

Discovering constructive ways to manage PTSD

Sarah: My name is Sarah. I was in the Airforce; active duty and I was an Intelligence Operations Specialist. I was stationed in England during the Kosovo campaign. I was doing like basically war time operations, so I was working around the clock. I had shift work and I still enjoyed what I was doing, I mean, I thought it was important, but that was when some of the stuff that happened and the things that I was involved in started to bother me.

Symptoms that I would have even when I was still in service were having nightmares. While I was married, just, you know, my husband telling me about me waking up and doing weird things. He, himself was an Airforce Vet, so he had served in Desert Storm, so he kind of knew and tried. He said, like you need to get a handle on this. Like, you can't be saying that stuff in your sleep because. You know, what happens? You know, it's just me now, but what happens if you're saying this and you're not supposed to? So, it was the culture of, your kind of, you suck it up and you don't talk about the things that were going on. I remember being in England, in London and I wasn't driving the car. My husband was driving the car and just had this panic attack where I just felt like I was surrounded and I couldn't explain what was going on and I just sort of like got down into the wheel well, like it didn't, it was a just total freak out. But I didn't really do anything about it.

Once I moved back to the U.S. and all that stuff was over with, I thought I would just go back to school and everything would be fine. But I ended up getting divorced. There was a culture shock of moving back from being overseas to being in the U.S., just a culture shock trying to go to school and even though I wasn't that much older than my peers in school, I was at a totally different maturity level. So, it was really hard to relate to other people. I remained social, but I realize now looking back, I was just trying to keep myself super busy, so that I couldn't think about all the other stuff that was deep down that was bothering me.

So, it was actually several years later that I just started to fall apart, like I couldn't keep myself busy enough anymore and I started messing up at work. I would be late. I was distracted. I couldn't stay focused. So, I started going to see a therapist on my own and somebody had actually within a year of me getting out had said that I had PTSD, but I just didn't want to hear that, you know, it was this professional therapist, but I was, nope, don't want to hear that.

I started isolating myself more and more and the things that I found that used to make me happy, I just didn't want to do. I drank a lot. I did a lot of risk-taking behavior. I would blow up while I was driving and somebody would cut me off in traffic and I would just act really inappropriately and drove dangerously and I noticed that myself more and more, I was unable to control angry outbursts.

So, I actually took three months off from work and started seeing a therapist outside the VA once a week just to do talk therapy and he was somebody who had worked with Veterans in the past. I also got enrolled in VA Healthcare at that time and I started using medicines. I had a medicine that helped me with sleep and then I also used another medication that just helps with my mood and anxiety and I was really hesitant to use any medications, but I got to the point where I realized something has to be done.



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Once I got into the VA and lost my insurance outside, the VA was able to make some accommodations for me and help get me through with just using one on one therapy and then there was the one group that I did with other Veterans who had specifically, Combat PTSD and it was so good to just be in a group with other people who didn't, you didn't have to explain yourself. You could just get down to, oh, this happened to me. Oh, yeah, I had that happen too. This is what I do. And just share ideas of how you're supposed to cope with the things that you can do and just having other Veterans to go out with that helped me, helped all of us really be able to get back out and do things in the community, do things with our family that we weren't able to do before.

Just know that you're not alone, like never feel alone. Use the outlets that you have, the friends that you meet at a therapy group, the people that can help you even if they're somebody you think, oh, I can't call them in the middle of the night. Just do it because you'd be surprised of how many people are out there that really want to help you.



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