



# Mental Health in the Intelligence Community, Uncovered

by Ms. Pamela J. Miller

## Introduction

If your back aches, you go to a chiropractor. If your knee aches, you go to an orthopedic specialist. If your heart aches, you go to a psychotherapist. Our mental health is as important as our physical health! However, many military personnel choose not to seek help from a behavioral health professional for fear of “losing” their security clearance. This is acutely prevalent within the intelligence community.

## The Mental Health Myth with Regard to Clearances

The Department of Defense (DoD) Consolidated Adjudications Facility determines a person’s security clearance eligibility once it receives a completed background investigation. Depending on the individual’s assignment, another agency may also need to do its own review because many missions and agencies within the intelligence community require specific levels of access. For example, an Army Soldier assigned to a National Security Agency (NSA) billet will require a background investigation adjudicated for top secret with access to sensitive compartmented information, known as TS/SCI. NSA will also vet the Soldier through its own system. This entire process often takes 6 to 12 months. After waiting so long to obtain these accesses, many Soldiers fear losing them because it would result in their inability to perform the mission.

In the field, Soldiers inevitably hear the story of a coworker who lost access to classified information after seeking help from a behavioral health professional. However, Soldiers are usually circulating an incomplete story because they do not have all the facts. The coworker might have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder that could potentially have had a negative impact on military readiness. Understandably, in this situation the diagnosis also affected the Soldier’s eligibility to access classified information. The reason for the pending discharge was not public knowledge, and the Soldier was not likely to share a mental health diagnosis with his team. Yet the perception was the DoD re-

voked the clearance because the Soldier sought help at a behavioral health clinic, which resulted in his subsequent discharge from the Army. That is not how it works. The DoD considers multiple guidelines and mitigating factors when determining whether to revoke a security clearance.

In truth, less than 1 percent of security clearance revocations are due to psychological conditions alone. In some cases, a Soldier may have been instructed to go to a behavioral health clinic because of a criminal act reported through family advocacy. In this circumstance, peers are probably not aware of the criminal act because of its sensitivity, but they are aware of the visit to the behavioral health clinic and assume that is why the Soldier “lost” his security clearance—thereby reinforcing the stigma of seeking assistance from a behavioral health professional. The timeline of events can also cause the misperception because the suspension of a security clearance often occurs quickly, yet a military discharge due to a mental health disorder could take more than a year.

## The Importance of Seeking Help

Electing to seek help from a behavioral health professional indicates a Soldier is taking ownership of his personal situation—being proactive to correct a problem before it gets worse. Some Soldiers try to cope by using drugs or an excessive amount of alcohol, which can have a lasting effect on their career and security clearance. Others spiral out of control into a pattern of self-harm, harm of others, or even suicide.

According to a 2018 study, up to 23 percent of people with mood and/or anxiety disorders self-medicate with drugs or alcohol.<sup>1</sup> Alcohol is the popular choice because it is legal and easily obtainable. However, self-medicating in this way has the potential to lead to *alcohol use disorder*, which will impair the Soldier’s judgment, stability, reliability, or trustworthiness. This is a serious condition. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, it is

“characterized by an impaired ability to stop or control alcohol use despite adverse social, occupational, or health consequences. An estimated 15 million people in the United States have [alcohol use disorder].”<sup>2</sup>

Signs of alcohol use disorder may not become apparent until the Soldier engages in a criminal act, such as driving under the influence, committing assault, or being drunk and disorderly. A security adjudicator will then review the case to decide if the Soldier will retain his security clearance. Had the Soldier gone to a behavioral health professional to get help for his depression, or other problem, rather than self-medicating with alcohol, the only adjudicative concern would have been psychological conditions. Instead, in addition to psychological conditions, concerns include criminal conduct and alcohol abuse. Depending on the severity of the criminal act, the Army may choose not to retain the Soldier, eliminating the need to make a decision about the security clearance.

Some Soldiers use shopping to cope with depression. The concept of excessive shopping may seem innocent enough; however, it can become an addiction. This may also lead to the Soldier being dishonest with her loved ones about the overextended spending, and the Soldier may accumulate serious credit card debt as a result. It is not uncommon for DoD security personnel to notice, through a process called *continuous evaluation*, that a Soldier has multiple delinquent accounts at low dollar limits because she has been keeping purchases a secret from her spouse and not paying the credit card bills. Do not cope alone! Seek help from a behavioral health professional!

