

VA doctors understood the stress my family faced

Nicole: My name is Nicole. I'm currently a Master Sergeant in Air Force Reserves. I served fifteen years, active Army. Actually, I met my husband on a train up for deployment out in California. My husband and I both were called to deploy to Bosnia. We were gonna to be going at the same time. I had just got stationed at Fort Hood. I didn't know a lot of people, so I contacted my mother. She was living in California and she moved to Texas to Fort Hood, moved in and she just kinda stepped in where we left off and we both went off to Bosnia.

We were on a convoy and my young Lieutenant decided that he needed to get out and I was in the vehicle with him and I said, "Hey, stay on the road though" you know, and he didn't. So, we ended up having to patch him back together because in Bosnia they did a lot of those homemade mines were everywhere.

From that moment on I became a little detached, which of course I brought back into my family too but I just, as a medic, to me, my survival was just to become detached and just be there and just not think, just go straight to step one, step two, step three, step four. And then you think about it afterwards and then you can't even believe that you saw what you saw or sometimes you don't even remember some of the things that you saw.

I didn't realize at the time some of the impacts that were happening with my children. Not understanding that they did worry. That they did have an imagination about what kinds of things could be happening to us while we were away. My daughter kinda became withdrawn a lot. My son acted out a lot. What they tell me now is that they just felt like I was never there. And at that time, they didn't understand why we were never there.

I began to see that some of those issues were like, wow we are a dual military family, we are always gone. Somebody is always in harm's way and that's stressful for anybody no matter the age. I don't know if I can even put it into words. It's just there are things about them that I simply just do not know. There are stories that they have that they can laugh about with my mom, that I just, I don't have that firsthand knowledge of.

After I had my last daughter I had to go Korea when she was six months old, and when I came back on my mid tour at the six-month mark she was a year and she didn't know me. She wouldn't come to me and I understood but it was, it was gut-wrenching, really gut-wrenching. I mean I've never been afraid to get on a plane and go anywhere knowing I was going to get shot at, but that felt horrible.

When I first got back, actually when I first got out of the Army active duty is when I started using the VA a lot. I was afraid, you hear these horror stories, and I go in the Texas VA system is awesome to me. I mean, I love it. They really listen. Being a medic, I would go in I'd be like, "Okay, this is what's wrong with me, this is what's going on." And they actually treated me like, okay, I can work with you whatever it is that you need.

I think the biggest challenge for me was just the new perspective that you have. Once you've gone once, subsequently you know that the same person is not going to come back but the people you leave behind they don't know that. They don't realize that, and



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they expect to be able to pick up right where you left off and that's not the case. You bring back this perspective of the horror that people can do to each other, of the living conditions that others are in. And when you hear your girlfriend going off about her lip gloss is too shiny or she burnt the chicken, it's like I know some people who would eat that chicken. And it just becomes irritating and so you kinda of back off a little bit, you don't really want to be around people. I had to really look at that and kinda try to become a people person again.

My issues kinda manifested in OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder. I have to do everything by task the same way, all the time to make sure. It's like I got to make sure. I take the certain routes when I drive. Things around the house, the cleaning, the dishes. No one likes to put groceries away because I'm going to be mad when there done, and nobody likes to put the dishes away because I'm going to be mad when there done. So, it made for an intimidating household after a while because it's like, you could never do anything right with me. And everyone, the kids, my husband, felt that way. And I really took a while for me because to me it just made sense, but you know my doc says, "Yeah, you probably got some OCD going on there." And she said, "Well just try to the medicine, and if it makes a difference then we'll know." It's not like you can test for OCD right? So, I did and actually I've been being treated for about three years now and I can tell the difference. I don't have to attack everything so much. I can sit back and go, okay there's another way to skin that cat.

I think the biggest thing for me was not listening. Oh no, that's not it, you don't know what you're talking about. But when I actually sat down and started listening to people who love me, tell me, this is what your doing. This is how this is coming out. This is what I think. I was like okay. When you listen to those voices that your affecting that you love then you don't have any choice but to at least go find out, is there a problem that can be rectified.

The VA and the Professionals there, I've had nothing but success. I've had nothing but like a love and a personal connection with the people who are treating. They really go out of their way. I mean the phone calls, the letters, the everything, it's like they're really putting out that effort to say, "Hey, you're not alone, come on in."

Isolation it breeds fear. It breeds sadness. But if you take the opportunity to surround yourself with love, with understanding with the people who really care about you or people who relate to what it is that you are feeling then only good can come from that. No one can do this alone. We went where we went as a team, as a platoon, as a squad and we did it together. So, the only way to overcome what we did together is to continue to work together to do that.



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