



# GROW FOR VETS

Turning to cannabis as an alternative treatment for PTSD

Words: Haley Rivet



When Woody Needler left the Army in 2009 after serving his third tour overseas in Baghdad, he suffered from insomnia and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

"I was so used to always being with a team," Needler said. "Being alone enough to live a regular life was excruciating."

Doctors prescribed him an array of medications, including Ambien for sleep, antidepressants and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRIs) for depression and anxiety. He consumed all these medications and drank heavily.

He felt numb.


"I couldn't see myself in the mirror," Needler said. "I felt nothing. No emotions whatsoever."

"People would say you're so angry and you're so broken. It didn't make sense. I was doing what I was supposed to. I was going to the VA. I was taking the drugs."

In 2014 Needler contemplated suicide. That's when he decided to look for an alternative. He quit prescription medications and started smoking marijuana to deal with the symptoms.

"The pain of coming off the prescription medicine was so severe that I wanted to die," said Needler. "Without cannabis, it wouldn't have been possible; I would've killed myself."

Today, Needler leads the Eugene chapter of Grow for Vets, a national nonprofit that aims to get veterans together and teach them about cannabis use as a way to cope with the aftermath of war.



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In 2010, there were 10,756 soldiers diagnosed with PTSD, which was more than twice as many who were given the same diagnoses in 2005, according to a PBS article. The same research found that in the ten-year period from 2002 to 2012, more than 100,000 troops who served in Iraq and Afghanistan were diagnosed with PTSD.

Among veterans, the relationship between PTSD and substance abuse is closely intertwined. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that more than one fifth of Veterans who suffer from PTSD also have a substance abuse disorder, and one third of Veterans who come to the VA for help with a substance abuse disorder also have PTSD.

Like any other substance used to relieve negative feelings, cannabis has the propensity to be overused.

Marcel Bon-Miller, a researcher in the Substance and Anxiety Intervention Laboratory for the Department of Veterans Affairs, works with veterans who have substance abuse problems

related to cannabis. He sees veterans come in because they have developed relationship problems or are struggling financially due to their use of cannabis. He equates cannabis substance abuse disorder to alcoholism.

“There is a subset of people that are high all the time, you know, use ten times a day, use a lot of it, spend all their money on it, can’t stop using it, have problems with their family and problems at work because of it.” said Bon-Miller.

In the year 2014 the VA diagnosed 40,000 veterans who had PTSD with a cannabis related substance abuse disorder, according to The National Center for PTSD. That’s a 13 percent increase from 2002.

The VA, as a federal organization, cannot conduct research on cannabis until it is legal federally. The VA will not deny patients who use marijuana their healthcare, but VA doctors have to ability to adjust prescriptions and treatments based on a patient’s marijuana use.

According to an official statement by the VA, "VHA policy does not administratively prohibit Veterans who participate in State marijuana programs from also participating in VHA substance abuse programs, pain control programs, or other clinical programs where the use of marijuana may be considered inconsistent with treatment goals."

Grow for Vets, a national nonprofit started in Colorado in 2014, argues that dependency on prescription drugs is a bigger issue. In the six states Grow for Vets Chapters are located,

they've taken marijuana distribution into their own hands.

"Since our founding in Colorado in January 2014, Grow for Vets has given away hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of cannabis to military Veterans from across America," their website states. They have chapters in both Eugene and Portland, Oregon.

Grow for Vets partners with organizations for free marijuana, then distributes it to veterans.

Some of the veterans involved, like Needler say it works for their post-war trauma and pain.

“Cannabis is an alternative pain-relief treatment. It’s not just physical pain,” Needler said. “It really relieves emotional pain.”

