

# **Influence of Instability on Substance Use Prevalence in Emerging Adult Active Duty Military Members and Veterans**

**Topaz Lavi**

**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

## **Abstract**

Emerging Adults (EA) are found to have the highest rates of substance use across the lifespan. Past research suggests emerging adults who are active duty members, as well as veterans, have an increased likelihood of misusing substances due to the feeling of instability. The Emerging Adulthood Theory (EAT) suggests that individuals ages 18-29 experience five different stages of development known as dimensions: optimism, self-focus, instability, identity exploration, and the feeling of being in between a child and an adult (Arnett, 2000). This paper will discuss instability, one out of the five dimensions of the Emerging Adulthood Theory in relation to military members and how their experiences in the military may influence their substance use. The relationship was found through semi-structured interviews and coding following thematic analysis. These results can also be found in many of the interviews of emerging adult military members conducted for our study. This study also has implications for social work, as it influences social work practice to be more mindful of the differences between emerging adult military members and their civilian counterparts. Without this understanding, it may make it more difficult for social workers to stray away from unconscious biases while working with this population. Unconscious biases can arise due to a lack of cultural competency and understanding of the unique experiences active duty members and veterans face, which can therefore negatively impact the quality of care and support this population may receive from social workers.

*Keywords: Emerging Adulthood, Military, Instability, Substance Use*

## **Introduction**

Emerging adulthood is thought to be a critical developmental period for individuals ages 18-29 (Arnett, 2000). This time period is explained through five different dimensions the age group may experience: optimism, self-focus, instability, identity exploration, and the feeling of being in between a child and an adult (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults are also found to have the highest rates of substance use across the lifespan (SAMHSA, 2017). According to Arnett's (2000) theory, emerging adults experience extensive amounts of growth and change throughout

this time period. Not only change within themselves, but regarding their environment as well. Certain changes can vary from moving to a new place, to forming new relationships or losing old ones. Because of these changes, emerging adults can begin to feel an increased sense of instability, which can be understood as uncertainty of the future. Moreover, feeling unstable can cause some individuals to feel as if self-medicating with substances is a viable coping mechanism (Shadur, 2015). This instability could be linked to high rates of substance use in this age range. In addition, this paper will discuss the differences between this dimension as an active duty member versus a veteran and will go further in-depth about instability and how this dimension may influence higher rates of substance use and misuse in emerging adults, specifically in the military.

### **Methods**

The study focuses on exploring Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory dimensions in relation to individuals in the military, as well as veterans (Arnett, 2000). This study was conducted through a series of 24 interviews with military members (N=13) and veterans (N=11). Emerging adults with high risk substance use behaviors completed surveys and an in-depth interview regarding their experiences transitioning into adulthood. These dimensions may explain their substance misuse. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked about their lives as an emerging adult before and during the military. In addition, they discussed substance use culture in the military and whether they felt the EAT dimensions applied to their experiences and substance use behaviors. The interviews were then examined following thematic analysis. Thematic analysis follows a six-step process: familiarizing yourself with the data, creating initial codes, finding common themes, reviewing founded themes, defining and naming each theme,

and creating your report (Braun & Clark, 2006). The coding process consisted of a team who would code the transcripts separately using NVivo software, and then come together in order to create and define themes found.

## Results

In order to collect the proper information to create the results for the study, interviews as well as outside sources were gathered. Together, they shed a light on the link between the feeling of instability and substance use behaviors. The interviews supported the results by bringing in qualitative data, which allowed for a holistic approach to the study, while the statistics conveyed the analytical portion of the research.

### Instability as Active Duty

The adjustment of becoming a military member (N=13), as well as the constant moving and deployments members often experience, could create a sense of instability for these individuals. A participant in one interview explained,

“Uhm, I mean, instability I would say 100% relates to the military. You know, sure. There was about a two-year period I think where I did not live in one place for more than about six months. You know, just constantly, you know going to different places, especially when I was first starting my career. And then you know, the instability of you know, you get really close to the friend group in one area and then you get told by the military you have to move. So now you gotta go make some new friends somewhere else” (26, Male, Army).

Not having the proper amount of time to adjust to a new setting can be difficult for anyone.

Constantly moving to new areas and being forced to leave the friendships can make one feel as if they do not fit in. For many military members, moving away from home for the first time can be a terrifying new chapter. As a military member, the continuous cycle of adapting to new environments can make it more difficult to find a sense of grounding, whereas non-military

emerging adults tend to have more control over when and where they decide to move. Therefore, these experiences can create an even greater sense of instability for emerging adults enlisted in the military.

