

## Moving past hopelessness and alcohol use

**Pat:** My name's Pat. I was in the Army Medical Corp in Vietnam. They sent me north to Da Nang. I was attached to the first of the 46<sup>th</sup> Infantry. We also worked at a aide station. As a medic, it would get very hectic. Choppers flying in, dumping off the wounded, and you'd take care of them as best you could, really just affected me.

I had my first panic attack, which I didn't even know what the hell that was, at the time, where you'd walk onto a ward, and the beds sort of just lined up, both sides, all walls, just hundreds of beds in an open bay ward, and I started sweating, having heart palpitations. I swear to God I thought I was having a heart attack and dying. When I got out of the Army, it was like, okay, you've been through a real shitty deal. You had your life before. Then, you went in the Army. So, let's just take this experience, put it in a box, put a bow on it, stuff in the shelf and go on, and that's what I tried to do. I went to college and started working in business and worked my way up. I was drinking, drinking pretty heavy. In a black out, I tried to commit suicide. My wife got the gun away from me, and I woke up the next morning, and she said, "Do you know what you did last night?" And I said, "Nah, not really." And she said, "Well, you were sitting on the deck with a shotgun in your mouth." So, that was a real wakeup call, and I said, "Damn, you know, I got to do something." So, a friend of mine worked for the VA, and he got me into a program. It was sort of a dry out kind of lockdown program for about two weeks, I think it was.

You got a big dilemma when you have coexisting conditions, and mine was alcohol and PTSD. So, I'd dry out for periods of time, and still had the mental issues going on. What I finally came to realize about three years ago was that you really can't deal with things going around in your head while your brain is screwed up, be it drugs or alcohol. So, that's when I really got serious about addressing the issues. It was a great experience to finally get to a VA that did have a more comprehensive PTSD group. I entered it, first of all, sober, and these people really care, and they're professionals, and through certain techniques, cognitive behavioral therapy, to be able to understand why you're having these feelings of guilt, safety, intimacy, all the facets of life really.

I don't feel like I have to be so angry all the time, and I don't feel like I'm threatened as much, and life is so much easier, so much more peaceful existence and you know once I surrendered and say, "Well, you know, you've got..." and you accept it, then you can really start dealing with it. There's no magic wand. There's no magic pill that you can take. You have to put forth the effort, but if you do, the rewards are remarkable.



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

**MAKE THE**  
**CONNECTION**