

Finding strength through reaching out

Don: My name's Don. I'm a former helicopter pilot and infantry grunt. I was in the Army from 1963 until 1970 and I spent my combat time flying helicopters in Vietnam. I would take guys out on combat assaults or out on operations and they were clean and they were my age and they had nice uniforms on, and then I'd go pick them up, only I wouldn't pick them up alive they'd be dead, and sometimes it would be 3 days, sometimes 5 days and we'd go out with body bags, and recover the bodies and I must have done that in excess of 100 times, and it just came into my sleep, it just dominated everything.

When I got out of the Army I was trying to find a job, and I didn't know what to do. The only skill I had was flying helicopters and got rejected because the market was flooded with pilots just like me, and I would go out and drink and then I would go out and drink some more and then I discovered that drinking and alcohol anesthetized me so much that I didn't dream anymore and I didn't see the body bags and I didn't see the remains and I didn't hear the screams of the wounded. So essentially, I just started drinking and kept doing that for over 20 years. I finally got a job in the grocery business and I was really good at that and I could do that and still drink, not on the job, but when I was off, I got married for a second time and my wife said, "You've got to quit drinking."

So, I went to a program, a civilian program. I stayed sober for 3 days. I went another time and stayed sober for 7 days, then I got fired from my job. I had to leave my home. I became homeless. I was in jail. I was drunk and I got detoxed, and I said, "I have no place to live, what do I do?" And this lady said, "Try the Veterans Hospital." I went to the VA Hospital and that saved my life.

I was in inpatient for 30 days in the hospital, and then in outpatient with the Addictions Treatment Unit, and that was when I was diagnosed with PTSD. From that point forward it's been great. It was a lot of hard work though, a year and a half it took before I got a discharge. As sick as I was, I couldn't do it alone. We all had to participate and myself getting sober and my recovery and I don't believe anyone can ever do that unless they do participate. There's no pill, there's no magic wand, it takes work.

In treatment, I have had essentially two main types, one is individual therapy where you're in a room with a psychologist or a psychiatrist and you're talking about the pain in your life, and how to adjust, how to fix that pain. In groups therapy it's even, it's more, it's more intensive, but it's better because you're in a group of people that are just like you, male or female, old or young, they have an addiction. They have posttraumatic stress disorder and you talk about it and you suggest this and in that way myself as an individual I get to see how I can change my life.

So, in 1991 or 1990 I'm admitted to the hospital. In 1997 I graduated with honors with a degree in creative writing. I'm reunited with my son. I'm back in my own home. I'm reinstated to my job, and my sobriety date I had my last drink March 7, 1991. You will find with treatment your whole life changes. You'll learn what happy actually means. It's just, it's just incredible.



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