

## **I had to redefine my normal**

**Ian:** My name is Ian. I served in the United States Marine Corps from 1999 to 2004 and I was 3521 diesel mechanic. I was part of the earliness ready platoon, so we were charged with mobilizing the first meth and getting all of the gear to Kuwait and staged in the desert too for this potential possible war with Iraq. So, it was very surreal for me to be so young and be in place of leadership and going to a country in anticipation of war, but not knowing if the war was actually going to happen. And within three months we had hundreds of thousands of troops that had come in so we were responsible for offloading the ships and making sure all the gear was staged appropriately for the Army, for the Marine Corps and then we invaded Iraq.

So, by time I had gotten out of the Marine Corps it was early 2004 and I had been accepted at the University of Oregon my field of study was gonna be Psychology. And so immediately coming out of the military I had my, my fall just stacked up with school. Spent most of my time that I wasn't at school drinking trying to be happy because I knew I wasn't happy and I didn't know why but I didn't want people around me to know that I wasn't happy. So, it made it easier for me to fill up my time with drinking, smoking weed, doing any parties anywhere that there was this fun environment and what it was doing was pushing me down this cycle of not knowing how to ask for help, not wanting to ask for help. I had my legs. I had my arms. I didn't want to cry about having some sort of mental struggle.

I got stuck in this computer lab with this girl and she just talked a whole lot and so I was really trying to figure out the statistics and she's like the conversation came that I had just gotten out of the military and she was like "oh did you go to war" And I was like, yeah. And she said, "did you kill anyone?" and immediately I mean I didn't stay in that class long cause I flipped out because it was such an insensitive question to ask anyone and so I knew from that moment my reaction went from zero to 100, and that kind of showcased how I would respond for the next 10 years to people when it came to my service, and wore my service in the military.

So, I immediately quit telling people I was a Veteran. I quit telling people that I was in the Marine Corps. So, my five years of pride now went into this suitcase where I didn't want to talk to people, because people didn't want to talk to me. And it's kind of crazy because the people who do know how to talk to me I also isolated myself from. I had come back from war and I felt less of a Veteran than other Veterans because what was being put on TV or the Veterans that lost so much, and so my heart went out to them, and I would find myself in tears but it also pushed me further into a hole.

I just started popping pills with the hopes of not waking up and I just woke up the next morning after I had taken about 11 of these pills and my friend had stayed there and he was like "oh I didn't leave your side something was wrong" and so that morning I ended up realizing after I threw all the pills away that something was really wrong. That to get to that point and that was when I knew that no longer could I sit in this room and pull the veil over my own eyes.

The first experience I had with the VA was in Roseburg. They put me in a group therapy and I sat there and immediately listening to these stories I just got up and left because I didn't feel like



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I was that Vet. I was like "oof I'm sitting in a seat that should be sat by someone else" and so my therapist outside of the VA was like "have you told someone that sitting in those rooms are productive and beneficial and I said "no why would I, why would I tell somebody that I can't sit in a room with brothers and sisters in arms?" And finally getting pushed to actually go make that step and say hey at the VA I'm not I'm not able to do this this is what I'm feeling I don't feel like I'm worthy, kind of opened this door for me to receive some of the best care like my best primary care provider still to this date.

I had somebody that was definitely willing to open the conversation on any topic and then kind of engage what am I doing at home versus what can she do at the VA that can kind of make these symptoms less problematic and so I did a cognitive behavioral therapy and that was the breaking point for me realizing that I couldn't hide from being a Veteran. I couldn't hide from the war because it almost did more disservice to run from my experience than to validate it. I had to redefine my normal. I had to create a new normal for me and I had to be happy with that, and I had to let the VA help identify what these new normals were going to be.

The best message for any Veteran is not to give up and to reach out. Reach out to that one person that you know for sure hands down loves you and then not to be afraid to say that you're hurting and that you're in pain. And then be prepared for the process that comes with it and whether it's inside or outside the VA if you find somebody who's helping you then keep the number because you may have to pass on another Vet to the same resource and we just got to take care of each other.



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