

This Army Veteran found purpose by helping others

Fernando: My name's Fernando and I joined the Army September 29, 2001 until February 8, 2008. So, I hope to graduate in May from Biola University with a Master of Divinity and Pastoral Care and Counselling. I'm a youth pastor at my church but that's part-time. I wanted to serve in the Army because I remember I was five years old, I watched Operation Desert Storm on TV and I was like, "Wow, these guys are warriors."

Ten years later from 1991 to 2001, on September 11, 2001 and I saw these attacks and I said, "Okay, this is it. It's time for me to step up and to join." So, I did. I was pumped. I remember getting the orders, we're going to deploy. We're going to this place called Fallujah. It's supposed to be really dangerous. It's out of control. I thought, "Okay, this is what I trained for. This is it. It's game time."

Going to combat was something very, very different. It was an eye-opening experience just to know that my life is really in danger and every time we had gone to the city of Fallujah it was the same, ambushes. I don't how many IED explosions I experienced. I was never hit; I was never wounded, thank God. Some of my friends were.

When I returned home from my first deployment, I started to notice some anxiety problems and I thought it was normal cause all of my friends had the same thing. And it wasn't until I got out of the Army that I realized, I am not like everyone else in society. I am different. I was around civilians. I'm going to college and I'm walking through campus and I just can't stop looking at everyone around me. I want to see their hands. I want to see their facial expressions. I'm looking at windows and roof tops. I just did not feel safe and it was like that every single day.

I did not seek any help. I lived with this with this anxiety, with stress, with nightmares. I was falling apart. It wasn't until my friend, he told me to get help. He picked me up and drove me to the VA and that's where I finally opened up to a Clinical Social Worker from the VA. But it wasn't until a few more sessions, maybe ten sessions, that I asked him, "Do I have post traumatic stress disorder?" and he says, "I believe you do."

Going through therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, being able to talk things out I came to the realization that I was carrying all these burdens of shame and guilt of what I did in combat when I didn't have to. It was a lie. Every unit has a Psychologist or Psychiatrist. Just go see him. Go talk to him because I can say now where I am in my life making new friends and being able to meet other Veterans and share this fellowship with them.

Life is truly a blessing from God and it's worth living. As human being we were made to bond. We were made to share our experiences, to be friends and family, to talk things out. Don't isolate yourself and know that you have a purpose in life.

Move forward and you'd be surprised just the great things that you can accomplish. Take all that military motivation and stamina and everything and just channel it to something positive in your life and realize that life is not all about you, help others. Seek help and help others. The sooner the better and you'll see the benefits of living a healthier happier life.



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