

Support and encouragement can make a difference

Dahlia: Hi, my name is Dahlia. My husband is Justin, he is a Major in the Marine Corp Reserves, and he was injured in 2006.

Justin was supposed to call me that morning, he had gone on a combat the night before, a patrol, and he didn't, but you know that was normal, they couldn't always reach the satellite phone. Now at the time, my dad was still in Iraq and he and Justin were actually supposed to meet, they were going to be in the same area in a couple of days. My dad worked with the Army though and Justin was a Marine. I reached out to Justin's best friend, so between the 3 of them, I was able to get some news, and within a few minutes of each other they would tell me, okay he's been transferred here, he's been transferred here. Because we weren't married, it was really hard to get any information first hand.

They told me he was just transferred to Landstuhl in Germany and I just remember thinking, "I've got to go there. There's no way I'm not going to see what he's like." Everyone kind of discouraged me from it, because they said, "Well, you know, you need to stay away from the hospital, it's this, how are you going to get there, it's not right near any airport, Landstuhl is several hours away." I said, "No, I'm going."

I thought, "I am going to take a semester off from school. I'll be with Justin, and then I'll go back and we'll continue." The minute I saw him I knew, this isn't a one semester deal. This is a lifetime of change that is going to happen. I remember someone saying, "This is a hard decision." It wasn't a decision, it was a non-decision, in a way. I saw him, we're going to be together, and school can wait. This is what you do. We knew it wasn't going to be easy, but if we kept thinking forward, and kept thinking ahead, it would get us through.

He was a leader in the military, and he is used to kind of being in charge, and he's a nurturer by nature, he takes care of people. So, when he has to have someone take care of him, it's really frustrating. So, he was cranky. If we have a cold, or some kind of illness, we're cranky, so multiply that by a million, but it was hard. We had these huge blow up fights and at the same time you feel guilty for fighting with someone who's recovering. You think, "I've just got to shut up."

We went to a friend's beach house and there was sand, and seeing the sand reminded him of Iraq. Fireworks, a car tire, all those classic symptoms that remind people of war. The survivor's guilt was there. I remember working with refugee kids who had survivor's guilt because they had come to the United States and the rest of their family hadn't, and you're still feeling guilty that everyone you left behind, which is exactly what Justin was going through, that he had left his team, that he had let them down.

Once we got home of course there were nightmares regularly, which have calmed over time, but are still there.

He would get frustrated with himself because he thought, "Well I'm okay, I survived. Why am I feeling these things? I'm okay." I didn't push, I didn't say, "You've got to go to counseling or I'm leaving", which I heard people saying in the hospital, or you have to do this, or force the issue. The minute I could see he was getting uncomfortable with the conversation, I would let it go, but I would bring it back up later, I didn't let his discomfort



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scare me away from talking about it. It had to be talked about, there have to be uncomfortable conversations.

I was uprooted for my life, and I think in the hospital, you're in adrenalin mode, you're in go mode, you just move. Then you come back and you're out of the hospital, and you lose that sense of community, of other patients and other families, and you're by yourself, and then I thought, "What about my life?"

I think I have a hard time sharing these things with people I know because you sound like a bad person.

His first counselor was in Alexandria, it was a VA counselor, and her husband had been in Vietnam, so she knew it personally, it wasn't just professional for her. I could see a difference within several sessions of his way of calming himself down, or using visualization techniques, and I think he gave himself permission to feel what he was feeling. The counseling is an outlet, again, it's not like they hand you a technique list and you just walk through it. You have these things and they have to come out, they're going to come out one way or another, so if you release them in a counseling session, even if you do nothing else but share them, then they've had their outlet. The outlet doesn't become your spouse or your children or your parents.

It's almost easier I think, in a way to talk to a professional, because there's no social attachment, there's no judgement, you're not going to see them for brunch and they look at you. I definitely saw someone a couple of times. Then as Justin started to heal, I started to heal too, and we could kind of get through it together.



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