

A Different Way: Cannabis for Combat Vets



No American can doubt that we are well on the road to major cannabis reform nationwide, despite numerous hindrances imposed by the Federal government to keep cannabis cloaked in the lies, propaganda and militant destruction of the failed War on Drugs. The great experiments underway in Washington and Colorado will hopefully provide us a framework to properly tax and regulate both medical and recreational cannabis use, not to mention begin providing proper education to people about the much-feared and long misunderstood plant.

Cries for cannabis reform have crawled from the shadows of fringe liberal politics and the basements of hopeful teenagers sharing a bowl to become a mainstream issue with serious bipartisan support throughout local and state governments, and even an ever-growing number of congressional leaders. We know we were lied to about cannabis. We know that once sacred epitaphs such as "gateway drug" have been proven unfounded. We know that millions of Americans, regardless of the current legality in their state, imbibe cannabis in some form or another daily. We know that countless polls have shown strong majority national support for medicinal regulation, decriminalization or outright legalization. No matter how long it takes or how many dwindling politicians will hold out to dangerously outdated beliefs, reform is here and support for it grows. The day will come when our children and grandchildren laugh and ask us about our generation's Prohibition and the violent crime and corruption it spawned, much as we laugh and shake our heads at the insanity of our grandparents' Prohibition, and the ugly scar it left on society.

One group has been mostly ignored in the fight for cannabis reform, and that is the United States combat veteran. This article considers cannabis for veterans diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and enrolled into the fairly standard DoD/VA treatment options. However, I wish to point out that the same beneficial effects and relief enjoyed by physically disabled civilians who are treated with medical cannabis can be shared by wounded combat troops. Currently, 20 states have medical cannabis programs in place, a hopeful and optimistic-for-the-future number compared to a decade ago, but only seven recognize PTSD for eligibility, with Maine and Massachusetts our only neighbors in New England to do so. An email I sent to the Rhode Island medical cannabis program asking why PTSD is not an included diagnosis for eligibility and what should RI vets who wish to apply for medical cannabis approval strictly for PTSD do, remains unanswered. PTSD among veterans, despite much better understanding and attention to the danger it presents than in previous conflicts, has become a particularly vicious killer of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. Suicide rates among returning troops are at

epidemic levels, and every day more veterans reach the end of hope and choose a way out rather than take one more pill, have one more nightmare or see one more dead friend's face in a crowd. When terror, fear and hopelessness haunt your every step and breath, from rising in the morning to falling into a sleepless sleep at night, some choose the only way out they can fathom. And every time a scared combat veteran chooses the final exit, it's a national tragedy. It's the very finest of our nation's future being destroyed. If cannabis can prevent just 10 percent of these suicides, the justification is there for full access.

As a legalization advocate, I can cite facts, figures and quotes from politicians, religious leaders and progressive activists all day long. And fellow legalization advocates will read this article and nod knowingly and in support at each passage. Instead, I spoke to a random sampling of PTSD-diagnosed RI combat vets about their experiences with cannabis. They are from different age groups, military branches and civilian backgrounds, and served either in Iraq or Afghanistan or both. Three currently self medicate with cannabis, and one does not.

When diagnosed with PTSD, either by the DoD or VA, what medications were you given, and how did they help/hurt you mentally and/or physically?

Mike H: I was diagnosed with PTSD after my first deployment to Iraq. During a routine route patrol and while manning a machine gun in the turret of a HMMWV, I was knocked unconscious by an IED (three 155mm shells) placed underground and beneath our vehicle. I awoke 30 minutes later with hearing loss, tinnitus and a grade 2 concussion. Shortly after returning from deployment, I began to experience PTSD-related symptoms such as night terrors, elevated heart rate/blood pressure and a general inability to never let my guard down. Also, loud and abrupt noises caused severe anxiety and stress in my everyday life. The symptoms were affecting not only my day-to-day routine, but also my marriage and relationship with my son. Upon returning from Iraq, I was evaluated and it was suggested by a doctor that I contact a therapist to undergo psychological treatment. I began therapy and continued until the day I was released from the Marines. It was incredible, however, I credit most of my success to the actual therapist. She was, in a sense, my medication. In the civilian world, I was unable to find a therapist as hospitable and proficient.

Paul M: After my second deployment, shit started to get real on the home front. Upon going to "The Wizard" (Ed: Many service members refer to Deployment Health clinics that initially treat much PTSD as The Wizard) for the first time, I was put to sleep with 2000 mg of Seroquel. My Seroquel remained at 1000mg a night after that. For the first few months it was coupled with different doses of Lunesta and Ambien. In the morning I would take a Valium, Abilify, Zoloft and Atavan. My SSRIs went back and forth between Zoloft, Prozac and Wellbutrin. A few months later, I still was not sleeping and was given Trazodone, and a list of other trial meds. What eventually would put me to sleep? Days of drinking.

