

Once I figured it all out, it was a lot easier

Brian: My name is Brian. I enlisted in the Army Reserves in 2003 at 18 years old. I joined the Army because I was a volunteer firefighter in New York on 9/11 and I was only 16 years old on 9/11. I really wanted to go, but I couldn't. So as soon as I was 18, I enlisted.

I was at basic training the month after they invaded Iraq. So it was effectively only a matter of time before the Reservists... basically as soon as I got back home to New York and reported to my unit they said we're going."

Regardless of where the Iraq war was going, at least my unit was doing good stuff and we were helping people that needed help, and when we built a school for little kids and go back next month and we were educating little kids, some of them for the first time ever, it was astonishing. I think that level of kind of importance for a 20, 21-year-old really addictive.

I came home and I felt bored, worthless, like what am I doing here? I mean, I'm not contributing anymore. I joined this new unit, and they said we're going back but you don't have to go. You've only been home a few months, you know, you have your mandatory year at home. I said where's the waiver, I want to go back.

Baghdad was way different. The brigade we were attached to was losing people almost weekly. Just the level of intensity and fear was a lot different.

I started actually seeing a therapist in Iraq which was great. And that has been... that was really helpful that he could kind of explain some of this stuff.

I got home in May, demobilized through June, and then started class in August. That, I think, was the biggest culture shock was then going into a classroom. I would try to memorize something and I couldn't remember what I had memorized before. I would do these little tests with myself where I'd read a sentence on a page and then read the next sentence and try to remember the one before and I couldn't do it. I graduated seventh in my high school class, I was... I thought pretty smart. And I could not remember the most basic stuff. And it was frightening.

I started kind of asking around like, did I forget how to study, is it me, am I, did four years being out of school just really wipe my brain? And at some point, someone said do you know what a TBI is and I said no, what's that? A traumatic brain injury. Were you ever exposed to blasts? I was like, yeah all the time.

They said, you should go talk to the Army and I was like okay. I go to Walter Reed. I forget what my first appointment was. But at some point, I started talking to the neurologist. My eyes hurt all the time and I couldn't figure it out. And I said, I don't understand why I'm getting these headaches and my eyes just hurt. And the same neurologist was like, your eyes were hurt. I said what do you mean? They said, you're super light sensitive and I couldn't kind of figure out why until, the neurologist walked me through what a TBI was and I said, oh yeah I got that, I got that, and I got that.

Then they said, well what else is going on and I said, well I'm having trouble sleeping. I'm having nightmares. I'm angry all the time and not going through, you know, good



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relationship stuff. They're like, oh yeah, you have PTSD. And I was like okay another acronym. What's that? They walked me through that and I'm like, yeah okay. Check, check, check, check, okay. So, here I am. You know, I think I've figured it out, but that was really valuable. Because before I just thought I was crazy and that I was doing something wrong or I was somehow stupid and that was really hard for my relationships with other people. So, I was kind of alone for a while and then once I figured all of that out, then it was a lot easier to relate.

I just owned it. And I said, you know, this is ultimately going to make me more effective at whatever I do. Even just using simple tools to learn how to manage my time reduced my frustration and my anger, and then so eventually, the therapist I was seeing said, you're doing so much better, you're not mad at yourself, and because now you're not mad at yourself, you're not getting mad at other people.

It has gotten so much less impactful in my life that I was able to say, hey, this is something that you can get over.



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