

Army Veteran learns to manage TBI symptoms

Tom: My name's Tom. I served with the 101st Airborne Division in the United States Army from 2003 to 2006. I was in Iraq before I was in active duty military for three weeks, so I just went to Fort Campbell long enough to get my desert issues and left. There was routes that you know, is inevitable. You knew you were gonna get hit and it was just a matter of if you were gonna live or if you were gonna die. And I got hit with two big mortar rounds in an old hole that knocked me out. Nothing hit my head physically, but the shockwaves didn't stop at one side of my Kevlar and go to the other. It shook my brain around. And I'm not a brain Doctor, but if you moved a little bit, you can really mess some things up. It wasn't till after I got out I started having vertigo, a lot of trouble with cognition, and sensitivity to light. I'd be driving if the sun was out or if there was snow, it was like I'd get tunnel vision and almost like a white out. And it was starting to scare me a while, and then the other things I found out too, a lot of folks with head injuries will sit with their head tilted to one side. Or they'll read with one eye. And I was doing all of those and just simple tasks were now, it was new to me. I didn't see it as a disability. I didn't know what it was.

When I first enrolled in VA healthcare, I believe, it was 2007. I came back with that mentality, drink water and drive on. I was — let someone else who needs it more than me get the treatment. And that kind of mentality that is all too familiar. My first primary care Doctor at the Ann Arbor VA was a retired Marine. He fought in Vietnam. He really helped me out and he recognized the brain injury from the blast. He spent a lot of time talking with me, one-one-one. I was just fortunate enough to come across some very good people and they introduced me to brand new shiny Craftsman tool box- you know, like breathing reiterations. When I first felt that first breathing treatment, we went through it for a while and like I said, I was reluctant, but I felt it, and after time I got to where I could just instead of sitting down and trying to get there for 10 or 15 minutes, I would just tap right in.

A lot of memory stuff, a lot of talking about your anger, and self-talk, a lot of the way you'd word things, just a hundred small steps to equal to a greater goal at the end.

PTS is like a snowflake, you know. It's different on everybody that it touches. But there is a lot of familiar things with Vets. You know, a lot of us that were there had combat MOS's and were outside the wires, rockets, mortars, fireworks, it relates a lot to loud noises. I've learned a lot more about the PTS and you know, different symptoms that come with it. My family knows my triggers. I don't want them walking on egg shells around me but I know there are little things like my wife announcing before she comes into a room sometimes when she knows I am high strung or my service dog, he knows when I am uneasy. He will jump up in bed and rest his head on my chest.

You have to be able to look into yourself and know yeah I am having issues. I can guarantee without a doubt if they go untreated they are going to just keep piling up on one another. Our country has always stood behind and willing to take care of our folks coming home whether it is the VA, Civilian sector, there are groups out there. You just have to find a good support network and throw all of your issues on the table and just be opened minded enough to let the professionals sort it.



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