

Recovery for the whole family

Debbie: My name is Debbie. I'm a military daughter, military wife and probably a military mother as well as a VA nurse. My dad was a fun-loving guy, constantly in trouble, and so he went in the military to try to get some responsibility, I guess. Then my dad started getting sent on these deployments and he would come back different every time, and so he got gradually more and more angry, and we didn't really understand what was going on. He wasn't any fun anymore and he didn't like to go to crowded places and he would startle really, really easily.

I met my husband in 1994. We got married and he was a fun-loving guy, and then as time progressed he started going on all these deployments and I started seeing a pattern and I saw the pattern getting worse and worse and him not getting any help, and we lived four hours from the base, so we didn't have that support group that you have when you're active duty, so that made a big difference. He was being sent on all these missions down to South America, and when he was doing those he would be gone for a few days and he would come back, and he couldn't tell me what he was doing, and so I didn't really understand that he was going out and he was collecting dead bodies, or seeing situations that were, frightening, and he really was in fear of his life, and then he would come home and he would have dinner with the family status quo, everything was normal.

Rather than talking to me or somebody else about it he waited and just kind of stuffed it all in there, and then later he started getting more and more upset. He abused drugs and alcohol for a little while, especially when his dad died. One day I woke up with him literally on top of me with his fist in my face saying, "I'm going to kill you." Another day I found him wandering around in the kitchen and I didn't really know what he was doing, so I asked him and he said, "I'm looking for a knife so I can get them." It was really scary because we had at that point three little kids that were under six years old in the house. I knew what it was like to be a kid going through that, and I wanted my kids to have...I know there's no such thing as normal, and that's okay, but I wanted them to have a well-adjusted family.

My Dad eventually talked to some other veterans. When he saw Jim started having trouble then he was very supportive. He said, "You need to make a difference for my grandchildren, and you need to take the steps that I wasn't strong enough to take." Jim waited ten years. He was very worried about what the other guys would think, and worried about he should be strong enough to handle this, and when he realized that his whole family was carrying the burden, that really made a difference. After a while I think he kind of put the pieces together, and once he started getting help, I think it surprised him how quickly he turned around.

He's doing much better. The anger's down, the making unreasonable decisions and trying to force everybody to go along with him is down. I think with PTSD or with any form of mental health depression, any of those things, it's very hard sometimes for the spouse to just step back and understand, and so it's nice to have a support person who can just kind of tell you "You're doing the right thing here," or "Back off a little there," and to help you to work through that.

His VA counselor has been probably the single reason our marriage is still together and that we've made it to 18 years. They have situations where they can take your family for



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a short period and just walk through what is PTSD, and that has been really helpful for my children to understand what PTSD is, how it affects you, how a lot of times there's depression or other mental health issues going on simultaneously.

My family uses the Raleigh Vet Center for personal as well as marriage, as well as family counseling, and we also are really adamant about using any of the support groups and picnics and different things that they have to where we can network with other veterans, and my husband goes to the VA for all his medical needs. It's not about courage, it's about being smart, doing the smart thing, not just the brave thing.



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