

Moving past MST to a fulfilling life

Ashley: I'm Ashley. I was in the United States Navy from 2002-2007. I was an air traffic controller, third class, and I was stationed in Florida, Virginia, and San Diego. It was right after September 11th happened. And so, I just decided I wanted to do something where I can get out of my small town and see the world. I ended up going with the air traffic control route and was pretty excited to get into school and do that. It was a pretty cool job. I loved the people. There's people that I met that made an impact on me for a lifetime.

I experienced MST when I was stationed on a LHA, amphibious carrier in San Diego, California. Having that unwanted attention and the informality of the military, it kind of just happens. If somebody went over the line, hopefully you had a pretty good chain of command to discuss those things with to where they can be fixed. Going over to the ship, I didn't have that. So, it was kind of this stigma of you against the man, and everybody was the man. So, there was nobody to talk to about it. I went to report it to my duty officers, and I was not taken. I was acting more of a problem child than anything. And so, ultimately, I ended up trying to hurt myself, and I was pregnant with my son, and I ended up staying a weekend in a hospital, and afterwards, I was discharged, and a week later, I was out. And so, I didn't really get any chance to go through any of like that process, because it was so it was so huge.

A lot of it didn't really hit me until about a year after I got out. The depression kind of just sits there and grows, and you don't really catch it, and the same time, it affects all your relationships. It affects everything. My boyfriend, at the time, he came home from Iraq. And so, I moved up to Idaho. So, I was kind of like out of my safety zone. So, I think it kind of manifested after I was outside of that safety zone, and I had to kind of start over on my own again, and I didn't really know how to do that without the support of my family near. And so, I remember I had a breakdown at home. I called up the VA, and they had triaged, and they got me in that day to talk to somebody, and it kind of started going in this to kind of validating some of the issues that I was having. It really was that step that I took to my treatment, and I did it differently than other people did, but it really was that step of taking my life back and taking the experience and doing something different with it versus hiding it away.

I started just doing mental health outpatient counseling with at the VA Medical Center, and then a few times went over to see about the Women Warrior, and for the longest time, I didn't want to share my story, because I didn't think my story was a story, and now I can. It's not just me who witnessed this or experienced it. It's a lot of other people, and we're finally sitting there saying, "No," and had enough, and we can stand up for ourselves, and I think that's empowering. You hear those stories, and it's a validation that you weren't wrong, but I wouldn't know that if I didn't know the other stories.

I think probably my most utilized resource at the VA though was the Voc Rehab program. When I got in, I wanted to go back to school. I got my degree, my master's degree in social work, and I did do my internships at the VA and the Vet Center. And so, I kind of focused it a lot on Veterans. The advice I would say to somebody who's experienced MST or was in the military would be to get the help that's there. The more you talk about it, the easier it is, and the more you talk about it out loud, the more organized the situation becomes in your head. It's not always going to be an easy ride,



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and there's going to be so many unexpected stones and hurdles that we have to go through, but if we can take that and not let it bring us down but rise us up, we can do extremely wonderful things in the world.



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