Taking the Steps

Mike: So, I retired in '04. My daughter went in the Army shortly thereafter. And then my son, after he graduated from high school, he joined the Marine Corps. And he was consequently killed in action in Afghanistan in 2008. And I found myself standing on a bridge, about to jump off. I had had my last meal. I was done. And then I heard my son's voice, it said, "Dad, it doesn't end here. You've got work to do." I knew that this is not what I'm supposed to do.

My name's Mike. I served in the Marine Corps from 1981 to 2004. I served in a number of MOSs, starting with dispersing on active duty, then light armored infantry, and counterintelligence in the Reserves. I joined the Marine Corps because my father was a Marine. I just always felt that I was drawn to the Marine Corps. I was at a training exercise in Yakima, here in Washington. They flew our unit up from Camp Pendleton. And as we finished the exercise and got back home, Iraq invaded Kuwait. That was my initiation of combat. And it got real. It got real in a hurry.

When I joined the Marine Corps, the commandant of the Marine Corps was a World War II veteran. You didn't talk about your feelings. Drinking your feelings was all right. That's what you do. That's how you handle your issues. It wasn't that good. It was not that good at all. The first time that I sought mental health treatment, it was terrifying. In Team Rubicon, I met a couple guys who had talked about Save A Warrior. My thought was, "Yes, I'm down. I'm going to go down there and help." Little did I know, I'm going to be the one getting the help. You get to talk to mental health professionals and just work on yourself. And they said, "Okay. Now when you get back, you got to get yourself a therapist."

So, I went to the vet center. I went inside, told them who I was. They let me sit down. I was so uncomfortable. And Audrey, who's my therapist there, came out and said, "Mike?" And I was like, "All right. All right. Let's just take one more step." My diagnosis was post-traumatic stress disorder. And I look back and I understand it now through therapy that the first signs of PTSD actually showed up after Desert Storm, but it was also things I brought to the Marine Corps growing up. And those things just kept piling up and piling up. I was at work when they informed me, my son was killed. I remember saying to myself, "Hold it together. Why? Why would you need to do that? Just be yourself. You just lost your son."

I think talk therapy was so important to me is because I didn't talk. But as you start talking it out and somebody's there to show you, "Look, here's what's happening," it starts to make sense. Helping you with your sleep and helping you understand that alcohol's not the answer. And the biggest part for me is my wife Valerie, that person that when I come in from those hard days or we're thinking about my son, that she gets it. And being with her and the things we do, like ballroom dancing and boating and just hanging out, when you have somebody that you can do that with, man, you're winning. You are winning. I like to read. I'm a big reader. If there's any more peaceful thing, I don't know what it is.

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I got my master's in social work, precisely because I did not want anybody, but especially veterans and first responders, to end up where I ended up. And if I can help, then I'm doing that. There's a lot of us out here who've been through this, and there's a lot of us who've gotten to the other side. Come on with me. Let's do that. My advice to other service members and veterans, go to the VA, show up, listen, pay attention to things they send you, pay attention to the text, go to your meetings, be your own best advocate. Whatever happened to you in the war is part of what made you who you are right now, but they don't define you. They don't hold dominion over you. There's a great life waiting for you. It can be hard. It's like going through bootcamp, man. It sucks a lot. But you remember how you felt when you graduated? Yeah, no better feeling. That's the way I feel just about every day.