

## It's OK To Seek Help For Invisible Illnesses

**Tonya:** My name is Tonya. I served in the Navy from 1994-1998 in Bremerton, Washington. I was on a ship, and we were pulled into port in one of the foreign countries. When you're on liberty, you're able to go out in town. So, it was myself, the van driver, and two men got in, and one was really drunk and belligerent, and I kept saying, "You need to calm down." The gentleman that I was sitting next to, he wound up grabbing one of my arms and started feeling me up, and I was like you know, "You need to stop." The van all of a sudden stopped, and I believe the van driver and the guy that was sitting up front joined in as well. And so, I was basically attacked in the van. To have your uniform literally ripped off of you is very embarrassing.

I didn't want to discuss it at that time. I didn't want to go to see one of the corpsmen or anything. I just wanted to be left alone, and everything went downhill from there, as far as my job performance. It got so bad to the point where I had wrote it down in my diary what had happened, and unfortunately, I misplaced my diary, and it was found what had happened, and it was passed around the ship. It was very tough to have that open and out on the ship, and it wound up being to the point where I was seeking treatment.

I would be seen by a male physician, and I'm like, and they would say, "Why are you here? What is wrong?" I'm like, "I don't want to talk to you," and I would wait to see if a female nurse would come in, or a female corpsman or something, and it was always males. And so, I wound up holding on to that for years. It ended my career on a sour note because of that, and because I couldn't tell my story to anyone. I was too afraid. I didn't want to be looked at differently.

Not only to lose my career, I lost my spouse. We were divorced. I went from a ton of friends to none. I was so scared of people and to go out. My family, my parents, my brother, my sister, my daughter, relatives were saying, "We literally have to walk on shells...eggshells around you. We don't know what to say. You make us cry. You have no tact. You don't care. You slam doors. You throw things down, and you're like acting up. We don't know what's wrong with you."

I felt like, at that time, when I first got out, Veterans were for older people or that Vietnam Era. And so, I didn't think that it would apply to me that I could talk to anyone. I went to it was like a Veteran stand down event, and that's when I was told, "You are eligible for VA benefits. Come and fill out the eligibility." I got connected to the system, and that's when I said, "Do you have female providers in mental health by any chance?" "Yes, we do." "So, you do? I'd like to talk to one." So, I was put with a psychologist, and boy she was great. And she said, "You know, you've got a lot of stuff that you're dealing and coping with, and you need to see a psychiatrist and get some medication going."

It took about 10 visits for me to really say why I wanted to see a female. I'd say it took about six months for me to actually begin to start seeing change. Oh man, I'm a whole different person. I've exceeded my goals. I wound up graduating in higher education with multiple degrees I hold. My daughter, the two-year-old back then, she'll be 21 in a few months, and I can't believe that we have the best relationship ever.

There are a lot of us out there that have suffered assaults and are afraid to just tell someone, but when you do, the help that you receive will be very great. Sometimes,



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invisible illnesses or invisible things, you don't have to show it, but you can still receive help. It's okay.



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