

Moving past the impact of difficult experiences

Robert: My name is Robert, and I served in the Navy from 2000-2010 as an operation specialist working with the radars and communications and weapon systems. When I went to Iraq, I was there as part of what they called a counter rocket, artillery, and mortars. So, my job was to shoot down the incoming rockets and mortars. Being on the ship compared to being in Iraq was a much different experience. At that point, it's just sort of hoping and praying that everything works right, and that the training they gave you was enough.

I deployed to the Pacific area. I was actually in Hong Kong when that Tsunami hit Indonesia, and we were sent to provide humanitarian aid. I honestly never realized how deeply it affected me until after I went, and you know started seeking treatment. It was something that it really bothered me, because I mean when you are dealing with war, you're sort of expecting the casualties. You're expecting some sort of violence to happen, but when you see something like that as a result of a natural disaster, there's absolutely nothing that you could do to prevent something like that.

When I first separated from the military, I thought moving back home to L.A. would be a good thing for me, being around family and friends. Honestly, like I had nothing in common with my you know premilitary friends. I would sit and have conversations with them, and they were talking about college and work and sort of these mundane things. My family, I sort of became more isolated from. I had some symptoms of post traumatic stress. I couldn't sleep. I didn't like going out to restaurants with my wife, because I was dealing with some hypervigilance issues. If I didn't have complete control over whether I could see all the access points into and out of the restaurant, I was completely uncomfortable. I also was suffering from depression. One of the things that we identified through my counseling was sort of that loss of purpose after the military is kind of what was creating the depression, because in the military, I always had a mission. I always knew why I was going into work every day, but in the civilian world, I didn't have that anymore, and I was really struggling, and it got to the point where my wife told me either I seek help, or she was going to leave me, and that was really what made me realize something was wrong, because up to that point, it just seemed normal to me.

I saw a psychologist once a week. I also started getting more involved with Veterans groups, which really was a result of the counselor's recommendations, and by associating with the other Veterans groups, I was able to find people who had similar experiences to me, who knew what I was going through, what issues I was experiencing and could relate to, and really by being more social through them, I was able to open up more to my family and to my friends as time went on.

Once, you can actually put a name to something, it sort of helps you create that understanding of what it is, and that you're not alone. It's something that you know through social interactions or through finding some sort of way of giving you new purpose and meaning could actually you know help pull you out of that. That was one of the first stigma I had to overcome internally, because I was like I wasn't an infantry man. I wasn't running around doing house searches, or going on convoys, so I don't have PTSD. I'm fine. That's just not true. There are thousands of ways you could come up with PTSD. It's not an abnormal reaction. It's the bodies normal reaction to an abnormal situation. There's all kinds of different ways that people can develop these



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symptoms, and it's not something that's permanent. There are ways that you can overcome these challenges.

Now, me and my wife pretty much go out to the restaurant about once every two weeks or so, and I don't have any issues with it. I can sit down and not have to worry about who's coming through the door. At the college where I work at, I've developed a peer mentoring program, peer-to-peer for Veterans, where someone who's just coming in fresh out of the military gets paired up with someone who's been there for a year or so, and they can sort of walk them through the process, let them know of the services that are available.

Knowing that I've made a difference in just one other person's life helps me with that sense of purpose. It helps me remember that I've done some pretty impressive things. Don't be afraid to reach out to someone. There's so many different programs available. Not one program will work for everyone. For me, it was finding a way to continue serving, finding that sense of purpose. So, just don't be afraid to reach out for that help.



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