Gregory C: When first diagnosed with TBIs / PTSD, I was given meds, mild to wild — Lithium, Klonopin and Trazodone, to name a few. None of any of them taken alone or with the other shoe box full of meds did anything. They only hooked me on pain meds and alcohol to try and deal with my PTSD. I soon had an added problem to overcome. I am now on zero meds, as my liver is trashed from all the meds. I didn't abuse my meds. They did nothing for me. I only added drinking to make the pain stop so as not to take more than the doctor's orders. The meds were a waste of time and money. I added weight, became more depressed and my PTSD became worse.

MN: When I was diagnosed with PTSD, I was in the active reserves with 1/25 (Ed: First Battalion, 25th

Marine Regiment). I created a habit of going to bars with the sole purpose of finding someone to get into an altercation with. I wasn't looking to just beat someone up. I was looking for someone to protect. I would keep my eyes and ears open and be on the lookout for guys mistreating their women or someone picking on the little guy, always with my good ole long island iced teas in tow. It felt great to be the one stepping in. The one taking the blows. The one beating the enemy into the ground. It was something I lived for and loved while deployed. After a few blackout-induced arrests and losing a few more teeth, I decided to go to the good ole VA. They had me go through all their questionnaires, and I had all their "classic" symptoms. Nightmares, insomnia, hyper vigilance, irritability, blah blah blah. So they started me on their usual cocktail of Trazodone, Seroquel, and Clonazepam. Into my drug induced stupor I went. This stuff turned me into a zombie. I had no emotion whatsoever, no motivation to do anything or interact with anyone. I consider myself a recluse and homebody anyway, but this was on a different level. I felt as if I were sleepwalking all the time. On top of it, if I missed a dose, all the emotion, whether it be anger or happiness, would flood back in. I would become manic until I took my next dose. Totally overwhelmed with rage, or bouncing around with happiness for no reason. These things were coupled with hangovers that rivaled that of tanking a liter of 100 proof vodka the night before, barely being able to stay awake throughout the day, and my dick not working. Needless to say I stopped taking the VA's PTSD regimen within about two months.

At what point did you cease (if you did stop) taking issued medicines and using cannabis?

Mike H: It wasn't until I was a civilian that I resorted to smoking marijuana to alleviate my PTSD symptoms. Therapy was no longer an option and I've never been the kind of person who trusts mass-produced and under-tested pharmaceutical drugs. I experienced a slight moral dilemma with the legality of the drug. However, with my own mental health in jeopardy the risk to reward ratio became clear. When using cannabis, my PTSD symptoms decreased dramatically; I felt semi-normal again. It was at this point I began to wonder why the government was not using cannabis in PTSD treatment. Surely I was not the first pioneer who stumbled upon the medical benefits of marijuana.

Paul M: I did my best to stay consistent with meds. I had a serious girlfriend and a family that wanted me to do better, yet the shit just never worked. I would be stuck in my mind without any ability to express myself outside of self destruction. Upon my discharge, I began to smoke weed. Right away I felt hyper-vigilant-paranoia, but after a bit I began to feel much more relaxed. After a few months I eventually gave up on all non-natural medicine.

Gregory C: I do not use cannabis; I have found other ways to deal with my PTSD. The tools I am using to deal with my PTSD would conflict with using cannabis as a medication. With that being said, I have been reading about, and was just in Israel where the IDF soldiers are using a proven program with great results to battle PTSD and more. I support this and any other medication that would help our veterans who have given so much.

As a combat vet with PTSD, how does cannabis make you feel when compared with the standard PTSD formulary?

MN: Although cannabis doesn't cure PTSD or present a solution to ALL the issues it causes, it does help me significantly. I can go home and smoke a bowl after having an unbearable day in society and it releases all of the pent-up frustration and anxiety I've been trying to push through during the day. I only wish I could periodically smoke throughout the day. That would prevent me from having to constantly take breaks to go get some fresh air, as I tell my coworkers when I have to remove myself due to the

ridiculous BS that society is constantly creating. BUT, I work in medicine and due to the reputation that the government has given marijuana, it would certainly be frowned upon if I smelled of cannabis as I took your blood pressure. The physiological effects are just as beneficial as the psychological, too. Cannabis allows me to fall asleep rather than staying awake for hours while my mind runs in circles. I also wake refreshed and ready to take on the day. It even dulls the extreme back and neck pain caused by combat deployment and constantly carrying heavy loads. I find that thoughts of my being useless in the world become less frequent when I have a supply. I become more social when I smoke, and people say flat out that I am more tolerable.

