all the stress, and hurt, and anxiety melting away in that moment. I had found my escape. But that escape rather quickly developed into a full-blown gambling addiction.

What was a fun way for me to blow off steam when I first got to Korea led to me doing things that I never thought possible. I was the enlisted leader of my squad. I had responsibility to ensure we were field-ready, that my soldiers had what they needed, that my command was always informed, and that my officer in charge never had to worry about the state of her squad. I did all of those things...at first. But as the year in Korea went on, I spent more and more time in the game rooms. I started leaving in the middle of the day to gamble. I borrowed money from my subordinates. That action alone tears down trust and reduced the readiness of my squad. What I did next, I still look back on and wonder how. I stole money from my unit to gamble. It wasn't much money, but I was a non-commissioned officer who felt honor and pride in who I was and what I did. How could I do this?

My actions got me reduced in rank. I was sent back to the States and regained my rank, but eventually lost it again as my gambling came back. This time my gambling led to the first of five suicide attempts and got me released from the Army. It was such a confusing time because I knew what was happening, but I did not know I was in the throes of an addiction, and my guess is neither did the military. Through that entire process, I can't recall anyone saying "gambling" or "addiction" to me. My last commander told me he was letting me out under honorable conditions so I could get the help I needed. But no one told me what that help was. At the same time I was being released from the Army, my first wife decided we should separate. It was the beginning of the darkest part of my life.

I spent six years in and out of the Army in a serious gambling addiction. I would often think, “no one could ever possibly understand what I’m going through!” At the time, the evidence I had supported these thoughts. I would go to the VA after a suicide attempt or severe bout with depression and would get treatment, but never for gambling. Finally, in 2007, a VA counselor pulled out a pamphlet she had for a gambling treatment program in Cleveland, Ohio. I did all of the leg work. At that point I had literally given up trying to “tough it out” or out-think it. I was beaten. The gambling treatment program finally showed me that I wasn’t alone, and that gambling is a real, and treatable addiction.

I started my recovery journey in 2007. I remarried in 2014. I reconnected with my children and have since been blessed with two granddaughters. However, I did experience a pretty serious relapse in 2020. This nearly cost me my second marriage. Here’s what I’ve learned since that relapse. First, I needed roadblocks. I self-excluded from all gambling in my state and my wife now handles all of our money. I needed to be accountable, to my whereabouts, and to my feelings. And I needed to stay connected to others in recovery.

The bottom line is this: gambling is a very real, very dangerous addiction that impacts military and veterans at a high rate. It is not spoken about or understood nearly enough, so there is still a great deal of fear and stigma which prevents many from stepping out of the shadows. But there is hope, and there is help. Learn more about this addiction and its impact at www.operationresponsiblegambling.org or at www.daveyeager-fallin.com.

- Dave Yeager, eleven-year veteran of the United States Army, in recovery for a gambling addiction

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.