

Gage's physical and mental health were connected

Gage: My name's Gage, I joined the Air Force in 1985. I served from 1985 to 2000, I took an eight-year break at which point I was a firefighter EMT for a while, and then I came back in 2008 and I just recently retired New Year's Eve 2015. I used to be in incredible shape. I was that old guy that could make fun, you know, that old sergeant that could make fun of my younger guys, you know, and I had the eight-pack going on and everything and I started noticing changes in my hands, pain in my hands, started getting some very rapid onset of, you know, duty-related arthritis.

One night I was pre-deployment training getting ready to go back to the Middle East and I woke up one night in the worst pain I've ever been in my life. My hand was about the size of a softball, I couldn't support the weight of my head with my neck, I couldn't walk on my right foot, my right jaw was in a mass amount of pain and all clenched and basically my immune system was attacking my body. When that hand swelled up so badly, it tore my joint apart. That was the beginning to the end of my career. I knew right then I was going to be in a world of hurt because I wasn't going to work for six months while they were just trying to get this autoimmune thing under control.

The first six months were harsh. I spent my first 45 days pretty much in bed. I lost 26 pounds of muscle mass in, like, 20, 30 days. I took that very hard because I worked very hard. I used to be the rail-thin guy that was always picked on, then all of a sudden one day I woke up and I was overweight and I worked in the gym and I accomplished what I wanted to accomplish. I was in great shape and, I mean, to me that was devastating, losing my physical stature. I'd go for days where I wouldn't eat, I'd go for days where all I'd do is binge eat. I couldn't get it under control and I became a prisoner in my own home, extremely lonely and extremely angry, extremely fearful.

I found a lot of solace in talking to my friends. I found a lot of solace in volunteer work and trying to help other vets. You know, I like seeing my parents every Sunday. I've recently got back involved in my church. That really helps. Every morning I take my dog for a walk, which is right behind the VA, and there's always some old vets and I try to seek them out and talk to them, let them pet my dog, you know, I try to do that. That helps. I think it's the reconnection with other vets that helps me the most.

I've just recently gone back to work. it doesn't pay anything, it's backbreaking hard work, but I'm on a team and that makes me feel good and at the end of the day I'm, like, "Wow, I did a lot of stuff today," you know, so I'm proud. I keep hearing my Dad and my grandfather talk in my head about, you know, a good, hard, honest day's work. That helps.

I think it's important for me to tell my story because there's a lot of people out there ready to give up. There's a lot of guys who are hurting. It doesn't matter how beat down you are, if you can still breathe, man, just keep getting up. Like I said, if your teeth get knocked out swallow them, get back up, keep getting up. If I could do one thing that would help one person not give up, I'd feel pretty good about it.



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