

# Veterans are reluctant to seek help for sleep problems or substance use

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American military veterans are least willing to seek treatment for the health conditions that are most prevalent in their communities—including sleep and alcohol use problems—according to a new study from the University of Missouri School of Medicine. The findings also show a link between willingness to seek help among veterans of color and incidence of discrimination.

The study included 334 veterans from 46 states—66% were men and more than 70% identified themselves as a person of color. Participants completed screening questions for 15 [medical conditions](#), including insomnia, hazardous alcohol use, drug use, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression. They also rated the importance of treatment for each health condition and their willingness to seek treatment.

"The majority of participants indicated they would be willing to seek treatment for both physical and [mental health problems](#). However, they reported significantly greater willingness to seek treatment for physical than mental [health conditions](#)," said

principal investigator Mary Beth Miller, Ph.D., assistant professor of clinical psychiatry at the MU School of Medicine.

In the study, willingness to seek treatment was greatest for [chronic pain](#), chronic medical conditions and physical brain injuries. Willingness was lowest for alcohol or drug use and sleep disorders.

"We speculate that because sleep and [alcohol problems](#) are common, they may be normalized or minimized to the extent that they are no longer viewed as problems—or at least problems that warrant treatment," Miller said.

The study also examined the role discrimination plays in seeking treatment for physical or mental health problems. More frequent experiences of discrimination were associated with less willingness to seek treatment for physical or mental health problems.

"Among veterans of color, discriminatory experiences were associated with less willingness to seek treatment, but only among those who denied use of other strategies for coping with stress," Miller said. "Empowering patients to utilize whatever healthy coping methods they have available may mitigate the negative impact of discriminatory experiences on treatment-seeking."

The study was recently published in the journal *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*.

**More information:** Mary Beth Miller et al, Impact of discrimination and coping on Veterans' willingness to seek treatment for physical and mental health problems., *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* (2022). DOI: [10.1037/adb0000861](https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000861)

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