

## You don't have to face your challenges alone

**Oral:** My name is Oral, United States Air Force. I served '75 to '76 in Malmstrom Air Force Base. I went in the Military voluntarily. It was, you know, pushing myself beyond where I thought I could go. I seemed to be very easily hurt and, you know, took things pretty hard in relationships, and it affected my ability to perform, you know, in the Military. Had problems with alcohol and I was trying to cover those feelings, and at that time I think I was offered some sort of mental health treatment but there was a huge stigma with the concept of going to the psych, so, you know, in my ego I just dealt with it myself, you know, pass me another beer.

Well, most of the issues that I was feeling at that time were related to depression. It was after I, you know, was honorably discharged that I had some issues readjusting. I had to refocus my direction, and I found that it was very uncomfortable for me to be around civilians because they just seemed very lax and civilian life just didn't seem as structured as I would like it to be, and there was also a certain amount of respect I was kinda seeking because I had been in the Military, and it didn't really seem to matter to most civilians.

The point I had to truly deal with it was when my mother passed, November 30<sup>th</sup> of 2000, and that's when everything that I had inside of me actually just collapsed, and I attempted to drink and drug myself to oblivion until I found no more sources to be able to continue to do that, and that is when I said, "I need to go to the hospital." Nobody told me when I got out that I was eligible to go to the VA. It wasn't until, I think, 1982 or 83 that I just happened to run across somebody who said, "Why don't you go to the VA?" I was at that point where I was gonna do something to myself more than likely, one way or the other, if I didn't get some help. That's when I headed to the VA in Chicago.

When I got to the hospital they quickly got me in. They settled me down, I got the evaluation to help and they sent me from the downtown location once I completed that initial dual diagnosis program to an extended program in the North Chicago VA where I spent, I think, another 30 or 45 days there. Then they got me housing in a clean and sober environment and then let me know that it was okay, that you're getting the help, as long as you continue coming you're going to get the help and you're going to get better, and I had never heard that before.

Dual diagnosis is a program that's set up to not only address issues with drug or alcohol abuse or dependency, but also with any kind of mental health issues, bipolar, schizophrenia, depression, because when I drank and drugged I altered my chemistry itself, so that's one of the main things that they focus on, but they address both issues. Parts of the program were uncomfortable, because you're allowed to open up portions of yourself that you've never really opened up to anybody, and there's a defense mechanism that I always had about what's mine and what belongs to me and what belongs out in the open. And for me to lower that wall took a process, but once I lowered that wall there was a relief. I didn't have to carry some of this baggage around, all my life holding it in and now I had it released out and I didn't have to suffer through it anymore.

I began to interact with my Counselor and it seemed like on a personal level, where you have somebody you can trust, they can give you advice, suggestions, and I can either take them or leave them, but it's coming from a third party, a neutral observer. But it took, for me, I had to go all the way to that point of that jumping off point, for me to say



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“Okay, I either die or I get some help,” and the door was open. There was no stigma. You’re surrounded by other Vets. They have the same if not same or similar situations going on in their lives, that you can relate to. And then with your one on ones you meet people that are trained in not only helping you with whatever you’re going through, so they’re there to help, and I didn’t know that those people even existed.

If it wasn’t for the VA I don’t know if I’d be sitting here talking to you. Probably not, but I went, and I got the treatment and the help I needed, and now my life’s completely different. I have a new family now, I have a nine-month-old baby girl, Oral Anne, and she’s growing fast, and so my life has changed but there’re agencies that helped us. There’s a roadmap, there’s a way to get there, and if you decide that you’re tired of living in that confusion, in that mayhem, and my life seems unmanageable, the only thing I had to do was just go ahead and ask for the help, and it was there. I encourage anybody that’s going through any type of issue, whether small or large, just come on in, just come on in. Ask a few questions. Sit down and talk to somebody for a minute. You’d be surprised.



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