

Navigating Life's Transitions

Mary: I remember when I finally did go talk to a mental health counselor describing the feeling of like I was just bending over backwards and farther and farther and farther, and I just got to the point where I couldn't bend anymore. Like I was going to break, and then I just felt like I just can't handle these feelings. I don't know what to do. I need someone to help me.

My name is Mary. I served in the US Army from 1994 to 1998, and my MOS was 35 Delta, Tactical Intelligence Officer. I was in college in 1990, 1991 when the first Gulf War broke out and didn't really know what I wanted to be when I grew up. So I walked into the door of the ROTC office one day and they said, "You can try it out for a year and see what you think. There's no commitment." And so I said, "All right, let's do it."

So I did my initial Military Intelligence Officer basic training at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, and then I went straight to Germany, and I was stationed in First Armor Division at the First Brigade headquarters. I was one of only, I think 10 or 12 women in the entire brigade headquarters, and that was a real life changing experience for me.

I left the Army in 1998. I married another soldier, and so I went from being an active duty officer to a military spouse. That was a tough time. There were a lot of changes. I realized just didn't know what to do with myself and didn't really know why I wasn't feeling good. Had feelings of anxiety and depression, and just didn't know how to handle those feelings.

In the beginning of counseling, things actually get worse, and that's apparently pretty common because you really are starting to talk openly about the things that are bothering you and things that have happened to you in the past, and that could be really tough. But after I would say about three or four or five sessions, and that's when I started to feel like this is starting to get a little bit better. I don't necessarily think that every person that needs mental health counseling is going to need it always, or even more than once. But for me, having been in transitions many times during my adult life, that has been really, really helpful.

So I was diagnosed with depression. Later on in my life, I've also been told that I have some anxiety struggles as well. The different kinds of treatments I've received, primarily it's been talk therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy. What I like about talk therapy is just having someone who I feel is in my corner, the counselor is there, really this neutral third party I can go from talking about challenges I have in my professional career, to concerns I have about my family. Do you want to talk about how you might phrase things in a different way or look for a different opportunity to engage them that might create the situation for a better outcome?

So, I'm divorced. I live alone and I have an identical twin sister and neither of my parents are from this area, so I didn't have extended family around growing up. So I think that's



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part of what makes me feel particularly close to my immediate family. Everyone experiences the depression differently. Accepting it can be really hard, not fighting it and not being afraid of it. I think those are probably the most important things. It's great to get outside. I live in a part of the country that has incredible natural beauty. My favorite hobby is bird watching. It brings me a lot of joy. I think it just takes my mind off myself and my attention out of whatever might be stressing me out.

Why I continue with therapy is because I feel like my life has continued to have a lot of transitions. Having a mental health counselor has really helped me navigate that. I still do have low days, no doubt, but sometimes I'm not that bad. But I can maybe kind of see the bad coming and if I can reach out and connect with my family or a friend or go out and do something that I enjoy, sometimes it buoys me back up.

Also, just reminding myself that it's not going to be this way forever, that I've gone through tough periods before and come out of them, and I can go through this stuff period and come out of it as well.



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