

Challenges after retiring from a military career

Hugh: My name's Hugh. I retired as a sergeant first class from the U.S. Army. I experienced signs and symptoms of PTSD after my deployment to Panama. I didn't realize it was PTSD, I didn't have to acknowledge that it was PTSD, but during that jump in the following operations, I saw my first dead American soldier which caused a, just instant vomiting. When I came back, I had difficulty sleeping, I was really agitated, what people would call hypervigilant. But I was able to channel all of that in the service. So, within a year, I'm in the desert again for Desert Shield and I was fortunate enough to be a driver of a truck that drove up the Highway of Death, and I still have vivid recollections of that for no reason, there's not necessarily a trigger. There were a lot of events that I didn't realize I remembered until I was out of service.

I did choose to retire at a really expedited rate. I was in, we finished our tour in Baghdad in February of 2007, and I was retired by June. Now, you can't do that anymore and there's some really good reasons why. I waived my physical evaluation; I waived my mental health evaluation. I didn't want to have to explain what I was going through individually and it never really surfaced easily for the first year and a half after I got out, but the problem was I spent twenty years being evaluated on my performance for putting mission first and taking care of others and not necessarily taking care of myself. My kids told me after I got back this time that I wasn't the same dad that left.

I experienced emotional moods for no reason. I can be in the car by myself driving from the house to the grocery store to pick up some insignificant item and be overwhelmed with emotion. You know, I can come home with bloodshot eyes from balling myself in the, you know from crying in the car. I was noticing that I was having a really difficult time staying focused at work, that I was having a hard time physically keeping up for an eight hour to ten-hour day and I'd had some cardiac issues before I retired.

I had been enrolled in and going through the Operation Iraqi Freedom program and part of that program, you get to speak to mental health professionals, and I'll tell you I'm the worst one asking for help myself, but when I was talking to a psychologist, she recognized a need for me to speak to a psychiatrist who then became the best mental health advocate that I've ever experienced. I know what works best for me, which doesn't work best for everybody else, so, if you have to find help, you need to find out what works for you and leverage that until you get to a better place. And it's to bring those people from the edge of their couch that are living in a really bad place where I was, into the light to let them know that there are people in organizations out there that are willing to offer services and programs to help them find a better new normal, because the end goal, the end state is to be a healthy Veteran.



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