

## Recovering from physical and emotional wounds

**Steven:** My name is Steven, a United States Marine. I was stationed in Okinawa, Japan, went to Camp Lejeune and then from there when to Iraq in 2005, did convoy security and route clearance for IEDs out there, and found a lot of IEDs and one finally got me. I woke up at the Naval hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. Still to this day I don't know exactly what happened. They said I was conscious but I don't remember anything. That was difficult, but it was also difficult because I woke up and my hands are tied down to the bed, I have tubes all in my mouth, I can partially see, I don't know where I'm at. That probably for me was the most scariest moment of— just the confusion, hopelessness, and then my parents came in the room and I just started crying, and I felt defeated, I felt weak. I felt like I'd let everybody down. I was around a bunch of guys that were lost legs, limbs. The hidden wounds you knew they were there but you still didn't talk about it.

I went to go see a Navy counselor there. He'd come in and, "Hey, so how are you feeling?" "I don't know, I'm feeling fine." "Oh, how are you sleeping?" "I guess I'm sleeping fine, I don't know." "How's your sex life?" "Wait—why are you asking me this? What—why are you asking me this stuff?" And he was like, "Well, I need to get to know you," so it was a lot different. This guy wasn't just sitting there telling you that something's wrong with you. This is letting us figure it out for ourselves, and he said, "Okay, well hey, why don't we go out to lunch one day," and so we go out to a mall. He said, "We're going to go to the food court," and I said "Nope, not going in there." Because you start to feel—you get that feeling where your chest starts getting tight, you're having trouble breathing, you start sweating a little bit, and that's the, I guess you could call it a panic attack but it's the symptom, one of the symptoms of PTSD and you start feeling it. And he said "All right, well, we don't have to go in there," but he would keep bringing me back to the same place, and slowly I'd be able to go in there and the term for all that was exposure therapy, which really helped me out.

I still have problems sleeping, I still get the nightmares, I still get the intrusive thoughts, but being able to talk to other Veterans, that's the way that I heal, because I'm constantly getting it out of me. We're always given an objective, we're always given a mission. When we come back, we don't have that, and so we feel lost. We don't have direction, so what I did was I started volunteering at the VA. I started becoming a part of military organizations.

I can go watch movies and sit with a crowd all around me. Do I get the tingles? Yeah, I get the tingles and I still kind of look around and check around but I almost feel like—y—I still feel, I feel safe, I feel like if something happens I'm the guy who's going to do something about it. I can drive, I can get out and talk to new people, which before you just didn't. You kept to yourself because you felt like people were judging you. You can't sit around and blame the military, you can't blame your injuries, you can't blame the enemy, you can't blame the VA, you've got to be proactive. You've got to do something about it. You've got to reach out.



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