

I deserve to have my life back

Melissa: I'm Melissa. I am 42 years old. I was a member of the Minnesota National Guard and I have done two deployments to Iraq. One as a Specialist/E5 and then one as a Staff Sergeant. Pretty much, they tried to attack us on 90 percent of our convoys, so that was a lot of attacks. I've been shot at. I've had RPGs come to me and I've seen, you know, IEDs go off two trucks in front of me and take the back of a truck off. In our unit, we had one KIA- killed in action and we had three serious injuries. I think sometimes, that knowing after our first serious injury, he was burned over a large percent of his body that any time that you went out and you were attacked, you knew what could happen to you. So, it added a level of fear even if their attacks were unsuccessful.

When I left, my oldest child had gone to a different state to live with her father. She decided never to return to live with me full-time. I had three small children at home and they were, you know, 18 months older when I got home. So, there was definitely an issue with me having not been a parent for 18 months to go back to trying to be a parent to little children who now are older. When you're deployed, you're not constantly waiting on somebody else. And when I got home, my children needed constant waiting on, so I mean, there was frustration that they weren't capable of taking care of themselves because you know, soldiers around me had been capable of taking care of themselves. So, I pretty much immediately started counseling at the Vet Center for Adjustment counseling to help me focus on how to be part of my family that I didn't feel like I was a part of anymore.

There was a lot of focus on not reacting initially, you know. To get rid of my Army voice when I talked to my children and that there's a voice that you use when you talk to children and you know, breathing techniques that, you know, if I got frustrated, I was to breathe before reacting that, you know, I couldn't bark orders to my children and things like that.

Society is a large thing. They have this opinion that Veterans should be men and not women and if women are Vets and they've gone over there, then they've stayed on post and they're nurses and they push papers and that they're not combat Vets and I am a combat Vet. For a while, I was a gunner and then I went to just driving trucks, but, you know, I was attacked. I did see gunfire and society as a large doesn't recognize that and it's really frustrating.

I think being older at the time that I deployed, when a 23-year-old loses his eye and I'm 36, I know what lifetime means, you know, a little bit more view of how long and lasting these effects are. Being older, I saw that the kids that were 18, 19, 20 went over and they gained five or seven years maturity or more in a year and a half and the effects on them, I think women take that a little bit more personal.

My first deployment, I did suffer from insomnia. I could only sleep for three or four hours at a time. Driving on the road to this day, you know, if a vehicle is broken down on the side of the road, I will get us far away from it as I can. I did go back to Iraq. Some of the symptoms of my PTSD have gotten worse and I did actually after a year of being back and noticing I still wasn't myself, I did go to the VA and say, you know, "I need help." They did medicate me. The first medications didn't work. They then switched up and I am starting a ten-week program to deal with the actual PTSD issues.



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I have a lot of avoidance issues. In the last year and a half, I don't go anywhere unless I'm meeting a Vet, somebody I know. I don't go places on my own. I've had anxiety attacks at my own grocery store. I live in a very small world that I've created for myself. I have like, "My gas station, my grocery store, my Target." And I don't tend to like to go outside of my comfort zone unless I'm either taking somebody with me or I'm meeting somebody. I ended up having to take a break from the National Guard because drill became too hard for me to go to and that's when I contacted the VA and said, you know, "I need help." I can't function up to my standards that I have. I'm not living up to my own standards. At some point, you get tired of your life as it is, or I got tired of my life as it was and needed to do something about it.

Life's too short to be miserable. I don't want to see anybody else come back and be miserable and sometimes it is just admitting, "I need help." My life's important and I deserve having my life returned back to me and so does any other Vet that's been over there and so, you know, if they need help, there are resources out there.



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