

Healthy ways to channel buried grief

Joe: Joe, United States Marine Corps, stayed in there for 17 years. Never really left the Marine Corps, just kind of stayed with it the whole time, even when I was out, I did a couple special projects. Came back into it right after September 11th matter of fact. Came back in to go over to Iraq. My experiences, for when it came down to the combat experience, was actually before that because before I actually got back in I was an Activated Reservist. That's how I got back into the Marine Corps.

When I was an Activated Reservist trying to get back into active duty, I actually did Mortuary Affairs for a year. So, I end up getting there and their like, "Well you're the senior man, so you're in charge. Well, we're a year backlogged on getting personal effects to families and to different people." I'm like, "What do you mean personal effects? Like what are we dealing with here?" Personal effects are basically anything that you have on your body in combat and anything you bring to combat is your personal effects. I've never done this before; I was a mechanic. Tell me to get a wrench and replace a blower or a turbocharger, I'm there with you. Tell me to go grab someone's remains and somehow successfully and professionally prepare this for their mom and dad to look at 'em was... who trains for that?

The hardest part of that job is what people don't understand is we were taking care of other people and we were so worried about taking care of the family and the person, we were so busy, we were so involved that we forgot about us.

When I came back, I didn't even really know I had a problem. I mean, I guess I did know but I, you know, typical Marine Corps fashion, I don't have a problem. I'm a leader, I lead, leaders don't have problems, leaders get over it, we drink water, we suck it up, we're gonna keep going. Biggest thing I found was I started gettin upset, I'd just get angry. I'd get angry about being upset. So, then you start burying your emotions through anger. I actually went and they did the post-health deployment, then went down to the VA and they asked a couple questions. And I remember we talked about the Mortuary Affairs side, and they were like "You did what? And then you went where? We didn't know you did this. Had we known you did this, we probably wouldn't have sent you to Iraq, we would have put you in a different area." So, they said "Hey, you gotta go get help. Would you take a referral to go get help?"

The mental health side of it was good in the fact that, you know, they did say "Hey, you're not a problem, you have a problem. We can fix this problem. We can get through this problem. Let us help you. It's not gonna go away. Quit trying to forget it. Quit trying to act like it didn't happen." And because it's not going away, it doesn't mean I can't keep working on it. And it doesn't mean that I have to be the guy that tells my story to everybody, it's okay to be quiet. But it's also okay to know that you have somebody that when you want to speak, they're there to hear you. You've gotta find someone, and a counselor's great. A counselor will listen to you. They're here to hear your story.

Like I said, anyone who has PTSD knows what you deal with. It's okay, you're normal, you're fine. Don't be afraid to let the anger go. Don't be afraid to let the other emotions come in. Yeah, it's overwhelming because they're all going to hit you at once. And that's what happens. I know what it's like to cry, I know what it's like to laugh, I know what it's like to be frustrated, and I understand what anger is. And I know how to be all for these emotions when I need to be these emotions. I'm a happy person today. I can



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smile, I can laugh. I have bad days. I have horrible days. Everybody does. But our great days are great.



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