

## Losing my friends is always on my mind

**Marcos:** My name is Marcos. I was a Marine and I was an Infantryman while I was in. I served three tours in Iraq. First appointment was during the invasion and it was really just, everything happens so fast and just coming straight out of Infantry School being exposed to combat right off the bat was definitely a shock, but things were moving at such a fast pace, I really didn't have time to think about anything. I think after my third deployment, I lost two buddies of mine that were in my squad, to a suicide bomber. It really made me question really the importance of life and also how things can end really quickly. I had been talking to them one minute, and literally, you know, about 20 seconds later, they're gone. And I think a lot of what was on my mind was that, you know, we had plans when we got out. We were going to go to school together. We were going to maybe get an apartment together and just live life, you know, and in a shadow of an instant, that's gone.

Especially coming from Infantry background where you're out, you know 24/7, patrols, whatever the case is. It was very difficult for me to comprehend that I could go outside of my house at, you know, 2 or 3 in the morning without a weapon and be able to walk the streets and nothing was going on. I could hear a pin drop man. It was very unsettling. The peace was very unsettling; you know, just trying to get used to not having a schedule, not having someone to answer to, not having people under me that are looking for leadership or guidance or whatever the case. I think that was probably one of the biggest issues, just not having a direction. At the time, I really didn't know what PTSD was or any of these mental issues that, you know, are now very, you know, they're out in the media and very popularized. I think everything relating to my PTSD was pointed out by somebody else, either a friend or a family member only because the way I reacted to situations was very aggressive and the military, especially in the Infantry when you're out on the street, you're taught to, you know, escalation of force, to escalate situations and that's how I would view my situation, my relationships while I was in the States as a civilian. So, that's how I would go from 0 to 60 and my voice would be at what most would perceive a yell. So, people would ask me, "Why are you getting so mad?" And I'm like, "I'm not mad. This is just how I talk." So, I was completely oblivious to any of that.

One of the things that I was dealing with and still is an issue today is being around groups of people. Obviously if you're going on a school campus, it's kind of hard not to be around groups of people and I felt that I couldn't go anywhere with having my back exposed, you know, with people walking behind me that I didn't know. So, I often, you know, turn around, check as we say in the military, you know, "checking my six," making sure that nothing shady was going on behind me.

My self-medication was riding motorcycles, you know, it's pretty much a cliché, you know, Marine fast motorcycle, whatever the case. So, that's how I dealt with it and, you know, I was dealing with it. I was going 120 down the street, on a public street and made a wrong move and went down pretty hard, probably at 80 mph and as I'm laying there on my back, at that point, I'm starting to realize, like all these things that are going on; my aggressiveness toward others, me yelling, me staying up at all hours of the night, partying, just really dangerous behavior. I noticed that there might be something going on, but still at this point, I'm really ignorant to what it is. I just know that something's going on. I'm not like everybody else, and it's not just because I was in the military or



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whatever, but my experiences might have played a part in some way, shape or form to how I'm acting now which is becoming self-destructive.

I was in school and, you know, I had a few situations there where there were a lot of ignorant students to what was going on out in the world and the comment had been made, "Iraq and Afghanistan, I didn't even know that was going on anymore." And I just completely lost it and walked out of the class and, you know, didn't go back that semester. I'm 22-years-old, you know, been through three combat deployments, seen friends go, had a lot of close calls myself, and now I'm here sitting in a classroom with people that don't really respect the teachers and are talking out of turn and that kind of thing was playing into my PTSD so much, it was making it hard to learn. So, I hear about a Vet Center that's close to me, Gardena, California. So, I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to go check it out." And while I'm there, I start talking to combat Veterans and talking to other vets that I was working with and start realizing that a lot of the symptoms that these people are dealing with, I'm dealing with as well and I'm starting to learn a little bit more about what this PTSD thing is and I start noticing that by working at the Vet Center, by being around these clinicians and speaking with other vets that have gotten help before, it was starting to help me.

It really saved my life because I really, at that point, you know, was probably at a really low time in my life because again, I didn't have that physical strength that I was used to in the Marines and still dealing with this aggression, this really unshaped aggression that I didn't really know where it was coming from and then dealing with the loss of my friends as well. So, it was nice to be able to get in, speak with other combat Veterans and then reassuring me that you know what, "There are others going through this as well." So, it was a really positive experience and encouraged me to continue to seek counseling. And after I started receiving counseling through the Vet Center, I was able to better recognize my triggers. Now was I completely able to erase all the symptoms of PTSD? Absolutely not, but I didn't let them get to a ten. I was able to spot them at maybe a level 2 or 3. So, I was able to understand, "You know what, I better step aside, take a breather, walk away. Is this situation really worth it? Is it really worth arguing over, making a scene in, you know, a public setting?" I don't have to escalate the situation as I did in the past. I can now accept it and move forward knowing that it doesn't have any bearing on my life and I can just continue on.

When you're separating from the military, your mission is to transition as successfully and issue-free as possible. Your mission now is to take care of yourself, to perform that preventative maintenance, whether that be going to the VA Medical Center or going to the Vet Center, but just put the check in the box, you know, go get checked out.

I lost two friends this year to suicides and, you know, it's probably the most heart-breaking thing because you're right there, but your friends don't feel that they can reach out or they have somebody to reach out to. So, it's important for not only Veterans to reach out to other Veterans, but if there is an issue, make it known. Confide in either another Veteran that you know or come out and seek professional counseling. I know myself; it's helped me. It's helped a lot of my friends that had been going through the same exact issues, to be able to get out and seek counseling, speak to their friends and if you're not comfortable speaking to a friend or family member, then come to the Vet Center or come to the VA.



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