

Tips for the Effective Assessment, Treatment and Management of Substance Abuse Amongst Veterans

Chris' story

Chris is 32 years old and has lived in Cairns his whole life. An only child, he was raised by his maternal grandparents, after his mother died in a car accident when he was 12. He has had no contact with his father since, who was a casual labourer, had a drinking problem, and was not able to adequately care for Chris. Chris' grandparents never really liked their son-in-law, and Chris remembers his dad as "a depressed son of a b!%#@. He'd drink to feel better about himself but it just made him feel worse".

At school, Chris was an average student, good at sport and very popular. His cricket and footy teammates became his life-long friends, and their kinship was forged on the pitch and in the pub afterwards. Remembering his time in the under-18's teams, Chris says, "Geez I loved that time. We'd play hard on the field and in the pub afterwards. Didn't matter if we won or lost - either way we'd put a dent in it, nearly every weekend I was rat s%\$#".

Given the close vicinity of HMAS Cairns, many of Chris's extended family, friends and neighbours were in the Navy. His grandfather thought the discipline and routine would be good for Chris and, in the absence of any other ideas, Chris signed up as soon as he successfully completed school, along with a couple of his schoolmates.

From day one, Chris really enjoyed being in the Navy. He relished the time at sea on the long deployments, enjoyed training as a marine technician and loved the regular pay, which was more than he anticipated. He felt a sense of pride and duty in his service. He bonded well with his fellow seamen, both on and off duty, which usually involved lengthy drinking sessions. Chris says "The grog was cheap on base and a lot of the local clubs in Cairns gave us free entry or cheap drinks". Some of his mates smoked

marijuana during their drinking sessions which Chris tried but didn't like.

Chris developed a reputation amongst his mates as a prankster and a risk taker. He loved drinking games where they dared each other to undertake reckless tasks, like scaling the palm tree on barracks.

Chris' grandfather started to become worried about Chris' drinking, saying "You'll end up like your father, a pathetic, lonely alcoholic". But Chris didn't think that would happen to him. "I'm not a bit like him – I still get a buzz out of drinking. When that stops I'll stop, but until then I'm going to have a good time".

After a series of short relationships with girls who either couldn't keep up or wouldn't put up with his drinking, Chris met Angela. She worked at a local bar and regularly took ecstasy or ketamine so she could party after work. "Grog makes you fat and dope is for losers. But ecstasy makes you feel good" she'd said to Chris when she introduced him to these drugs. He discovered he too liked the effect and valued that he could party all night and still go to work the next day feeling relatively fresh.

Chris believed Angela was 'the one' and started spending most of his time with her. After a year together, Angela encouraged Chris to leave the Navy, which he did without much thought or consultation. He was proud of his achievements over the 14 years he spent in the Navy, and he thought his work as a marine technician would bode well for employment on the outside. However, he was disappointed to find how hard it was to find a job and, after a couple of months looking, he was forced to settle for a casual job as a courier.

Despite his poor employment experiences, his relationship with Angela was going well, and they moved in together.

They spent most weekends clubbing and taking drugs.

Many of his Navy mates were starting to settle down and Chris found himself spending more time with Angela's friends, who were always up for a good time.

One morning he was stopped for a random breath test and was surprised that he was over the limit significantly; he lost his license and, as a result, his job as well.

With no job and no money, Chris began to spend most of his time in the apartment he shared with Angela, drinking and gaming. He started to become unsure of his feelings, saying "I'm toey all the time, I feel like hitting something or someone." However, he felt that the alcohol and the gaming were helping him in some way.

A year after leaving the Navy, Chris began to regret his decision. Without a driver's license, it became too hard to look for work, and his mates were focused on their wives and children and weren't around for him as much. His body couldn't do what it used to, he was too old for team sports and he couldn't afford a gym membership to stay fit.

He and Angela started niggling at each other and spending less time together. Angela would go clubbing without Chris, while he stayed at home, drinking and gaming.

Seemingly out of the blue, one day Angela kicks him out and Chris is blindsided. His only option is to move back with his grandparents, but his grandfather has now said he will only take Chris back if he stops drinking. Chris doesn't know if he wants to stop drinking but knows he can't quit on his own. With nowhere else to live, he reluctantly accepts his grandfather's terms and starts to look for local services that help might help him manage his drinking.