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I Suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Part 4

by James Glaser

So far I have gone from thinking about needing help with post-traumatic stress, to going to the Minneapolis VA and getting a year of one-on-one sessions with a shrink, and on to an intensive eight-week in-hospital PTSD program at the Tomah, Wisconsin, VA Medical Center.

Now I'll take you further into the program, starting with my second week at Tomah. You know, I wish this was exciting, but it isn't. I have been thinking about this for a while now, and I can remember most of the program. But I might have things out of order. Some of the classes or therapy sessions we had were assertiveness training, dreams, relaxation, trauma, journaling, and relationships.

Assertiveness training was good for me because, to begin with, I realized that I had two ways of dealing with things. No matter what the situation was, either I got really angry and said whatever came to mind, or I would mentally say, "To hell with it," and walk away not saying anything.

Let's say that I went into the rural electric office to dispute a bill or the courthouse to talk about my real-estate taxes. Usually I could get my question out in a coherent manner, but if the answer I got was not what I wanted to hear or wasn't in a form I could understand, I would start to get worked up. I could get terribly angry in 10 seconds and because I was so angry and didn't really want to be that way, that would frustrate me. My best bet was just to walk away, which I learned to do.

A lot of Vietnam vets took the other path. When they got frustrated they would get angry, and then many of them went from angry to violent. Lots of Nam vets spent time in jail or even prison because what started out as a simple problem escalated into something totally different.

I don't know if I am right here or not, but the way I figure it, many veterans who have problems with post-traumatic stress are stuck in the way they thought while in the combat zone. Too many times if a person didn't answer a soldier's question or didn't do what the soldier wanted him to do, the soldier got violent. Usually, going nuts verbally with an automatic rifle in

his hands got the results the soldier wanted. If things went from bad to worse, the soldier could always shoot or even kill the person who was wasn't doing what he wanted.

Giving 18-year-old kids that kind of power of life or death over a population is not a good thing, and when he comes home he tends to forget that that power has been taken away. Power does corrupt, and the Marines and Army will give a recruit absolute power. Remember too, that a Marine or soldier is given that power when he is scared out of his mind. He is that scared, and he is watching friends and comrades-in-arms being killed or wounded on a regular basis. That is a bad position to be in, especially for a teenager.

That is probably why, when I got home, I would walk away when I felt things start to escalate. Many times I would walk away and throw up because a huge dose of adrenalin would be dumped into my body so that I could be ready for whatever was going to happen. I think this is called the "fight or flight" response.

Regaining control

The assertiveness training classes at Tomah could have been called "being in control" class or "being prepared" class. What they taught me was to have a balance in my response to whatever situation I was in. I learned that nothing is black or white. A person's being on the other side of the counter did not mean that he even had an answer to my question; and if I couldn't understand what he was saying or I didn't agree with his answer, I could always ask to see his supervisor. Another good pointer for me was to do my homework and try to be as knowledgeable as, or even more knowledgeable than, the person to whom I was talking.

Now when I have a problem with a bill, or with the county, the state, or the federal government, I take it as a challenge. It becomes a game for me, and if I do the research before I start asking questions, many times I don't even have to take it to the next step. Before Tomah, I thought I was always right because I didn't take the time to study my problem. I could look at a bill and think, This isn't right. Now I take a second, third, and maybe fourth reading of that bill, before I take it to the next step.

That assertive class was one of the first classes we had at Tomah, and it got me off to a good start because it was something practical that I knew that I could use. In the big picture it wasn't that big of thing, but it got me to change the way I thought about things.

I'll tell you one thing that saved me a lot of trouble, and that was that I lived in the woods of northern Minnesota, and that was by choice. Living in the woods when I was upset with something meant I was usually too far away to do anything about it. There are lots of vets living out in the woods because it gives them a cushion of time and distance to things that could get them in trouble.

Nobody likes to think this but dealing with PTSD has something to do with maturity. A GI leaves that combat zone as a young man who knows how life works in that zone but the military

never gets him ready for the new zone he is going to after his war is over. That new zone is life in the real day-to-day world of America.

Maybe getting out of the combat zone is akin to getting out of prison. We've all heard stories of the prisoner who has done his time and gets out of prison. He doesn't know how to relate to the real world and gets himself in trouble and lands back in prison. It's the same way in the military — we knew how things worked in that setting, and that is all we knew. We tried things that worked there just fine, and they don't work in this new world at all.

We knew how to act and we knew how to think, but those actions and those thoughts didn't work anymore. In fact, they got us into trouble. The hard thing is, those thoughts and actions kept us alive. It is a hard transition to make.

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