On the other hand, some participants in the study discussed feeling a greater sense of stability within the military due to the structure and responsibilities provided to their members,

“But what gave me the feeling of stability was, I am in the military, they are going to provide housing, provide food, and I get paid a lot, and nothing bad is going to happen, like I felt stable, by the time I was leaving the military, ready to go to school, I had money saved up, I had a whole plan, benefits, I struggled with moving, but it is still like I had a safety net, I always felt like there was a safety net for me, yeah, yeah I always felt like the military always gave me some kind of safety net” (25, Male, Marine Corps).

Having a strict schedule every day, as well as expectations to achieve, gave members a sense of purpose, which created a stronger feeling of stability for some.

### ***Substance Use Prevalence for Active Duty Members***

Being in the military can come with mass amounts of stress due to a sense of boredom, loneliness, the situations military members are thrown into, and the experience of being so far away from home. The concern around military members misusing alcohol is elevated due to the high rates of psychological distress, and trauma-induced psychological distress from their experiences (Stewart, 1996). Moreover, members become closer to individuals in their unit and begin feeling a sense of brotherhood, which can further influence or exacerbate the military’s drinking culture. This idea of brotherhood and belonging is encouraged in order to create a stronger sense of uniformity, which can aid in more successful teamwork within units. However, it can also have negative effects such as increasing the likelihood of risky substance use behaviors due to the pressure to conform. In most branches, binge drinking is prevalent and, in many cases, expected. In a study researching the prevalence of binge drinking while enlisted, 26.8% of men and 12.5% of women in the sample (N=713) fit the category of frequent heavy

drinkers, which was measured by five drinks per occasion for males, and four drinks per occasion for females a minimum of once a week (Moore, 2007). Unfortunately, there are many gaps in research related to patterns of binge drinking linked to gender; therefore, making it difficult to understand why men engage in more binge drinking than women while enlisted. Moreover, one in three service members are binge drinkers and more than one in three service members are hazardous drinkers (NIDA, 2019). A binge drinker is an individual whose drinking may cause temporary physical harm, whereas a hazardous drinker's behaviors can cause more adverse health effects such as alcoholism. Some members feel unstable during active duty due to the constant changing and adapting that occurs while enlisted. For example, moving, deployment, and psychological distress from certain lived experiences. Due to a feeling of instability, mixed with the prevalent military drinking culture, and a desire to feel a sense of belonging, it is common for military members to regularly binge drink as a coping mechanism.

### **Instability as a Veteran**

For all the veterans (N=11) in the study, reintegrating into the civilian world was a time with an increased feeling of instability. After spending years adapting to life in the military, it was time to live a civilian life again, which came with more freedom and much less structure. For veterans without a plan, or ones who could be struggling with mental health problems due to trauma they may have endured while enlisted, a new life without a sense of structure could be extremely difficult to adjust to. One participant explained,

“But when you get out, and I know a lot of people who do like three-year contracts, when they get out and that is when it gets real unstable, that transition period, and then I think also now that I am starting to think about instability on the weekends, you do not have structure and you have freedom and, uhm, nothing is super stable for the weekend, you do not have a wake up time, a final formation time, and all those kind of things, so I think that is part of it, definitely attributes to that” (22, Male, National Guard & Army).

That transitional period back to civilian life can be extremely unstable due to not only feeling as if one is returning to a prior life, but also seeing how much that life has changed since enlisting. This can vary from relationships, to living situations, as well as the amount of freedom a veteran now holds. Without the structure of the military, service members had become so accustomed to, many begin to feel lost. Since the “safety net” they once had is gone, it becomes difficult to find structure and stability in their lives once again.

### ***Substance Use Prevalence for Veterans***

Beginning a new life outside of the military can be stressful and unstable, as exemplified with the above quote regarding life as a veteran. With a strong drinking culture in the military, many individuals have learned and become accustomed to self-medicating through binge drinking. Now, after not learning how to cope in positive ways, many resort to coping in the way they are familiar with, which is through the use of substances. One participant explained their experience returning from deployment,

“That instability one really speaks out honestly. Yeah, I can definitely say that one.. Yeah. Cause I can tell you right now after I got back [from deployment], I had a few beers just because I was so mad. Yeah, definitely the instability part because I mean I got literally moved around so much and used in so many different places. It was just like at the end of each day, I was just like, oh my god, I’m going to get a beer or something like, crack open a beer and shut off a little” (23, Male, Marine Corps).

