

Admitting she needed support was the first step

Nicole: My name is Nicole. I deployed in 04-05 Operation Iraqi Freedom with the 39th Infantry Brigade. At the beginning helped my commander run the company, his aide, him, and our first sergeant and unfortunately 2 weeks in he got killed in a mortar attack so after that it was doing .50-cal missions, working in the defect and doing combat lifesaver missions. Right before day, right before the sun rose, probably 4, 3 or 4 in the morning. It was like this really loud explosion and I mean it was like so earth shattering it knocked the wind out of me and I remember this ton of smoke coming in and it was real.

I can't describe, but it was powerful that everybody kind of knew something had happened. You couldn't even think or rationalize what was going on and I saw my supply sergeant and you know he was just kind of just blown out. I remember just telling him it was going to be okay. I was trying to look through my, hold his hand and look through my COS bag at the same time to see, in my mind, I knew it wasn't anything that I could do in that moment. I mean he ended up passing away and I just remember this feeling of just not, it was just unreal.

When I came back from Iraq, I got a position with the governor working with the Veteran community in our state and I was going through the motions, what I now know is avoidance. I was working 24 hours a day, well not 24, like 18 hours a day. I didn't sleep well. I never did, but I just thought it was, it just was you know. I didn't understand what the anxiety attacks were about, and they didn't get bad until after I became the head of this organization, after I began to get into this work. I could be sitting in a room like in a staff meeting and something could happen, a scent could come, a sound, somebody may say a word or something, somebody may make a joke and I would mentally leave. You know, and I mean I may have looked like I was there, but I wasn't there. I knew those things that made my heart beat faster and made that feeling in the pit of your stomach come where I had to just, like sometimes I would have to stop and just take deep breaths so I was recognizing what was causing issues and I just tried to avoid those situations and I had this one incident where I was holding my daughter and I kind of had an anxiety attack flashback and I don't remember. Like I don't remember if I let her go, I don't remember if like, and it was the scariest feeling.

When you're in a position of leadership or when you're helping other people sometimes the hardest thing is to get help for yourself and I kind of had this feeling like people would, they saw me as this like rock soldier, you came back, you know you were a .50-cal gunner. The governor is like going around telling people, like this is my sarge and she's this and that and it's just like, to be vulnerable to that and to acknowledge that, it changed how I felt about myself and I wasn't, I just couldn't get to that point on my own and so my husband was like you have got to get some help.

I reached out to somebody else I know who's a PhD at the VA, worked in one of the mental health components and I kind of explained to her where I was, and she was saying that she was glad that I came to her and she connected me. She talked to me about cognitive behavioral therapy and she told me about this doctor and so I contacted her, and we had our first visit and it went really well. I just began to like notice differences. I began to notice that I was a little bit stronger in handling stuff. I knew how to figure out different things and I didn't feel like I was in it alone.

I have a female support group that it's about three of them that are military sexual



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trauma and it's about four of us that are combat. That helps because we kind of make this personal commitment to one another and it was weird how we all connected that we were going to be different and how we handled it and how we processed it. We know ourselves and we know when something is wrong. We know sometimes to what extent is wrong and it's just how we approach what to do with that information that we have.

Things are better today, because I feel more in control. I'm not afraid of the future as it relates to my mental health. There's some fear there, but not nearly as much fear. I mean, I feel like I'm in control of the situation.



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