

Acceptance and healing to move forward

Bill: Hi, my name is Bill. I was in Navy, in 1975 I joined. I went to boot camp in Great Lakes and went to A school in the Great Lakes area as well. I really liked my job, which was operations specialist radar technician. I come from a military family dating back to my great-grandfather, so it's a family tradition and especially the Navy. After I left the service, I utilized the military funding to go to school. I went to school and I graduated and I got a job for 12 years and then I was involved in a car accident. My passenger was killed, I was almost killed, I was in a coma for a month, I had four surgeries, and I received brain damage as well. When I came out of the coma and I was slowly rehabilitating in the hospital, I had memory loss. It was so bad that I would forget family names, friends' names, places and different things of that nature.

After I got out of the hospital, I went to the VA to sign up for healthcare, and more specifically for the psychological help—healthcare. I received the counseling approximately three months after I was in the auto accident. They did a bunch—a battery of tests which determined certain things such as memory loss to a dementia level, and in addition to that I had a lot of depression because of the sadness of losing a friend. There were times I felt it should have been me who died and not my passenger, and that's called survivor's guilt. I know that now. I wasn't willing to accept it at the time I was told that because I thought I was being pampered.

I was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder, slight dementia, depression. After the testing it was determined what I needed to do to help myself. I would play certain games that were suggested to me to increase my memory, such as starting out with easy-to-do crosswords. Before the car accident I used to do crosswords from the Boston Globe, the Boston Herald, the USA Today and I'd finish them and do them every day. After the car accident I was unable to do any one of them, and slowly through their help I was able to work my way back up to where I could do what normally would do.

It's been a trying time, we've been doing it for 17 years, but I'll tell you from then to now I've come a long way. Before the counseling I found it extremely difficult to go to family functions because I felt that I had to get away from everybody, and some of the physical problems such as everyone talking all at once was echoing in my head, and through time and integration back into my family and they understood because the counselor told my sister who was my caretaker at the time steps that I needed to take. With her help and the rest of my family, I was able to do that. I am able now to go to any family function and not be worried about the noise in my head because it's no longer there, and also I don't feel that I have to get away from everybody because I'm crowded in. I feel like a family member again. Survivor's guilt for me now is more of an acceptance. I accept the fact that it was not me who died, and I accept the fact that I could have died but didn't, which was making me feel guilty in the past, but after realizing no, I shouldn't feel guilty, I should feel lucky, and to this day I do feel lucky.

When I do go to the VA, it isn't just the comfort of knowing I'm being treated, but also talking with other vets that are there for similar problems or other problems, it doesn't matter, but when vets stick together I find that there's more comfort and strength. For anybody who's afraid to go to the VA, I would suggest that they talk to other veterans and then visit the veterans' centers and check it out for themselves, because there's a world of help whether it's just from talking to another vet or if it's talking to a professional, you get the help that you need if you want it.



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