

## Relief and recovery through VA

**Mike:** I'm Mike. I served in the United States Army from 2005 to 2009, spending 15 months overseas in Iraq. I was a young kid, I was 18, so I didn't know much. I came in and was a little lost, but I was excited. Losing friends was a tough deal. I didn't really know how to act or react, especially when it first happened because you're in such a place, you're operating at such a high level and I feel like we don't have any room for emotions at the time. It wasn't until we came home did I really feel the rush of events like that.

The first two weeks were great. Nothing happened and then I start to realize little things that were overwhelming. It was everything from driving in the car and honking and yelling, and I would get in arguments with my family — I would yell at them. Nobody understood and I felt anger that they didn't understand what I was going through, and I would go and confide in my buddies and that close group of friends you bonded with the last fifteen months, that you bled with, you fought with, and they were the only ones that I could really go to, and we never really talked about it, but we all knew we were going through it.

We would go out, and when we went out we would get in fights because our angers were so high. We had all this built up frustration and anger, and we would go to a bar and just fight, that's all we would do, and that's how we would let it out, and one of my friends who deployed with me who was having trouble got his hands on opiates, oxycontin, boom, tried it. Oh, it was over from there. So I eventually discovered heroin and heroin is a lot cheaper than oxycontin, so I started using heroin and it never got better. I didn't really see it at the time, but my drug addiction was literally just as bad as my PTSD issues. I began stealing things, lying, I would wake up in jail. I spent 90 days in jail, so, I had all this on my — I had all these charges. At the same time my service in the military was up. I wanted to reenlist, and I went back to my unit, and they sat me down and they said, "Look, Mike, you can't reenlist, you have felonies."

I got sent back and then I just got out of the military and I never felt more lost at that point, you know. I had gotten a job, and so I was working at that job and I got health insurance through them and I went to a regular doctor to treat my medical issues, and I told him I'm a Veteran and I worked with him and he said, "Oh, I used to work at the VA, I used to be in the service," and so that's when I started taking him real seriously, you know, and this guy seemed to reach out to me and he's like, "Why don't you go to the VA? It's free too. They have really good people and they understand what you've been through." I went into an appointment and I literally felt relieved going in there. I see all the Vets, older Vets with their Navy ship on their hat or their patches on their back, and I felt kind of at home. Granted I didn't know these guys but I had known what they went through, so I felt comfortable in there, I felt like I could open.

I went on into my initial appointment and the lady brought me in and I basically just talked for, like, an hour and a half, not even realizing, just kind of letting it all out. I had never been able to do that. I had never been able to just freely talk to anybody. Working with the VA, specifically one counselor is who is kind of your day-to-day counselor, amazing woman. I don't know where I'd be without her. My experiences just only got better. The more people I met — I met individuals in the PTSD clinic who helped me work on my emotions and everything I'm going through with my nightmares. Still to this day I go in at once a week to one counselor and once every two weeks to



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another. I mean, I — dude, leaps and bounds from where I was. Thankful to the people there at the VA, what they've done for me is astonishing.



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