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## **I Suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Part 5**

**by James Glaser**

Last month I wrote about the assertiveness training in the Tomah Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) program and how I thought it helped me. This month, it's dreams and relaxation therapy. I am purposely saving the trauma group for last, both because it was the most important part of the program and because I don't really want to talk about it, and putting it off seems like a good idea.

Honestly, the dream class seemed kind of bogus to me. Guys would talk about their dreams. The facilitator would then try to interpret what the dreams meant. Some of the guys had dreams that were completely far out in left field, and they had every detail of the dream. On top of that, they would take the whole class period to describe one dream. I don't know about other people, but I don't dream in minute detail like that.

It is true though that veterans with PTSD do not sleep very well at all, and while at Tomah I never got up in the middle of the night without finding two or three other guys up already. I still do that to this day. I get up and walk around just to make sure the perimeter is secure. I have had dreams a lot, but I don't usually remember what they were about, and my wife used to tell me that I would call out numbers. Later on I figured out that they were grid coordinates.

With the dream class we learned tips on how to get a good night's sleep. Exercise during the day, don't use caffeine after 4 p.m., and don't drink a lot of liquids or alcohol before bed. Most of the tips were just common-sense things that we should have known by then. I guess if the dream class helped some guys, it was worthwhile.

For me, the relaxation class was very helpful, and I still use what they taught me every day. A lot of vets are what they call hyper-vigilant, and many have a strong startle response. For some guys, if a truck backfires, they hit the ground and cover their heads. It is an automatic response, and it can be very embarrassing. Many are constantly looking around to see where they are in relation to other people. Those vets will always sit with their back to the wall and try to never be out in the open and vulnerable.

It can be exhausting if you are staying alert all the time, and learning how to relax did a lot for me. I don't know how the class started out, but the guy giving it had a voice that could put anyone at ease. He had us try all sorts of techniques, and I remember the first one that worked for me was to take one muscle group and flex that for about 10 seconds and then let it go limp and then move on to another group. That worked for me, and all the time we were trying it, the instructor was quietly talking us through it.

Later on he taught us another method that I still use today. In this one I start out thinking of my toes and do deep breathing at the same time. In my mind I envision my toes getting bigger as I inhale and smaller as I exhale. I start with my toes and go to the ball of my foot and on to the rest of my body until I have relaxed my whole body. Today I can start with my whole foot, move on to my legs, and get totally relaxed in about one minute. It feels so good when a tense muscle lets go.

I don't fall asleep doing this, and I do it for only about 15 to 20 minutes in the afternoon. When I am done, I am refreshed. A couple of years ago a drunk driver went through a stop sign and plowed into my truck. I was lying on the side of the road with a dislocated hip, a broken hand, a lot of cuts, cracked ribs, and pain like I couldn't imagine. So I prayed and then started doing my relaxation-therapy routine while waiting for the ambulance. It worked wonders for me.

Now if I hurt my back or am having a bad day, I take the time to run through that routine, and I sure feel good. I do the same thing if thoughts about Vietnam start springing into my head. I can get so relaxed that I can no longer feel any part of my body. I use music now to help me get relaxed and have found that American Indian flute music works best for me.

Having post-traumatic stress is hard on the body and the mind. The PTSD program had us work on both. Learning how to live a healthy life was just one part of the program, but I came to believe that the program was a package, and I needed to work on everything they gave me if I wanted to get something out of it.

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