

Study identifies reasons for drinking in UK serving and ex-serving military personnel

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A study, led by the University of Liverpool and King's College London, has identified the reasons why UK serving and ex-serving military personnel drink, in research based on military personnel self-reporting a stress or emotional problem.

Alcohol misuse is common in the United Kingdom (UK) Armed Forces, at a higher prevalence than the general population. Alcohol has historically been used in the UK Armed Forces to encourage bonding and to deal with difficult experiences. And while [alcohol](#) use is now on the decline in both populations, alcohol misuse in the forces is still double that of the general population. To put this into perspective, about 10% of [personnel](#) in the UK Armed Forces meet the criteria for alcohol misuse, compared to just 3% of the UK [general population](#).

Despite the high prevalence of alcohol misuse in this group, the reasons why people within the UK military drink have not been studied.

The researchers aimed to identify the reasons why UK military personnel drink and explored the characteristics of those who were drinking for different reasons. They also investigated if the context of drinking (i.e., where and who with) made them more or less likely to meet the criteria for alcohol misuse or binge drinking.

As part of the study, 707 serving and 572 ex-serving military personnel reporting a stress or [mental health problem](#) occurring in the last three years were selected from a large follow up study of UK military

personnel. Researchers conducted a telephone interview to examine military personnel's mental health, [alcohol use](#) and reasons for drinking.

The majority of the sample were male (84%), with 18% of personnel meeting the criteria for alcohol misuse. When looking at how common mental health problems were, they found that 18% met the criteria for anxiety, 8% for depression and 8% for post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD).

The reasons for drinking were categorised as either drinking to cope (such as, to escape your troubles or to forget your past) or drinking because of social pressure (such as, to fit in or to be sociable), in UK military personnel with a stress or emotional problem.

Those who met the criteria for depression, anxiety and PTSD were more likely to drink to cope, suggesting that they may be drinking to deal with the mental health symptoms.

Military personnel who reported drinking to cope were more likely to meet the criteria for alcohol misuse and binge drinking. Personnel who drink at home or alone were also more likely to meet the criteria for [alcohol misuse](#) and binge drinking.

However, the researchers state that these findings only reflect the reasons for drinking in military personnel who report having a stress or emotional problem, and may not be representative of the wider UK [armed forces](#) community.

Corresponding author, Patricia Irizar, Ph.D. student at the University of Liverpool, said: "Amongst military personnel with a stress or emotional problem, those who drink to cope with mental disorder symptoms, in addition to those who drink at home or drink alone (rather than with friends/family), are more likely to drink excessively."

Lead author, Dr. Laura Goodwin, Psychological Sciences, University of Liverpool, said: "This study identifies the need to better integrate mental health and substance use services for [military personnel](#), who may be drinking to cope with an existing [mental health](#) problem."

Professor Nicola Fear, King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London, said: "These findings can inform the development of tailored alcohol interventions for this occupational group, by identifying individuals who use alcohol in a way that is more likely to become problematic."

More information: P Irizar et al, Drinking motivations in UK serving and ex-serving military personnel, *Occupational Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/occmed/kqaa003](#)

Provided by University of Liverpool

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