

One Veteran's story of PTSD and recovery

Dawn: Hi, my name is Dawn. I joined in May of 1996 when I was 17. My parents very reluctantly signed for me to join because Bosnia was going on at the time.

I've been a medic in the Mass National Guard since then. I had one deployment to Iraq from December 2003, and then we came home March 2005.

In 2004, we got hit with mortars a lot. We were in a very small area. We were low. We didn't have a high ground point, so there were bridges and hills and we'd always get hit with mortars, rockets, small-arms fire. We had IEDs going off all over the place.

The worst one was December 21st, 2004. It was like 12:05 and a guy had dressed up in an Iraqi National Guard uniform, walked into our chow hall, and blew himself up. He killed about — I want to say it was 17 people that died instantly with the explosion.

While we were there, it didn't affect us while we were there, or at least we didn't think it did.

When I first came home, just happy to be home. I was very happy to see my family. And for whatever reason, I was fine with everyone else, but with my parents, I was very angry at them. No matter what they asked me, I'm like, "Really? We have to go through this again? I already told you this." Or, I'd be telling a story and I'd use an acronym and my mom would be like, "What does that mean?" I'm like, "Are you kidding me? How many times do I have to tell you what that means? Just learn it!" And, anyone else I'd be like patient and explain, but I knew like I could blow up at my parents and they're not going anywhere.

So, my biggest symptoms of PTSD, I didn't sleep, or slept too much. I would be angry at things that made absolutely no sense to be angry — like, if I couldn't tie my shoe the way I wanted to, I would start yelling at my shoe. So, irrational anger. Driving, because I did a lot of driving when I was overseas. And for the first, well, even once in a while even still now, almost 10 years later, if I go up to a bridge, I have a hard time going through the same lane that I came in. So I have the opportunity to switch a lane, I will switch a lane if I can.

Or if I see somebody walking on a bridge I kind of freeze up and have to try to pretend that I'm not going under a bridge.

So I actually ended up working for my National Guard unit doing medical records. I was in a little hole; I was by myself. Didn't have to deal with anybody but military people, and I did pretty good. And that's actually how I got offered the job to do the post-deployment health reassessments was through that.

I got to talk to hundreds of the guys and girls that had come back, and it was kind of funny because at the time, I hadn't really gone to the VA for anything. And I knew I was having issues at that point. I didn't sleep well; I was angry all the time.

And so finally I was like, "Well, I've been preaching this for a while. Maybe I should try it." So that's when I decided to go get screened by our OIF/OEF guy, who was always like, "You should come in. You should come in," every time I saw him. I'm like, "Oh, I'm



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coming. I'll be there. Don't worry." And so that was the first time I had gone to get treatment.

I had a really hard time with counselling at first because the first person I had was not a Veteran and never served. And she was very nice, but I just didn't want to talk to her anymore. So, I probably sat down with three or four people before I found somebody that I liked and connected with. And my counsellor that I liked, suggested I went to go see a psychiatrist. So, I'm still with my psychiatrist. I'm still on medication. And I notice a huge difference in myself.

I am able to keep it together enough to finally go to nursing school. I'm in my second year of getting my associate's RN. For a long time, I was not really afraid but kind of apprehensive about going back to school because of my memory issues.

The medication definitely has kept me moving in a good direction and I could see very easily how without it, I would not be where I am today because I wouldn't go to firework shows with my son, who loves them, I wouldn't take him to Patriots games or Red Sox games because I cannot stand crowds, and even though I'm uncomfortable when I'm in them, I can physically be there when I'm on my medication.

Keep with it. Even though it seems like it's not working, it really is. And just because one thing didn't work, don't give up on it. Find a different counsellor. Find a different medication. Go to the Vet center. Go to the VA. Use TRICARE. Find somebody that you can connect with and get help, because it does make a huge difference.



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