

Connections and support are critical

Erin: Hi, my name's Erin, I served in the United States Army infantry from 1979 to 1990. I was an infantry platoon leader, infantry company commander, and those were things that kind of suited my personality. I really enjoyed doing that kind of work. My career ended abruptly when the military learned that I was a transgender person. It had not been affecting my performance of duties, but in 1990 it was considered incompatible with serving in the military.

It was devastating. I was an infantry officer. I mean, that's my identity at that point in my life. My wife had been really involved as well and so after we had to leave the military, our relationship deteriorated quickly and fell apart and I was divorced within a year.

There was a ten-year gap between the time I had to leave the military and the time I was finally willing to explore and understand who I was. While I was involved in a number of things socially, I was not getting close to people. When I came out and started to accept who I was, I thought the problems were gone. I was basically living with a low-level depression that I hadn't really been able to identify because I didn't want to admit there was a problem. I was trying really hard not to have any problems. And one morning I woke up and said, "why am I bothering to wake up?" And there was a little bit of me going back to when I was a platoon leader and a company commander, that if a soldier had said that to me, that would have been a flashing red light. And that part of me that was still in control took me to the VA the following day.

I was triaged and I was provided with a therapist, and that therapist stuck with me for a year. And about ten months in, I realized that I wasn't, that it wasn't my transgender issues or my gender identity that was the problem, it was the fact that I'd never grieved the loss of my career, the loss of my family, or any of the issues that went around that. And we spent about two and a half, three months working on that. One of the things that has helped is knowing that there is a transgender Veterans support group that I can go to every Friday. Having those connections is really critical and having people that I can talk to who've had some shared experiences and understand the comradery and the brotherhood of arms. I know that I can go to the VA and have somebody to talk to if things get rough.

The treatment that I've gotten, the way I've, the help I've gotten to become comfortable with myself has made it possible for me to talk to people who are, not who don't understand who we are, but want to be helpful and that's made a huge difference in my life. I'm out, I'm public. I do TV interviews, I do radio interviews, I've done op-ed pieces. I do three or four presentations to businesses or medical mental health providers every week. Where I'm working now, I feel like I'm actually making a contribution to society and I'm doing something that's helping the country, helping other people and that has restored some of my sense of purpose as well.

For a Veteran who is dealing with their gender identity, go to the VA. Transgender Veterans who receive care from the VA are well taken care of. The people are very understanding, the doctors are really good. The social workers and the therapists are really good. It's very good care. If I can help one of those people avoid the pitfalls of being in hiding to maybe avoid the possibility of suicide one more time so that they can start getting the help then I feel like I'm, not only have to but I really want to do that.



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