

Talking about his challenges led to relief

Josh: My name is Josh and I served in the Marine Corps from 2000-2005, and I was trained as an Arabic cryptologic linguist and I did two tours in Iraq. As a member of the intelligence community, no one really expected me to go fight anybody. Of course, we were trained and we had weapons so we could defend ourselves, but we were not an offensive force and so my team of six guys was attached to an infantry unit that was following a reconnaissance unit. They were part of some of the initial and very violent battles in Nasiriyah. It would get mortared and rocketed; I wouldn't say often, but a couple of times a week and then one week it was like five days in a row. It has taken me years to get comfortable with any type of siren shrieking, whistling sound.

I left the military in 2005 and immediately went to college and very quickly became interested in archaeology. The second summer after I left the military I went to Cyprus to do an archeological excavation. We're driving through Cyprus and this feeling of discomfort is growing and I'm finding myself getting more and more quiet, but I just remember thinking that I didn't want to talk to anybody. I felt really uncomfortable. I couldn't look out the windows of the vehicle because what I was seeing just magnified this feeling of discomfort and tenseness, and I remember thinking that this isn't what I'm normally like and why can't I be talkative, why can't I be open, why can't I have fun?

About a month in, I spoke with this woman who was working with us and I just kind of mentioned real briefly like, "Oh, yeah, well when I arrived here I was kind of not myself. I was kind of anxious. I was kind of irritable," and she said, "That's sounds a lot like PTSD. Like, you were feeling stress related to a prior experience that you may have had."

And she was the first person to make me think, I mean I knew that the burning smell bothered me; I knew that the siren sound bothered me, but I had no idea that foreign travel would get to me. In Cyprus, it's more European than it is Middle Eastern, but there was still enough a flavor of the Middle East that it got me. So that's when I started to see the VA. I went to the VA to talk about PTSD, and so I remember I was meeting with a VA Counselor - this is in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania - and she says, "Well, the reason I think you're feeling this anxiety and this discomfort and this irritability is that you're entering experiences that remind you of the worst experiences you ever had," and so she did a really nice job of coaxing me into this idea that it's perfectly natural to feel this way; that it's normal; that it's almost expected to feel this way and that there is nothing wrong with it. This is just something I've got to work my way through.

I know my experience with the VA was extremely positive. I had a female therapist. What she was really good at was saying, "I'm not a Veteran and I can't relate, but I do understand." She did a really great job of listening, which is what I think I needed at the time, and then explaining to me what was happening with me, explaining to me why I was feeling that, trying to put it into context for me, trying to explain how common it is and other people who have also gone through it, and she did a great job of providing this safe environment for me to let it all out, to not feel judged, and to realize that her sole goal, her only purpose in this setting was to help me.

As long as I'm being honest about who I am and what I feel and what I've been through and what's going on with me, it's a safe environment, and the more honest I am, the better it's going to be because then they can truly get at those issues that need to be



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addressed. It's just difficult to talk about it, it's difficult to verbalize what's going on in here and in here, but you got to do it because it's going to improve your life.



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