

Overcoming anxiety and panic decades later

Nick: My name is Nick. I was in the Army Security Agency. It was from 1968-1974. I was stationed in Germany, Herzogenaurach, for 18 months and Vietnam through 1971, and then I taught at the security school up at Fort Devens for three years.

When I first got to Vietnam, we were under attack that first night, and I was sleeping and they had to get us on alert and put us into a concrete bunker. While I was sleeping, I didn't even hear the alert go off, but the staff sergeant that was there with me, he grabbed me and led the way to where we were supposed to go. And when we got into the, concrete bunker, it was very musky, hot, and it was overcrowded. That was the first kind of time I felt the twinge of getting anxiety, if you will. The next time I experienced it was when I was up in North, in Fubi. During that period of time, we were under mortar attack or rocket attack and we used to have to go into a trench line, which was, again, very narrow, very congested, and it had a smell to it, a musky odor if you will. During those times, that's when I started to experience panic.

It kind of went away. I didn't realize that I was claustrophobic even, during my military time. Around 1994, I went to Charlotte Motor Speedway to drive the NASCARs at the driving school, and when you're in a full-face helmet, they strap you in, and you don't move. You're in a five-piece harness. You become a part of the seat. Everything was going okay until they put the window net up, and when they put the window net up, that's when I realized something was radically wrong, that I was getting this claustrophobia, if you will. And what happened was I started getting tunnel vision, my breathing was erratic. All that kind of just brought everything back, 20-something, 23 years later. It just brought it all to the forefront.

What led later on to me seeking help was as time progressed my anxieties, my claustrophobia became more prevalent. At the Tampa VA Hospital, I needed to get an MRI and I was scheduled for a CAT scan, getting in the tube, and I just could not do it. It was now affecting not only my personal life but my medical well-being also. So, I raised my hand at that time and said, "I got a problem. I need to talk to someone." And that's when we got an appointment with the mental health folks.

When I got there, he said, "We're going to duplicate the feelings that you had." We wound up, actually, by doing different exercises in his office, I could actually feel the shortness of breath, the tightness, my throat getting dry. The exercises we did at home, were real simple and they brought the same feelings and stressors right to the surface immediately. We worked on those for a couple of weeks. Things like just putting myself in a linen closet, wedging myself behind a sofa. It was real easy things that I could do and yet duplicate, what it would be like to be in an MRI or in the CAT scan machine. We progressed, baby steps if you will, and we got to the point where he thought I was ready to actually do the CAT scan. The stressors were there, but by using the tools that we had developed in his office and my home, I was able to complete it on the second try. If you just regroup and remember what you were taught, it really helps. It really does.



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