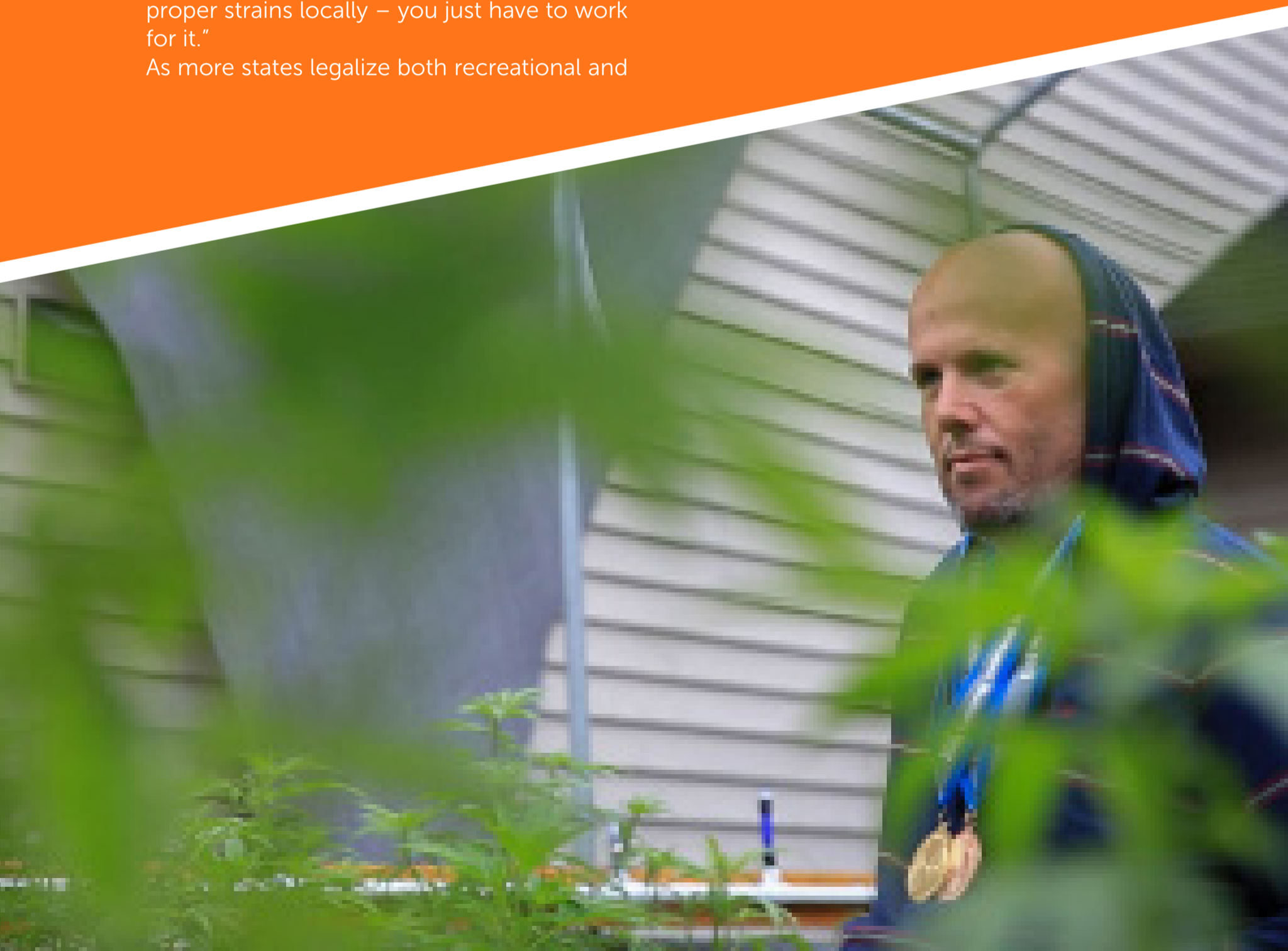
Nathan Paine, a Portland Chapter Member, grows weed at his apartment in Washington. It’s part of his mission to perfect the strains of marijuana that make the best medicine.


“I’m trying to find the strains that work medicinally, that help my body but don’t give me the head high because I want to be able to function,” Paine says. “It’s hard to find those proper strains locally – you just have to work for it.”

As more states legalize both recreational and

medical cannabis, more research is devoted to the health effect of marijuana. But doctors still don’t know the full picture of what it does.

Separately from his work with the VA, Bon-Miller works as a principal investigator for the first randomized control trial of cannabis for PTSD, an ongoing study sponsored by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies. As opposed to previous studies on cannabis use and PTSD that were observational, this study will analyze the effects of cannabis as a controlled variable.





“What we are really hoping to find is whether there are certain preparations of cannabis that are helpful and that simultaneously reduce risk of side effects,” he said.

He doesn’t expect to discover a cure. “I think at this point, the evidence would suggest that for most substances, including not just cannabis - but any other psychotropic, like any prescription med or anything like that, generally speaking - we’re talking band aides,” Bon-Miller said.

“Here when we are talking about cannabis, we are talking about reducing symptoms in the short term.” For long-term PTSD relief, Bon-Miller recommends seeing a therapist.

“Whereas certain psychotherapy, particularly behavioral therapy for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder can actually fix it and can actually get people to no longer have Posttraumatic Stress disorder,” said Bon-Miller.

Still, cannabis’ ability to treat symptoms short-term has helped some Veterans with PTSD reclaim their lives. As more states legalize both recreational and medical cannabis, more research is devoted to the health effect of marijuana, and doctors learn more about the full picture of its side-effects.

In the meantime, vets have been experimenting for themselves.

Woody Needler believes that while marijuana isn’t a perfect treatment for everyone, success with cannabis use can have a lot to do with how much is consumed, the method of consumption and the strain that is used.

“I’ve had negative experiences. If you take full plant extract and your body is not used to that concentration or that dosage, you can have very, very odd experiences,” Needler said.

Finding the right combination can be “uncomfortable,” he says. But for him, “it’s worth it.”

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