

Sully shares his trauma and recovery experience

Chesley Sullenberger: Hello I am Chesley Sullenberger, known as Sully. I was an Air Force fighter pilot from 1973 to 1980, and after my military service I was an airline pilot for 30 years.

Chesley Sullenberger: Most of my service was peace time, in the draw down after Vietnam. In spite of the fact that I never saw combat, there was still a transition I had to make to return to civilian life. I was surprised at how much I had to make. In the military, it's a very structured, very disciplined environment. In the civilian world, there are a million ways to do things. So I think I had a bit of adjustment to make in that regard.

Chesley Sullenberger: I was very fortunate to join an airline about 10 days after I left my military service. I had been an airline pilot for 29 years, a captain for 21 of those years, and on January 15, 2009, Flight 1549 leaving New York's LaGuardia Airport heading for Charlotte, we suddenly encountered a large flock of large birds, Canada geese that weigh 10 or 12 pounds, with 5 foot or 6 foot wing spans. We struck them. They entered the center, the core of both jet engines, damaging, as it turns out irreparably. The sudden loss of thrust was shocking. The startle factor was huge, and we began looking for a place to land over Manhattan, one of the most heavily developed areas on the planet. It turned out we could not glide as far as a runway, and that the only option, the only place long enough, wide enough, smooth enough to attempt landing a large jet airliner was the Hudson River, and we were glad to have that option. We made an emergency water landing and fortunately all 155 people, passengers and crew, survived.

Chesley Sullenberger: I asked our pilots union to send their critical incident response team, our peers trained in PTSD, to come talk to our pilots and flight attendants on this flight. They told us that we were going to experience distracted thinking, and inability to sleep, the inability to shut our brains off. We'd have constant what if'ing, and second guessing, especially late at night.

Chesley Sullenberger: That first night I slept perhaps 45 minutes to an hour. I just couldn't sleep anymore. The next day, I would try to read a newspaper or magazine, end up rereading the same sentence 5 times, and finally giving up. I just couldn't concentrate, I couldn't focus. My mind would keep going back to that moment, flashbacks, reliving it.

Chesley Sullenberger: I had lost 13 pounds. My wife was shocked by my appearance. My skin looked white, my eyes looked sunken in as if I had been starved, and my body was using itself up because of this stress.

Chesley Sullenberger: The loss of sleep lasted for weeks. Then finally after about 2 or 3 months, after months of talking about it and actually writing about it, which was very cathartic, which helped me a lot to process this, I began to more effectively deal with it. But you know, people are resilient, and we can learn new ways of coping with things that are very difficult. I did seek professional help. I talked to a therapist, and that was useful also.



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Chesley Sullenberger: I can't give enough credit to our peers who are trained in critical incident response. It really helped to know what to expect. I specifically asked for a road map, and they gave us a very accurate one. Knowing what was coming and say, "Aww, this is what they said was going to happen and here it is." I finally realized I didn't have to carry this burden myself. I could let go of it, I could share it, and that would be okay.

Chesley Sullenberger: By talking about this experience, by writing about it, I was able to desensitize myself to it. To make it less powerful over me, make it less painful for me. I gave myself permission to forgive myself, for not being perfect, and for performing as well as I could under the circumstances.

Chesley Sullenberger: It's very important to stay connected. It's important for you to know that you're not the only one having these thoughts. You're not the only one feeling this way. You're not the only one having these experiences. If you stay in touch with your brothers and sisters from military service, you realize that you're one of many and you can get help just by hearing their stories and how they might relate to you.

Chesley Sullenberger: My advice is very simple, to any Veteran, to anybody who has been through a traumatic experience, whether it's combat or something in civilian life, is love your family enough, respect them enough to tell them the truth about what you feel. Get the help that you need and your family deserves.



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