Living with PTSD and Allowing Myself to Get Help

At 19 and having just graduated from high school, Mike was looking for his next challenge. “I was set to go to Texas Tech. I had a dorm room and a roommate, but I wanted more than just the college lifestyle of classes and partying.”

Days before his high school graduation and weeks before he was set to begin his freshman year in college, Mike instead enlisted in the United States Marine Corps infantry. From 2004 to 2007, he deployed three times to combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan and served more than 22 months overseas.

“The Marine Corps provided a camaraderie, a brotherhood, that I had never before experienced,” Mike said. “Through blood, sweat and togetherness, each of us knew that someone was always going to be there for the other and that we were all going after the same common goal...to get everyone home alive.”

Along with the positives Mike experienced in the service, he also witnessed some of the horrors of war – combat and fallen comrades. On his last official operation in Afghanistan in September 2007, an improvised explosive device (IED) hit Mike’s vehicle.

“It was chaos and there was immediately fire everywhere. I couldn’t open the door to escape and had to climb through the turret. In doing so, I noticed one of my Marines was unable to move in the back seat. We worked as a team to get our close friend and comrade, Travis, from the vehicle. But, with more than eighty-five percent of his body burned and devastating internal bleeding, the world lost Travis on the helicopter in transit to the hospital that night.”

“My previous tours overseas left me feeling invincible,” Mike said. “Sure, I had some close calls, but that night, I realized how human I was. My mind was hazy and heavy for the first time in more than two years in combat. In one night we sustained physical injuries - our lungs were filled with smoke, our bodies and hair burnt – but what stayed with us were the flashes of memories branded in our minds.”

Weeks later, Mike was back on U.S. soil, struggling to adjust to everyday life out of the Marines. Without a sense of purpose driving his life’s path, he battled daily against his own mind and memories of war.

“As a Marine, we are trained to show no weakness and no pain. But, I underestimated the heavy toll my combat experience took on my heart and soul. When warriors come home, they are deemed ‘homesick, broken-hearted, combat-fatigued, and shell-shocked,’” said Mike. “I have lost more of my Marine brothers outside of a combat zone due to suicide. Two guys that I served with who had beautiful families have committed suicide since our time in combat. It left me asking ‘who will be next?’”

“A lot of things I saw every day would trigger an emotional response in me. I could not go to a restaurant, mall or grocery store without feeling desolate, paranoid, and hyperactive. I would sweat profusely, had
trouble breathing and wanted nothing more than to escape the civilian world I was in. I needed to escape from reality,” Mike said.

“I had never failed in the past and I was failing at being a civilian. After eight months and penniless, something switched, and I realized that I had the control to change my destiny.”

With a new focus, sheer determination and a sense of purpose, Mike redirected his path and enrolled at The University of Texas at Dallas to study psychology.

“After the Marines, I trained myself to circulate through the world by minimizing, suppressing and avoiding my thoughts and feelings towards my experiences during the Marine Corps. I felt numb, empty and hollow. When I first started at UTD, I would sit in the back row next to the exit at class, never speak, had difficulty concentrating and a hard time focusing on the professor and task at hand. I knew I needed something more.”

While on campus, Mike learned about the Center for BrainHealth and its research with military service members.

“It was Veteran’s Day and UTD had a gathering on campus. There, I saw the Center for BrainHealth’s booth and spoke to some of their representatives about opportunities to participate in research for Post Traumatic Stress. It was right up my alley to volunteer for the study. I was willing to do anything that might benefit and help me succeed.”

“It was up to me, though. I had to recognize that there was an issue that needed to be addressed and that it wasn’t black and white. I thought to myself, ‘Why not give something a try?’”

“At BrainHealth, I was treated as a human being, not a head case or a number. The staff there was genuine in their approach to understand and assist me. There were definitely times where I didn’t want to go and I made excuses to miss my appointments. But, I can say that each time I left and walked outside of the building, I felt relief and that there was a weight off my back.”

As part of the research study Mike received thirteen sessions of cognitive processing therapy (CPT), a method of psychological training that teaches individuals how to lessen the emotional response associated with PTS.

“Through CPT I was shown the limitations, loneliness and potential dangers that the path I was on held. I was guided to give healthy meaning to the traumas I experienced and incorporate the good with the bad. The training helped me reorganize my own thoughts and find an explanation for them. It showed me that I had strengths and ways to capitalize on them outside of the military lifestyle.”

“At BrainHealth, I never felt like I was right or wrong for having the thoughts I did and I wasn’t judged because of my feelings. Instead, the training showed me that my thoughts were my own, and I began to question if it was the best way to think.”

“I learned techniques that have allowed me to live in the moment and experience all this world has to offer. It has been a lifestyle change, and I feel like I have become a whole person after the training at BrainHealth. My past no longer haunts me, but instead is a part of me and has made me who I am today. I still have a long journey ahead but BrainHealth taught me to see the ‘tall grass’ and gave me the tools to walk in it rather than the beaten path I was on before. Instead of my military experience being the definition of who I am, I now know that I am much more than it.”