#### What is Continuous Evaluation?

Continuous Evaluation (CE) is an ongoing screening process to review the background of an individual who is assigned to a sensitive position or has access to classified information or material. It exists to ensure that the individual should continue to retain a security clearance or the assignment to sensitive duties. CE leverages a set of automated record checks and business rules to assist in the ongoing assessment of an individual's continued eligibility.<sup>3</sup>

### Identify the Problem Early On

DoD Manual 5200.02, *Procedures for the DoD Personnel Security Program (PSP)*, and AR 380-67, *Personnel Security Program*, identify the requirement to promptly report any information to the security office that suggests a Soldier may have an emotional, mental, or personality condition

that can impair judgment, reliability, or trustworthiness.<sup>4</sup> Failure to self-report such criteria is a violation and could result in the suspension of access. Once an individual has reported the information to the security manager (or in the case of SCI and Special Access Programs, to the special security officer), these security professionals will refer to the adjudicative guidelines to determine what further action is required. Commanders/directors may remove local access or suspend all access to classified material when a Soldier's behavior casts doubt on his judgment, stability, reliability, or trustworthiness.

This does not mean the DoD will remove or suspend access because a Soldier voluntarily goes to marital, grief, or trauma counseling. In fact, seeking help for these three reasons is highly encouraged. However, certain psychological conditions may result in a temporary suspension until a mental health professional can confirm that the Soldier's condition does not adversely affect his judgment, reliability, or trustworthiness.

Once the mental health professional has determined the diagnosis and prognosis, the security officer sends the information to the DoD Consolidated Adjudications Facility for a final adjudication decision. A Soldier in the intelligence community will likely have multiple access levels requiring reinstatement after a suspension. For example, when the DoD suspends a TS/SCI clearance for a Soldier who has access to NSA, NSA also suspends access. If the DoD Consolidated Adjudications Facility reinstates the TS/SCI, only then will the NSA consider reinstating access as well. Although the process may seem lengthy, it is necessary because the protection of National Security Information is paramount.

### Conclusion

We all experience the ups and downs of life, including severe stresses such as grief, trauma, financial difficulty, and divorce. If Soldiers take a proactive approach when dealing with these stressors by seeking help early on, they will mitigate their threat to national security. The identification of a mental health disorder may also help to mitigate other adjudicative concerns, such as financial, criminal, drug misuse, or alcohol abuse. The sooner the disorder is identified, the sooner the Soldier can receive the proper care and treatment to get healthy.

So spread the word: When Soldiers talk to a behavioral health professional, they are taking positive steps to improve their mental health. Their action is a sign of strength, and speaking up is a sign of responsible behavior and a commitment to performance. In most cases, it will not result in “losing” a security clearance. 

## Endnotes

1. Sarah Turner, Natalie Mota, James Bolton, and Jitender Sareen, "Self-medication with alcohol or drugs for mood and anxiety disorders: A narrative review of the epidemiological literature," *Depression & Anxiety* 35, no. 9 (September 2018): 851–860, <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22771>.
2. "Alcohol Use Disorder," National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism website, accessed 21 July 2020, <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-use-disorders>.
3. "Frequently Asked Questions: What is Continuous Evaluation?" OPM.gov, accessed 21 July 2020, <https://www.opm.gov/faqs/QA.aspx?fid=cb3cafacc1e73-4a6b-bd88-a3adad355390&pid=d4b7d235-34d3-4dba-9c4e-4ad8f4e6e522>.
4. Department of Defense (DoD), DoD Manual 5200.02, *Procedures for the DoD Personnel Security Program (PSP)* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], April 3, 2017), 69–70; and Army Regulation 380-67, *Personnel Security Program* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 24 January 2014), 38.

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Photo by SGT Christopher Lindborg, Army Reserve

One team, one fight! Mental health is just as important for military readiness as physical fitness.

## Military OneSource

While Military OneSource does not provide health care services, it does point members of the military family to the resources available to help.

<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/health-wellness/mental-health/>