

## Tools to manage depression and live well

**Dave:** My name is Dave. I'm an Army Air Force Veteran. In the Army, I joined first. I started out as a Military Police Officer 95 Bravo and then I switched across to 11 Bravo figuring that I'd be able to do more schools, like jump school and things like that. I joined in 1988 and got out in 2009 so I finished up my career in the Air Force.

My first deployment was to the Persian Gulf with the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division out of Kansas. What I remember happening was tanks would come upon you and they'd be turning the turret around, which means they were surrendering, according to NATO or according to the Geneva Convention, and they'd just turn right around and shoot right back at you. All of the Crescent Moon, which is our Red Cross vehicles, they were all armed to the teeth. Guys inside ready to shoot. I mean there wasn't a tremendous amount of action but it was very violent, from beginning to end it was very violent. Extremely violent.

The biggest problems I had was that there would be days come up where it would be a regular day like today, and I just wasn't feeling it. I'd feel just fatigued and alone and it was tough. As far as any symptoms or anything like that that came about, I found it extremely hard to sleep, especially later on throughout deployments that I had done. There was enough things seen that just...it's inhuman to see and I found sleep to be a major factor in pretty much everything that happened in the beginning. Then from sleep went something to put you to sleep.

Instead of taking medication I figured well we'll just do what every other generation did and have a few beers and maybe that'll help you sleep. Everybody knows that when you drink you don't really sleep that well anyhow. Maybe some people do but I certainly didn't. I figured I was no worse for the wear, but I really was. I was just slowly killing myself with it.

Then the other onset of symptoms were there would be a smell or sound or something else that would bring me back and I would lose my place in line. Then it became losing your place in line in life. Then I was setting things aside that I knew needed to be done but I could put them off or dish them off on somebody else. I felt bad for myself. I said, "I gotta be the only one doing this so I'm gonna feel bad for myself." And that brought on more and more and more, and it just got worse and worse steadily.

By that time, it was probably after my third deployment, I was drinking heavily and, you know, I was having a tough time. Mentally I was having an awful time sleeping and then putting work together. So that transition alone was traumatic and I did the best I could with it, but I ended up going to the VA for a little bit of help. They obviously told me that there was issues with alcohol that I denied, denied, denied. But hey going a step further, I said, "Well is there anything you can do about maybe do you think maybe I have depression?" And I took the test for it and they said "Yeah, you definitely have some sort of clinical depression going on here." I don't know if it's an anxiety-type based depression. Because I would have anxiety attacks but I didn't know what they were. I mean I didn't know what was going on.

My first encounter with a Psychiatrist or any type of Mental Health Counselor, Clinician, whatever you want to call them, was with a Psychopharmacologist at the Boston VA. It was her recommendation that I go see a Psychologist instead of a Psychiatrist and we were gonna try that angle. The regressive state of my depression was turned around a



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little bit. I was understanding a little bit more. I had the tools to understand, okay, if I do this, it's gonna blow over. It's not hopeless. Nothing's hopeless. I can make this work. And it was just because I'd gone to certain groups, they'd say in AA you can take tools with you and leave all the rest behind. I didn't have to leave anything behind that I got from the VA. It was all worth something to me. I think the overall concept of it was that just come in through the doors and sit down and you'll find your way some way. There's almost a road map as soon as you get there.

My depression, I'm not gonna say it's gone away completely because everyone has bad days, but I realize that. I don't think I ever got to the point where I wanted to take my own life but there were lots of times when I was hopeless. It was just like this is never gonna end. I spent many nights alone isolating which I found that it helped in the beginning, but it's not the way to go. A lot of the guys pulled me out of that along with the staff. That's how it worked for me. Then the drinking trailed off and then I just became sober all together and I just find life to be so much different now. If it wasn't for the VA I wouldn't be in that position right now.

The biggest thing about going to the VA, and if you haven't been there or you're afraid to go there, there's nothing wrong with it. You're not weak, you're not letting your family down. If anything you're letting yourself down if you don't give it a shot. I wouldn't be sitting here today to allow myself to even give you this advice if it wasn't for them. And to just make sure you walk through those doors because just like the military, when you knew you could count on that guy next to you, you're gonna find somebody else right there that's gonna be there for you.



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