Mike H: Roughly 20,000 vets are prescribed opioids in their first year after being diagnosed with PTSD. Many of those prescriptions can be refilled indefinitely. I watched my fellow comrades indulge in all kinds of painkillers and BP meds after deployment. A month later they were hooked and on their way to a serious lifelong addiction. It seems as though the United States government has a general solution to PTSD: throw drugs at the vets until they're comatose and can't complain. There are many reasons I refused medication and addiction was at the top of the list. Hence the appeal of cannabis — a non-addictive therapeutic drug with properties that lower heart rate and blood pressure.

Paul M: When I smoke, usually once in the morning and then again before bed, I am much more relaxed. I can focus. Every day I hear the same voice calling the same words and I am reminded of how I wasn't good enough. I know that "good enough" was not the problem, it was just a matter of unfortunate fate. It's easy to say, but believing it is a whole different issue! She don't ever go away, but the anxiety of it does with a little bit of bud, and I am able to talk about it and make an attempt to come to terms with it.

I am not a fucking head doctor, but it seems that in order to get an individualized plan within the parameters of the VA, one must endure the rigorous course of pills and plans that are preset for PTSD. When one fails, move on to the next. You can only do that for so long until you give up on any hope of, for a lack of a better phrase, getting over it.

Hypothetically, if medicinal cannabis was legal federally, and was available to vets via the VA to treat PTSD, do you feel this may change the current rates of vet suicide?

Gregory C: I do highly agree that cannabis in a medical program would help to affect the suicide rate of our heroes who are willing to do anything to get well and again live in the America they fought for. We owe our very freedom to these men and women, and the burden of that should be enough to make it clear. Stop at nothing to help them and keep them safe. This needs to be about the facts, not politics, slanted reporting or anything else.

MN: There are obvious positive psychological effects: reducing anxiety and greatly reducing anger. The problem with marijuana being illegal is the fact that so many vets have already found cannabis as a solution. They reduce all stressors by smoking the plant, only to be given a handful of more problems. They get their jobs taken away for testing positive or are rendered unemployable. It's ridiculous. Veterans commit suicide, in my opinion, because they no longer find themselves useful or because they think they are intolerable to their friends and family. Making cannabis legal and available as a treatment would negate much of this. Cannabis is by no means a cure-all. All it treats are the symptoms. It does so damned well though, and if there is something out there that does more good than harm, why keep it from people?

Paul M: You know, I can't really say. I have seen it both ways. For some it works, and for others it

makes it worse. I feel overall, though, that it's a good thing. There is a ton of research that indicates the benefits of combating PTSD with pot. Again I don't believe it's a cure-all, but it does give doctors a much broader realm to work with, as opposed to the current standard of chemical combinations.

I am not a marijuana expert by any means, but there are different strains of pot that provide different effects. It only seems sensible to utilize these for the benefits of society, especially those who are severely injured.

Mike H: I feel as though cannabis has helped me reach a stable mental state. The first two years after deployment were incredibly difficult. Each day was a struggle; my marriage fell apart, I almost lost custody of my child and I was unable to find a job. I was headed to a dark and unreachable place. My personal version of therapy (smoking cannabis) has helped me psychologically and lowered vital functions such as my BP and heart rate. I am now on track to graduate from a major university with a bachelor's in applied health sciences and on my way to a doctorate. I have joint custody with my son and an excellent relationship with my ex-wife. Needless to say, cannabis has been instrumental in my overall success.

I implore you, the voting populace of our fair state, to question your local and state lawmakers as to why the medicinal cannabis program here in Rhode Island does not include any provisions for PTSD, or any mental health diagnosis for that matter. I encourage you to spend five minutes reading into the literature beginning to emerge from all corners of the globe that indicate cannabis and psychedelics like home grown magic mushrooms and LSD are being explored as treatment options for PTSD, insomnia, depression, opiate addiction, alcoholism and more by the Tripsitter team. I demand that you form your own educated opinion on the subject of medical and recreational access to cannabis here in Rhode Island. As our brethren out West have done, it is time for a state that prides itself in dissidence and freedoms, a state born from the fires of persecution, to become an example for our neighbors. Far from the will of greedy pharmaceutical empires, drug war-cash-backed police departments, or a federal government bent on disinformation campaigns and making criminals out of those who just seek some peace of mind, it is time to say, "We value our people."