

## You go there and it's no judgement

**Joel:** My name is Joel. I served from 1999 to 2003 in the United States Marine Corps, and I was a 0331 Machine Gunner. So, I remember I was at the rifle range on Camp Pendleton, over the loudspeaker they mentioned that a airplane had just struck the World Trade Center, and at first it didn't really mean a whole lot, because we didn't really know because back then, I mean, we didn't have cell phone reception there, it was just the only communication we were receiving was whatever they were telling us. They came out on the radio again and they just reminded us to make sure these rounds count because the US was under a terrorist attack.

Going into the invasion into Iraq, there was a lot of unknowns, but nothing can really prepare you for, like, the real thing. I guess the first traumatic experience for me was seeing all the artillery being fired over us as we were crossing into Iraq. That's something that I'll never forget and to this day, that's why loud noises do trigger me sometimes and it's hard to explain to people that weren't there just because it's those traumatic experiences.

I know there was some changes in me when I came back, but I kind of tried to hide that, and that's why when I came back I didn't really talk about it and tell anybody that I was in the service and kind of avoided the VA for a long time. In hindsight now I realize it was because I was suppressing my anxiety, depression, all my feelings. My parents, they noticed that there was something wrong with me, that I wasn't the same person from when I'd come back from my deployment. They're the ones that kind of pulled me aside and were like "Joel, we're worried about you, we want you to go seek help."

When I finally decided okay I need to do something because I'm having uncontrollable anxiety, I was just kind of scared because I didn't know, like, who to call, like, what to say or anything like that, so I actually just went online and I just read on there, go to my local VA Hospital, and once I was able to get enrolled I was enrolled into, like, a PTSD clinic at the West Los Angeles VA, specifically for combat traumatic events.

My happy place is on the highway. Living in Los Angeles, we all know there's traffic everywhere. So when you're splitting lanes on a motorcycle after some therapy at the VA, it's a nice way to decompress. Yeah, the VA is great, and the place I found is the American Legion, so I'm part of the American Legion in Hollywood, Post 43. They also have this organization called the Legion Riders that's part of the American Legion, and right now I'm in the process of actually joining on that, and what it is just get together, ride motorcycles, fundraise for other nonprofits, it's like, stuff that I avoided for a long time, and it's like in every community, and it's no judgment. You go there, it's other Veterans that just want to make sure you're okay.



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