

Ending the grip of nightmares and flashbacks

Robert: I needed help. I stayed in the program for six weeks. Then after that, I got reassigned. I had to go to weekly and monthly urinalysis tests and meetings, and we go into the meetings and there were bird-colonels, chief master sergeants with alcohol, all types of problems. That's when I realized just because you're a soldier doesn't mean other people don't have problems, and for an hour or an hour-and-a-half that's what we talked about, how we needed to deal with our problems. And so when you talking to other soldiers and they've had similar types of problems, it's like an eye-opening experience. People start telling their stories and I realized that soldiers can be weak too, there's no shame in admitting that you don't have 100% strength or that there's some failure so to speak. There's nothing that I should hide about that, and it was not until I went into the therapy program, in the military, special treatment program, until I started talking with the professional military counselors and realized they were trying to make us understand that it's okay to talk about that. In fact, the more you talk about it, the more honest you are with yourself in terms of being healed or on your way to recovery. And once I heard that, I thought it was a revelation and then I enjoyed hearing the other soldiers admit some of their problems. It became like I looked forward to going and hearing some of these stories. At that point in time, it made me realize how many more soldiers needed to talk to somebody. I realized that sometimes you could be more wounded in your head than your body.

I had problems early on from the nightmares because I kept seeing the bodies, whether they were wounded bodies, injured bodies and I could hear some of the soldiers asking to be killed and it haunted me; it haunted me at night; it haunted me through college. I tried to go to the VA early on, but there was no such thing as PTSD. I went through school so fast, and I ended up getting married after three-and-a-half years and I didn't even tell my first wife, I kept going to school. And later on, it affected our marriage, because she would talk about how I would talk at night in my sleep and fight and talk about saving people or walk into the wall and I got very aggressive towards her sometimes as well as to other people, which to me it was like they were being too slow about doing things. Or I was taking situations in real life and almost acting like they were military life and people weren't as compassionate or didn't care as much. It was kind of scary for a while for me.

One thing they said to me in therapy I never forgot, they said, "Never forget that some things never go away," and I said, "Well, what did you mean?" He said, "Your life will never be a normal life in a sense of thinking because you've had these experiences," and so I never tried to act like it was gone. The one or two times I did, it was more or less I was immersed in academics or my young family or whatever the case was, but it would come out at different times. To this day, I know what some triggers are. I can't watch a full movie of any type of war, because it reminds me of the instances of me treating victims. Well, that's been over 25 years now. I've never tried to sit through, my wife, my second wife knows right now. If she's watching one, she likes those types of pictures, she'll turn it; she'll look over and see me. My first wife had no idea. I would sit there like a zombie.

To me, today, every Veteran regardless of the era that they served in, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, every Veteran needs to be able to make a connection with their families to let them understand that they're okay or that they are linked to the resources that will give them help.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

**MAKE THE
CONNECTION**

When I got out, many of the Vietnam Veterans were not greeted cheerfully. I've had more people say, "Thank you for service," in the last three or four years than 15 or 20 years. Now, it's more resources available. There is no excuse to traumatize your family, to go through this trauma yourself, regardless of what you've seen, what you've been a part of, and even what you don't understand. Most of us, as Veterans, followed orders. Some of us followed orders to the point of seeing other people, loved ones die, friends die or wounded, but we still followed our orders. I think the best thing we can do now, even as I sit here, is make the connection with the resources available. It was one of the best things I did. With those limited resources that were at the university, through the Veterans program for those who are going to school, for those resources that were available with the VA at the time, which was sparse but still I made the connection, or with those services through my church and others who understood that Veterans need tender loving care, or with other family members who just knew from other family members they had that Veterans need care. You've got to make a connection if you want to be a part of the community again. And remember, following orders continues all of your life. The key is follow the right orders. I'm more respected now in my community because of my testimony as a Veteran, because I've shared it with so many other people and because I know now, if I do nothing else, I help other people make a connection. There's nothing weak about saying, "I need some help." There's help available just for you.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

**MAKE THE
CONNECTION**