Due to growing so accustomed to drinking as a means to cope while enlisted, it can become increasingly difficult to learn more positive coping mechanisms as a veteran. In a study related to veterans and drinking prevalence, it was found approximately half of the women (N= 2,528) and over half of the men (N=21,682) ages 18-25 participating in the study (N= 24,210) reported having binge drank in the past month (Hoggatt, 2017). Without the structure holding veterans accountable, such as a daily schedule and set expectations, as well as an increased sense of instability, it can become significantly easier to cope through substance use.

### Further Research Implications

Alcohol has been prevalent in the military for decades. In the 18th and 19th century, drinking rituals within branches were common, and often condoned. Even though alcohol is no longer provided by the military, it continues to be easily accessible through means such as going to bars near ports during members' free time (Shirvani, Reed, & Clingan, 2017). Moreover, the drinking culture in the military instills an idea that coping through substances is an appropriate way to deal with daily struggles. For example, in the Navy, it is common to view drinking with other members as a positive strategy to cope with stress; binge drinking is not necessarily condemned either, as long as members are capable of returning to ship at their designated time (Ames & Cunradi, 2004). Due to the normalization of binge drinking in the military, members often rationalize risky alcohol use behaviors as a means to self-medicate. Engaging in the use of substances as a coping mechanism can contribute to adverse health effects such as addiction. Furthermore, it can also negatively impact an individual's quality of life and may worsen conditions such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Positive coping mechanisms to advocate for instead may be journaling, meditation, or recreational physical activity. Mindfulness practices such as journaling and meditation can help individuals find healthy ways to ground themselves when struggling with stress, boredom, or loneliness. Moreover, recreational physical activity can help relieve stress that may come with the responsibilities the military pushes on their members.

Some gaps were found in research on this population, which were why the prevalence of binge drinking was so much higher among men than women and how gender roles may affect this finding. It is important to find how different lived experiences such as combat exposure, sexual assault, and toxic masculinity may negatively affect the substance use behaviors of

military members and veterans. Without this knowledge, effective treatment for this population may be increasingly difficult to create.

### **Conclusion**

Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental period for individuals. For military members and veterans, the added stress due to constant changes and transitions in and out of the military, along with binge drinking being so commonly normalized, can make it easier to misuse substances, which can later develop into a negative coping method. Moreover, emerging adult veterans and active duty members struggling with a feeling of instability can also lead to risky substance use behaviors. Due to the stressful environment that comes with joining the military, this can be a factor as to why the prevalence of substance use is so high among active duty members and veterans. The use of substances can be a means to cope with the responsibilities and trauma that may come with military experience, as well as the instability that a veteran may feel during their transition back into the civilian world. Lastly, it is critical for social workers to be mindful of these issues when working with active duty members and veterans in this age range. The struggles and transitions they face can be much different than the ones emerging adults in the civilian world have experienced, and it is important to be aware of these differences in order to effectively work with active duty members or veterans.



## References

- Ames, G., & Cunradi, C. (2004). Alcohol use and preventing alcohol-related problems among young adults in the military. *Alcohol Research & Health*, 28(4), 252–257.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood. A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *The American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Hoggatt, K. J., Lehavot, K., Krenek, M., Schweizer, C. A., & Simpson, T. (2017). Prevalence of substance misuse among US veterans in the general population. *American Journal on Addictions*, 26(4), 357–365.
- Moore, R. S., Ames, G. M., & Cunradi, C. B. (2007). Physical and social availability of alcohol for young enlisted naval personnel in and around home port. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, 2(1).
- NIDA. (2019). Monitoring the future.  
<https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/monitoring-future>
- Shadur, J.M., Hussong, A.M. (2015). Negative affect variability and adolescent self-medication: The role of the peer context. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 34(6), 571-580.
- Shirvani, M., Reed, M. B., & Clingan, S. (2017). The Relationship Between Emerging Adult Alcohol Consumption and Military Enlistment. *Military Medicine*, 182(9), e1731–e1737.

Stewart, S.H. (1996). Alcohol abuse in individuals exposed to trauma: A critical review.

*Psychological Bulletin*, 120(10), 83-112.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SAMHSA. (2017). Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2015 national survey on drug use and health. HHS publication no. SMA 17–5044, NSDUH series H-52). Rockville, MD: Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, substance abuse and mental HealthServices administration. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data>.