

## Opening Up to Family

**Tonya:** Hi, my name is Tonya and I served in the United States Navy from 1994 to 1998 as an Operations Specialist Second Class Petty Officer.

**Ernestine:** Hello, my name is Ernestine and I'm Tonya's mother.

**Tonya:** During service I experienced a military sexual trauma and it affected me greatly because I wrote it down in a diary and that diary was found and spread throughout amongst my peers. I did report what happened to me, but the ramifications of doing that reporting wind up making me feel like I was punished more so than helped.

**Ernestine:** She was an outgoing person, happy, enjoyed life, but when she got back, because she was... kept to herself a lot. And it seems like whenever any kind of confrontation or someone incite any little thing, she would go off and it was like everyone was against her. Also, her kids went through a lot with it too.

**Tonya:** I wouldn't offer to do homework with them. I could care less if they had school plays. I was not attending. I wind up being very depressed and couldn't socialize with anyone. I didn't have any friends. I wouldn't even leave the house for weeks on end because I was so scared of what happened to me. I didn't talk about it. I kept it to myself. I didn't even tell my closest family.

By the time I did begin to tell, it was so many years later, well over a decade later. It was after finding a Veteran Program Manager and she wind up introducing the VA to me and that they offered benefits geared towards women. That's when I began to seek treatment, and began getting help, and then I found a way to begin telling my family. Unfortunately, I didn't tell my mom until a couple years ago. It's been almost 20 years.

**Ernestine:** It hurt me really, really bad that I didn't know about this. Then when I found out, I didn't know what to do myself. I just fell apart, because it was like it's really hurting. And it still does.

**Tonya:** I felt better after I explained it to her. I'm sorry it hurt her so bad, but I felt like finally... to finally take that breath. I did have my kids sit down, even my youngest. I had them sit down, and I explained to them what had happened, and my oldest was like that's why mom was so crazy, made us walk on eggshells for no reason, we get it now, we get it. It feels good to not have my family scared of me anymore.

**Ernestine:** After she told all of this, she was a completely different person. She's getting much, much better.

**Tonya:** Now I do more social things. I just feel better. I feel happier. I actually enjoy being a mom now. Now I go to everything they have going, it's sport-related, I don't care. I'm there.

**Ernestine:** We talk and we go out together, you know, which was good for me because that's what we used to do before she went in the military.

**Tonya:** It's like when I was a little girl, we would do girl things and hair and nails done and let's go to the mall and shop and I missed that. Now that I'm older, I realize that



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

**MAKE THE  
CONNECTION**

she's more than my mom. She's my friend too. And I feel more comfortable now about talking to her about anything. So, thank goodness. I love you, Mom.

I would say to get professional help earlier than later. Tell someone and don't just write it down. Just tell someone, even if it's not a professional. Once you tell that one person, it gets easier to tell more and to get the help that you need.

**Ernestine:** I think the best thing for a mother to do is she going to have to be persistent. Give her all your love that you can give them and be persistent too, just ask, ask, ask, until maybe they get tired of you asking.



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

**MAKE THE**  
**CONNECTION**