

## The best way to heal is to open up

**Jesse:** My name is Jesse. I served with the United States Army's Infantry from 2001 to 2008. We crossed the border and invaded Iraq. Baqubah is a really volatile city, a lot of explosions and firefights. Ramadi was the same thing, that's when we lost a lot of our casualties, in Ramadi. Transitioning back from civilian life when I got out of the military, it was very difficult. I didn't realize that they were going to going to have — I don't call them nightmares — I do dream about Iraq daily, or nightly, I do dream about Iraq, and I dream about firefights and explosions. My hypervigilance affecting other people, my jumpiness affecting other people, where the slightest sound, bang, shot off in the distance, I do jump. I no longer had equipment to maintain, I no longer had to have accountability of my soldiers, I had nobody to lead. It's a challenge because that's what gives you purpose to get your head off the pillow in the morning, so having not to do that anymore, you lose yourself.

I had enough money saved up from the deployment I didn't need to work, so I lived off my deployment money for about a year. Once that deployment money ran out I lived off unemployment for another year, not having anything to do, no purpose, no mission, no task, so it was really frustrating and I didn't know what to do with myself, so that's when I turned to substance abuse. That wasn't a good way to cope. So, for two years I did nothing but hang around, waste time, waiting to get inebriated, just waiting to get that next drink. When I lost my first job because of substance abuse, that's when I got a kick in the chin. It was like, "You know what? I'm not setting a good example for my brothers and sisters. I need to stop messing around, get my life in a better situation and be the big brother that my family deserves." The Phoenix VA had an OIF clinic. It was EMDR therapy, reliving those past experiences, and them listening to me as far as not pushing some soft script down my throat, they were listening to me and allowing me to vent, and I've found out that's the best way to heal is to vent, and relive it. It doesn't numb it but it helps me get over the intense emotion. It's realizing "You know what? Okay, something went wrong? Let's work around it. Let's adapt and overcome." I started talking with other Veterans and me being service connected I got hired on as a medical support assistant in the mental health department of the Phoenix VA.

My first week of being hired on I get a suicidal Veteran on the phone. Didn't know how to handle a suicidal Veteran, never expected to take a phone call like this, but my military training came in and I started talking on that phone like if I was talking to one of my soldiers on the radio. "Do you understand me, how copy, over," just using military radio lingo. Well, after talking to this Veteran for a few minutes he told me that you know what, he'll come into the Phoenix VA and get himself checked in. The medical staff that I was working with heard what I was doing, heard what I did over the phone and they told me, "Why don't you become a peer support specialist?" I had no idea what that even was. It's helping other Veterans. Again, I found another purpose, I found a reason to get my head off the bed in the morning.

The VA is great. If you take advantage of it. I'm one of the guys what felt had that machismo, "I don't need help, I could do it on my own." Two years of struggles, it took two years of realizing that I was hardheaded to learn how to ask for help. If you want therapy go in and ask for it. There's a chance. All you have to do is want it.



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