

Even after retiring, Justin still felt on edge

Justin: My name is Justin. I'm retired Army. I did 12 years as a Signal Corps. My job was a 25 a go line of sight. I deployed three times. Over the three deployments, there was no just one significant event that I think gave me PTSD; it was the culmination of three tours. I mean, I took mortars like everybody else. I was on a FOB. I was there for the scuds. We helped detainees carrying dead bodies if we had to. We did what we had to.

On my third tour, I was walking, I remember walking across the field; it was at night and all of a sudden I had this rush over me and I didn't know what was happening. I got scared, I hit the ground. I didn't know what was going on. I had an anxiety attack, but it'd never happened before. I went and talked to somebody and they were like "You'll be okay. Here, take a couple of these and, you know, there you go." I talked to a couple of the, you know, soldiers or other fellow NCOs about it, but we just had to push it to the side.

When I got home is when the effects of PTSD, you know, started really coming out being hypervigilant. I mean, I was drinking. Everybody drinks when they get home, but when you're drinking a 12 pack to 18 beers a night, not showing up to work the next day, you just kind of lose sense of reality. I went through rehab twice. The first time I was just there because the command told me to be there. When my drinking got so out of hand and it wasn't working, I turned to drugs. I started doing cocaine and then finally had a come to Jesus moment and said, "I can't do this anymore." I went back to rehab and I've been drug free since 2009.

I went up to the hospital and I told them that I was having a lot more issues than what I let on. So, anytime I went to talk to a therapist, I just told them what they wanted to hear. It was hurting my family, I was hurting my military service, and they saw that, a lot of them saw that and they even had me moved to a different battalion and everything, and it still didn't work. I finally got moved into a Warrior Transition Unit. The WTU was mainly there just for those soldiers that couldn't deploy but didn't have a regular job. Finally, it came down to me either getting forced out or retirement, and it went in front of the Commanding General and I got retired.

When I got out, I want to say that I was doing better, but I actually got worse. Me and my wife at the time, we lost our apartment, moved in with some friends, and then I lost my job. That's when I finally moved to Houston. And when I moved to Houston, I was living with my parents. I have my child and my wife with me, trying to get a job, and I finally landed one and that's when life started looking up. I actually got in contact with the AW2 project or the Army Wounded Transition Program, and they helped me realize there's certain things that, you're going to have to always remember that you're a Veteran; you can't just suppress it. Once you find a group that you can identify with, you start realizing that you're not the only one out there that wakes up angry, that gets into just a rage for no reason.

I've done counseling sessions when I got out of the military through the VA and with any counselor, you just have to find somebody that you connect with, and I found one in Houston. She helped me realize one, you can have PTSD even though you didn't get blown up, you didn't kill anybody, I mean anybody can develop it. It's not because, I



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mean you're not a less of a person because these guys have lost a limb or they got shot or they got blown up, you can still develop it.

My symptoms from PTSD from when I was first diagnosed until now is, I mean I still have them, I still notice them, just through the counseling you have identifiers that you can initially just think about and you can use your coping mechanisms that they teach you. The hypervigilance is still there but not as bad. I don't have to lock every door in my house three times to know that I'm safe. I don't have a shotgun behind every door anymore.

My daughter, she's my world along with my son. I mean, right now I'm a stay-at-home dad and it's great to wake up with them every day. You know, my wife works. It's challenging, but it's something that I missed. My son, when I left for Iraq and he was eight months old and I get home and he's almost two. And when I got home, he grabbed onto me and he hasn't let go since and my daughter is the same.

Having that connection with my family has been great for me. I mean, when I moved to Houston, I had just my mom and dad and my wife, and then I've met a couple of friends and now I've got 30 people I can call on and that's the importance of getting with not just one organization but many, finding the one that you can make a connection with and grow from there.



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