I realized I didn't want to live like that

Gus: My name's Gus. I was an Army Infantryman and I graduated from West Point, joined the Infantry and served from 2004 to 2009. My dad served, my uncle served, both my aunts served, and so it's a very military family, and so I wanted to enlist too. So, I applied to West Point, got in and, you know, never looked back.

I noticed the mental health issues mostly when I got out of the service and I noticed it in three ways. One way was anger. One way was, you know, call it crying… just bouts of crying that came on out of nowhere, just being overwhelmed with emotion. And the third way was nightmares and just having a lot of trouble sleeping.

When I got out, the anger manifested in real unhealthy ways. So, you know, I remember people would notice sometimes the anger come up and I was a little bit too intense, a little bit too aggressive, and they would mention that, you know, "You might need to tone it down a little bit." I didn't have my emotions under control, I didn't have my anger under control, and, you know, it was damaging not only to other people but to myself.
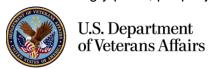
Any kind of little reminder of a service, you know, a jet or you would see an American flag or I might, you know, see somebody in camouflage, you know, don't mention military movies or anything like that, and I would just get very, very emotional.

They had built out, in my high school this color guard, it was a really fantastic color guard and they had, you know, Cadets which were teenagers right, 14 to you know 16, 18. And they had Cadets dress up in uniforms and period gear from every war that America had ever been a part of. So, the first thing that hit me was, how young everyone was. It made me think of all the young people that had given their lives in service to the country since the founding. And it just kinda overwhelmed me as it does obviously today still. And I just took off and I went and kinda looked, you know, but I took off and I ran to the bathroom and just kinda sittin' in a stall and let it out. I started crying, you know, and tried to get a hold of myself. At the time I had no idea where it was coming from. I was like, "Why am I getting overwhelmed so easily?"

I just couldn't sleep. I would sit in bed and, you know, my mind would just be racing. It wouldn't necessarily be military thoughts, but I couldn't sleep. And then when I would fall asleep, I would have nightmares. Most of it was having to go back to Iraq that was like my main kinda nightmare like, "Oh, I'm gonna get called back for IRR and have to go back." So those three things; the anger, the being overwhelmed with emotion, and the nightmares. I realized I didn't want to live like that.

I spent the next, you know, two years in kinda this talk therapy with the Vet Center psychologist. I was telling him just about all of my symptoms with the anger, with being overwhelmed, you know, my emotional, crying, not sleeping, and he recommended thinking about meditation. It's helped me get some detachment from the emotions and it's helped me kinda of just be calm. It gives you some distance. You can see the anger coming up and you don't have to act on it, and then if you think about it, and you watch it, it just goes away.

You know, when you respond to people with anger, you respond from a place of anger, you get that back. And so now when I'm trying to, you know, be more… respond from less of an angry place, people just respond so much more positively to you. And then if I

find myself… hey I'm having trouble sleeping or I'm having trouble, you know, I'm getting overwhelmed or I'm getting angry, what is almost always the case is, I haven't meditated enough, I haven't exercised enough, I am drinking too much. And as soon as I do one of those, it helps. If you're not sleeping, if you're feeling angry, if you're getting overwhelmed with your emotions, then absolutely go to a Vet Center and talk to somebody, because it is so helpful.