

VA resources provided tools to succeed

Keith: My name is Keith. I was a Navy Corpsman assigned to Marine units in Laos and Cambodia. My job was to take care of the wounded. The hardest thing was when a mortar hits, the guys that were in the fox hole were there one minute and then they were gone the next. And the carnage of war left an indelible mark on me, and it was very difficult for me to not take that to heart.

When we got home, we were faced with a lot of protesters. There were not a lot of jobs for us either. I had a good MOS being a Corpsman, but the hospitals were full, and I basically just picked up menial jobs and did the best I could. It took me a long time to finally go back to school and paste an education together.

As a Marine and a Navy Corpsman, you're always told to suck it up. And sucking it up was not always an easy thing to do. So, early on, we drank. I drank heavily when I came home from Vietnam. I had a lot of headaches. I had a lot of nightmares. I had a lot of tremors. I did not realize I was in trouble. But a few of my Veterans, we would always have coffee at the coffee shop, and they saw that I was in trouble, suicidal. And so, they said, "We're taking you over to the VA clinic", which we just had in Alaska. We don't have a VA hospital. We had a VA clinic. And they took me over and got me registered. And I was seen the same day and was able to receive treatment.

Going to the Vet Center early on, we would pretty much meet about once a week, and the Veterans would all take a turn talking about what they were experiencing and how they're managing it. I ended up going to a VA hospital in Connecticut and then furthering my treatment down in Charleston, South Carolina at the VA hospital down here. There's a new post-traumatic stress disorder program. I went through a 12-week program. And at the end of the program, my depression level went down, but my PTSD went up, which happens once in a while.

So, when you have PTSD, the simplest thing is one, you're not alone, and two, breathe. Breathe, breathe, breathe. You have to breathe. And you have to realize that what you're feeling, the anxiety, is real. We went through an awful lot. We were neglected for a long time, so now these new programs are just that. They're new. So, we have the tools now by going over in these programs what we did, how we did it and what we were doing at that time. Bringing things to the surface. And in the early days, the VA did not understand post-traumatic stress disorder. It's taken over 20 years for them to understand just to give it a name.

Do I still have nightmares? Yes. Can I manage them better now? I understand them. It's been a whole new world to feel better about myself. Coming home with those tools I was able to share them with my girlfriend. She now understands what I have gone through. And sometimes if I do still have a mood swing, she understands. And she can understand what it's like living with a Veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder. And so, our relationship has been stronger because I'm not as irritable as I used to be. And if I become irritable, she can manage and knows what I'm experiencing at that time.

You cannot do this on your own. You need the professionals to help you to understand that what you're going through is real. I encourage Veterans to go back and find their VA and get into these training programs and continue. I wanted to quit my first time, and



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they wouldn't let me. They said, "You're not done yet." And I stayed with it and it was the best thing I did.

You need to seek the help. And I encourage all Veterans who are not going to the VA, you cannot manage this on your own. Get it and you'll see a whole new world at the end of the tunnel.



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