

Effective therapy leads to a new outlook

Omar: My name is Omar and I served in Iraq from 2003 to 2004. I was in the Army. My job in the Army was Infantry. I started off as a machine gunner, dismount in a mounted mechanized unit. This one particular day I think we took like 22 casualties; that was pretty intense.

When I first got off the C-5 in Germany, when I first got out of Iraq and that door opened, I never thought I could smell clean air, but you can smell clean air and that was pretty amazing. The honeymoon didn't last too long though. I mean, you know, if my girlfriend at the time had dropped some pan or something in the kitchen, I would kind of dive behind something. I still lived on a military post, so sometimes the artillery guys would be firing their rounds and that sounds a lot like, you know, mortar rounds. I did not like being there immediately coming back. I had hurt my back and it kept getting worse; it didn't ever get better. I had this girlfriend, a German girl, who I kind of met, you know, before I deployed. The marriage was really nice at first, but I was still in a very go, go, go kind of mentality. I felt like I was doing it all for her, but she didn't ever feel that that was the case. It was that I was always out doing stuff and I wouldn't understand why she wouldn't understand that, and so there was always a disconnect there.

I decided to get out school and go back into the military. It was easier. It was more structured. If my wife needed support, she would be able to have it. There would be other military wives there. I mean, it seemed like the perfect situation. So I went back in. Alaska was my next duty station. She took our son to Germany and kind of basically told me, "Look, I can't do this anymore, not right now. I need to take a break and, you know, we'll work things out." That's what she said and she never came back.

I reached out to the VA. I was like, "You know what? I just had this back surgery. I'm walking around with a cane right now and it's pretty difficult for me to find work. What can I do?" And they were like, "Hey, why don't you, you did get injured in the military. Why don't you try vocational rehabilitation?" So I started working with a VA counselor there, an education counselor, and slowly I got enrolled at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, but in the back of my mind, you know, I still had to work through a lot of the issues that I had from before.

The times where I really started reaching out to the VA for mental health was actually when I moved down here to San Francisco. You really do have to hash out what has happened, go back, write about it, like write about it, write about it again and read it 30 times, like, yeah, it's not fun, it's not. But it has helped me not react to those stimuli, those memories the way that I used to. Probably the biggest symptom that I've noticed a change in would be my temperament. Before, I had no patience whatsoever, like no patience whatsoever. It's supposed to happen, it's supposed to happen now, and I think that's an Army mentality. Slowing down, you know, not having as many anger issues, not letting things get to me. I have a lot of forward momentum, a lot of purpose and meaning. I always thought I could deal with whatever it was on my own, just go do your mission, go, go, go. You're never alone and it helps so much when you can hear that from other people that have been in your shoes.



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