

Don't be afraid to ask for help

Tom: My name is Tom. I served in the Army from 1999 to 2011. I served everywhere from Hawaii to Germany, a few tours overseas and Iraq. Being soldiers and being overseas, we know there are issues. We know that the people sometimes struggle with some of the things that we have to do as soldiers. When you see friends, soldiers or civilians, hurt and you want to express a feeling, but you can't; you kind of shut down emotionally so you can do your job. You can defend yourself or defend those people.

I think there was a lot of confusion and concern at first from my family, my parents. Coming home and feeling broken or realizing I needed help was concerning to them. My heart was pounding all the time. I was sweating for no reason; crying for no reason. I didn't sleep. I think the classic, yes, the classic symptom definitely was, I clearly would get up every couple of hours. I would check all the doors. I would check all the windows. I would check on the kids. The hyperarousal and hypervigilance were keeping me on alert and making me feel like I needed to be prepared for any kind of emergency or response. I did feel like at that point, it would probably be better for my kids and better for my family if they didn't have to take care of me or worry that I was going to do something crazy or stupid. I have no idea what it was or how much, but I know I woke up in the hospital three days later.

I kind of agreed that I would go talk to someone and I went to the VA and said, hey, I basically had to acknowledge that there is probably a problem. Of course, there was medication initially to mitigate the physiological symptoms. Then, you show up in a group and you hear all these other people saying the same things that you're thinking, I can't sleep. I can't do this or I heard a car backfire and I tackled somebody to the ground out of safety. Those are the things that you're like, I get it now. Okay. So, the group therapy was instrumental early on.

I probably spent between 20 and 30 hours a week on taking care of myself through that time and it involved a lot of exposure therapy. They put me in the big virtual reality simulator and I had to stay for 30 minutes. I had body armor. I had a rifle. I had a helmet with a radio that went back to the team of doctors and they would talk me through things. I couldn't stop myself from diving to the ground. It was amazing to see. I've never known in my head that something was so safe, but had my body respond in a way that was just like combat. It was an eye-opening experience.

Last year, I finished my Bachelor's in Electrical Engineering to design devices for handicapped clients. Engineers don't just build bridges and iPhones; they can help people too. Finding a way to help others with the same things that I went through, hopefully catching them before they get to my point, finding a way to get back to being a role model for my kids. They're all great things. I can't really ask for much more than that.

There's a lot of things that happen overseas that you'll never be able to explain and it impacts everybody different. When you can recognize it, when you know how it happens and what happens, you can deal with it. Ask for help, don't be afraid.



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