

This Navy Veteran stopped hiding his problems

Ponce: My name is Ponce, U.S. Navy, I served in various places from July 1988 until December 2011. Some of the things that I pushed down initially was really the fear of some of the operations that we did and under the austere environments which we were in. That manifested itself in a lot of different ways.

I was very fortunate. A Navy chaplain was the one that guided me and said “Let’s talk about it.” The things that he saw I think was my meter in how I talk. I was very sullen, dull, flat-lined. Definitely the constant gazing around as if there were a threat and we’re just talking to one another and the complete almost depletion of just basic self-confidence. Not to be melodramatic but it became very clear that he had convinced me, at that moment, “You want to seek some help?” and I think I was really at the end of my rope and I went “Yeah.”

Mine was a combined therapy. It was medical as well as therapeutic. One of the first things that they do is they remove you. Frankly, they place you in what’s called LIMDU or Limited Duty for about 180 days and that’s when they triage. They give an assessment of what’s going on there and then you’re reevaluated at about maybe the 90 day part by doctors and they actually have a Medical Board to see how you’re tracking and how you’re coming along. In my case at that time I was found fit for full duty again and I resumed my career.

You think “Okay, now I’m fixed and I’m good.” And so you say “I don’t need this therapy anymore.” Right? But you haven’t found a lot of those coping skills or you may have another incident that then you find yourself not able to deal with those things or you don’t have the mechanics or instruments to do so.

What I found myself then, I became better at masking it. It was completely counter intuitive at the end of my career and that’s when it really came to a head, because it’s compounded. Some of the military experiences, now you have your internal experiences, and now the external experiences because you’re not out there deployed on the front line. It came to a head and resulted in me having to actively seek assistance with specifically the Department of Veterans Affairs.

They have what’s called the Vet Centers. The Vet Centers are one more tool in Mental Health in which in my case, you would go to six to eight weeks whether it would be group counseling, individual counseling, and individual assessment. It’s free so there was not a hindrance there. And what’s really important as well is if I find that I’m in a situation because of some of my conditions, I feel free and know where I can go to get an answer. I don’t have to self-medicate, I don’t have to self-loathe. I can acknowledge “You know, I’m not feeling comfortable here and this is the reason why.” And then be able to use some of those coping mechanisms to right-size myself.

At the time, some of the stigmas that I had concerns about was would I be derailed of my professional career? Would I lose my security clearance? Would I be seen as someone who’s faking? Of course on Active Duty that was a very real concern and might I add it’s still a very real concern for some of the people that I still interact with that are on Active Duty. But of course what I share with them is “Listen, it’s normal. There isn’t a stigma attached to it. It’s better to be healthy. Reach out to the Veterans



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Administration and seek help.” It’s fun out here. It’s okay. Things happen but you can recover and we’re here to help you.



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