

Finding the tools to manage anxiety

Don: I'm Don. I was in the United States Marine Corp. I joined in 1968 and got out in April of 1970. I was a machine gunner in the infantry. My first firefight I was 18 years old and we got ambushed and it was my first experience with death of a human being. I had to shut down. We were trained not to feel, not to process emotion. Emotion got in the way of reason and training. Once I came home, boy, started drinking. I was paranoid, very paranoid. I was afraid people were trying to kill me. I didn't like to be out alone. When the moon wasn't out, I was, anxiety ran rampant. I had a sister living in Central Oregon, in Bend, Oregon.

I went up there, tried to start a new life and the first year was okay, then it started creeping back in and I felt myself having the same old feelings, despair, fear, anxiety, and I became a Christian, and it seemed to resolve a lot of the conflict. And I went on, and I got educated, got a BA degree and then I got a master's degree and I was in ministry serving a local church. The leaders in the church knew something was up. They suggested I take some time off and get a Counselor and I did and he tried his best to help me address what the issues were and then said, "Don, you really need to go and connect, reconnect with the VA."

So, I did a 30-day inpatient program and it was frightening at first. The most liberating thing that I heard was all of these symptoms that you're experiencing, Don, are normal given what you went through and the word normal just jumped out at me and I thought, finally, finally somebody has got a handle on this stuff that I have been trying my best to deal with all of my life unsuccessfully.

For the first time I felt like I found a home. I found a home to deal with war and the impact and the trauma that war has placed in my life. It's been 15 years now, I've been involved. I still go to counseling every two weeks and I attend a group once a week.

How do I manage the symptoms? Bravely, that's probably the most important thing. I face them now. I don't run from them, I don't hide from them, and I don't pretend they don't exist. My faith has had a profound impact on my healing process because I had resources available to me in the spiritual realm because the experiences that I had in war are emotional and mental and physical but they're also spiritual. Now I know, that it takes both mental/emotional health, healthy spirituality and a healthy physical body. I feel alive again, you know I feel animated. I feel light. I have happiness. The VA is filled with caring people who are very well equipped to help. They can't do it for you. It's a battle. If you've been in combat before you know there's no way out except through it.

There is life after combat. There is life after war. There is integration in society and then we can use what valuable experiences we've learned about life and the value of life to help society, to help our community, whatever, our families, our children, grandchildren. We have much to give because we survived.



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