

Opening up, moving forward

Stephanie: Hi, I'm Stephanie, U.S. Army. I served in the first Gulf War, Desert Storm War, from 1990-1991.

Shirley: My name is Shirley. I served in the United States Marine Corps, 1963-1965.

Stephanie: We were connected through my organization. I advocate for other women Veterans that experience military sexual trauma, and I believe we talked on the phone for a while and then it was kind of corresponding back and forth, and then we eventually went out for lunch.

Shirley: Right. We are good friends. We support each other. If she needs to talk to me about something, she does. If I need to talk to her about something, I do. Stephanie and I have talked about when she was in service and when I was in service, things that happened to each of us, but at different times.

Stephanie: While I was serving, I experienced what they call military sexual trauma. I wasn't aware of what it was so at the time I didn't report it; I just kind of tolerated it. When I got out of service, there was nothing for women Veterans, no facilities, no one understood what MST was. I didn't know I was undiagnosed with PTSD. I got my bachelor's in psychology and I started working as a social worker and I found myself very disconnected and estranged from family. I didn't want to see any people, because I felt most people were causing me harm and pain. So, a lot of my days was dealing with avoidance of people and avoiding contact. The less I dealt with people the better.

Shirley: I didn't want to see people, liked to be alone. Sometimes if I go out, I would be kind of frightened and I would turn around and go back home. I had a daughter - when I spent time with her, that helped, but when she was gone and I was alone, then I was depressed, didn't know why I was depressed, but that lonely feeling came on, feeling hopeless, helpless. A couple of times I even thought about committing suicide, but I didn't want to leave her with someone to take care of her.

Stephanie: When I got out, that was very rare that anybody admitted they had a trauma experience. So, it was definitely important to have your tribe and your community of women Veterans that understand where you come from. To have that sisterhood and a safe place to talk, but also, I invested in treatment, prolonged exposure therapy, and I encourage any Veteran to do that.

Shirley: You need someone to talk to. You need a professional, number one, to talk to, and after that, you, like she said, you need your support around you because I feel like once you get it out, you feel better and you can help that person feel better.

Stephanie: My quality of life improved overall. I can say I really just bloomed to this place where I really enjoy life and I'm looking forward to what's next and excited about the things that we're doing in the community to help women Veterans, to help empower them.

Shirley: My daughters are, they said that I had changed. Church members say that I look like I have a glow on my face now when I come to church. I'm always smiling, so, yes, I get good, positive feedback now.



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Stephanie: For a woman Veteran that is struggling, doesn't have the support or are isolated, and if you really need someone, I would say reach out to a VA. See if they have any peer support groups. I know it's hard to trust people, but just believe that someone else, eventually you're going to find the right person.

Shirley: If you was woman enough to serve, then, you're woman enough to get out there and get help.



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