

Exposure therapy worked for this Navy Veteran

Summer: My name is Summer and I served eight years in the U.S. Navy as a photographer and videographer. I deployed to Iraq for six months. I was with the Infantry during the whole time, air raids, land raids, just everything. Everything that they do, I had to go with. Women weren't really allowed to be or I still think they're not allowed to be in the front line Infantry, but I was the Combat cameraman assigned to them and it just so happens that I was a girl. And what's always hard in that situation is you walk in the door and you're instantly sized up and judged. "Oh, there's a girl, dead weight." It's just like that. They quickly realized that that's not me. That's definitely not me and the challenge for me was not just keeping up, but stepping my game up to not let those limitations hinder them. I would go out to forward operating bases and stay for a couple weeks at a time to really, A) to build that relationship with them and to kind of challenge that stigma that a cameraman just comes to take their pictures and then they go. They don't really know. They don't really have a taste.

As a result, I did see quite a bit, and at the time, you see the things; it's your job. It's what you do. As the months went on and things just kept piling and piling and piling, I guess there needed to be a breaking point. Something really terrible happened. A couple people died. And it was, when they came back, it was an ugly scene that they brought back. And one of my teammates was out there with them and she came back with some footage that, the blast had jolted her camera and mechanics and everything, so she didn't get much. I had to create a report and so I had to take those seven frames and slow em down. It wasn't just the video, you see, those are my brothers crawling on the ground. Those are my brothers and that's my sister who will never, never be the same. It's just like the world kind of stopped at that moment. But you roll on. It's like, "I have a job to do." So a couple weeks went by. I did take some leave. I come back to the command.

I was having issues with proximity of people coming close to me or loud sounds and stuff. That's when I took a step back and, on my own volition, I went and started talking to somebody. What was prescribed to me was something called, I think, it's Exposure Therapy where you take one event and I guess, the heaviest, the most painful one and he forces you to talk through it. You want to get mad, but he's just trying to help you. I wanted so much to feel again that I was willing to do whatever it would take to do it. So that was our treatment; was the repetitive exposure and talking it through and forcing myself to emotionally experience it. Through that structure, through his guidance, I was, he started me on the path of moving through it.

When I first got out, I moved back in with my family. It was not an easy time. Unemployed for a long time. Moving in with your parents. It's just, I didn't take an active role in going to the VA and getting started there again. I was offered a job out in Tampa in Florida; first job offer I had gotten since getting out. I registered with the VA here and immediately said, "Okay, I need to get in with the mental health clinic," and met with a civilian doctor; sat with him and I told him all the things that we had done, that I had done with the other fellow and he said, "I think that that's exactly what we need to continue," Exposure Therapy and medication for anxiety. That in tandem got us to a point where I could actually talk about it. To me, that's success. Being able to then take an overseas assignment to Afghanistan to teach video productions and broadcast journalism to Afghans in a combat zone. I count that as a success and I attribute a lot, a lot of that to the very intense treatment that I did receive at the VA. I can have a conversation. I can



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make friends. I can talk about things that are hard. Yes, I get a little, my heart starts to get a little heavy when I talk about it, but it has taught me how to move through that emotion. You have to think about, "Is this what I want my life to be like, this very moment for the rest of my life?" You need to get help and that takes a good hard look in the mirror. You can find happiness. You can find joy. You can find relief. It's for your own good. It's for your family's good. It's for your community's good. It's for your country's good.



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