

A Better Life

Kyle: My name is Kyle. I was in the Marine Corps. I served as a field radio operator from 2002 to 2006. My dad was a Marine. He did 20 years. It seemed like a good life to me, so I just followed in his footsteps really. It was right when I was graduating high school, was around the same time that 9/11 happened. 9/11 was really the thing that pushed me over the edge. Partway through our deployment to Okinawa, it was, "Oh, actually, we're going to Iraq." I ended up in the Fallujah. The last insurgent hotbed is basically how they described it. It really is a dangerous situation. "All of the bad guys have been concentrated into this one city and that's where you guys are going." So, it was ominous going in there, expected there to be some heavy casualties. There was.

It affected me quite a bit. When I first came back, I was drinking pretty heavy. I was just generally more irritable, having more outbursts. I thought we would get out and be heroes. People just hand us these great jobs. "Marines are too stiff," was what I kept getting told. So, finding work was tough. Got into a bar fight on my birthday. I get arrested. And by 2009, I ended up in a mental institution. Four-year sentence. Out of that came a connection to the VA. The VA did pretty much all of my mental health. It was really what I needed. With PTSD, there's a lot of stuff to sift through. That was my introduction to mental health. I had the psychiatrist there at the outpatient clinic. I had a psychologist there. Did a whole lot of just regular cognitive behavioral therapy with a therapist.

There were some other Vietnam veterans and a Korean War veteran who took me under their wing and were like, "Look, you're lucky that you only have a four-year sentence. You have a very short time in here. You've got exposed to see what reality can be like for veterans." Without the mentor there encouraging me, I would have been totally resistant the whole time. It was just collectively, all of it builds on top of each other. Here's what the VA can offer. Use that as a blessing. Now I fill my time a lot with weight training, mountain biking, and snowboarding in the winter. A lot has changed. I have a master's in criminology, and then I'll be done with my PhD in sociology.

I bought a house. Used my VA loan, I bought a house and I'm renting out all the rooms to other veterans and watching them turn their lives around. Got a son now. I have a three-year-old. That's the center of it all. That's just what gives you the meaning for life. Taking him hiking and fishing, just introducing him to playing with cars and Legos. The little kid hobbies have become my hobbies, too. Just the opportunity to be able to open the door and walk outside and look at the sun, that ability is something not to be taken for granted. I did really get lucky. So, I tried to maximize that, still trying to hold onto that. Let people reach out and grab you and pull you up. Seek help before it gets too far.



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