

I talked to someone at VA and I'm better for it

Owen: I'm Owen. This November will be 22 years in the military with the U.S. Army. Where I've been... I've been to the Gulf War, been to Panama, been to Afghanistan, been to Iraq.

My tour in Afghanistan, where I got wounded, that affected my mental health. My vehicle was hit by an IED. I was launched from my seat into the ceiling of the vehicle and I broke open a three-quarter inch steel hatch with my hat, well I had my helmet on. I was knocked unconscious, didn't really.... I don't remember the blast, don't remember a lot of anything, and honestly, I never knew anything was wrong with me until I actually came home.

I'd say the biggest thing that I had to deal with was frustration. I couldn't speak right. I didn't know why. I couldn't communicate well. I didn't know why. Everything seemed out of place. Even though military life is a little chaotic at times, it's structured, you know, for a reason. You know what you're gonna do every single day. And when I came home to my wife and my three kids, which is complete chaos and anarchy, you know, I couldn't function very well.

What I didn't know, you know, when I couldn't speak very well is because I have a traumatic brain injury that affects my speech. I couldn't communicate well because I have attention deficit due to my brain injury. I have balance problems due to my brain injury, memory due to my brain injury. And, you know, overseas they... "Hey, he's fine." You know, of course I am fine because I know what I'm going to be doing, but when I come home it is completely different. And it wasn't until a friend of mine, who happens to be a Veteran Affairs Service Officer, he goes, "You know, maybe you should go get it checked out." And was I like, "Oh, what do you mean?" "Go ask them to see if you have a TBI." I was like, "What's a TBI?" And he told me and sure enough, I go to the VA here in Minneapolis and, yup, I got one.

One of the biggest things I felt was frustration with myself because I'm normally very in control of myself and with my brain injury, I just couldn't speak right, I couldn't act right and it was something I couldn't control, so I'd get frustrated with myself and get angry with myself. And whenever my wife would try to help me, I would get angry at her because she was trying to help me. And my kids... you know, the first couple of years was kinda scary for 'em because they wouldn't know what would make me angry and what wouldn't. The best example, my son spilled a cup of water, I didn't say anything to him, I just cleaned it up. My daughter spilled a cup of water and I totally freaked out on her. That's part of the brain injury that, you know, is frustrating because you don't know what it affects and what it doesn't affect, when it's gonna affect, when it's not gonna affect, things like that.

When I got to the VA, you know, I got assigned a general physician and I explained to them what I was going through and then they just started lining me up with the right clinics and I got lined up with the Polytrauma Unit, which means multiple injuries basically. It was there that they diagnosed my TBI. They zeroed in on what exactly is affected. They gave me the right meds to deal with the problems. You know, I started speaking more clearly. I became less frustrated, less angry. And then at the same time, I got to speak to somebody, you know, every month if I want to or more. And talking the problems out probably helped more than anything else.



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I was your typical, you know, soldier where if I say I got a problem that's a sign of weakness, you know. I, you know, the big strong Paratrooper type where, you know, if I admit I have a mental problem then they're going to kick me out. It was like an attack on my manhood if you will. You know, back then I took it serious, now it's just kinda silly. But, you know, talking to my doctor helps. You know, she'll ask me what's going on, I tell her. You know, she'll pick out either key phrases or something, she'll start to talk about that, and then I'll talk, you know, about what she talked about, and you know, by the end of the hour it's just, Oh, okay." You kinda understand what you're going through, and you're able to deal with the situation when it arises again, because it will arise again. Just talking to her has helped me learn how to deal with a lot of the problems I have, cope with a lot of the problems I have. Some of the things I can't change, a lot of the behavioral things I can change, and it's helped me a tremendous deal.

It has been my experience as a Soldier, as a leader of Soldiers, as a member of the Law Enforcement community, as a Veteran, the number one trick, the number one drug, the number one therapy, the number one thing that gets people away from suicide, away from divorce, away from, you know, criminal behavior, away from all the bad stuff is talking to somebody. The VA has untold amount of, you know, number of services and people and all they want to do is help you. It took a lot of swallowing of my pride to go talk to somebody and I did, and I'm better for it.



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