

# Tackling traumatic aftermath of combat

Being a 31-year-old veteran with diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder makes my life pretty... interesting. I say interesting because sometimes I surprise myself with some of the things that pass through my mind: memories so vile and intrusive, they can change my emotions and behaviours in any place at any time.

Currently I am a student at a community college and have the pleasure of watching and putting up with a younger generation. This is another reason I say my life is interesting. As I struggle day to day to feel like a productive member of society, I often ask myself "Why don't I fit in anymore?" or "Why have I not made a single friend since I exited the military?" or "Why are my values so much different then the values of civilians today?" Then I take-a-look back at the nine years I spent in the Marine Corps.

When I think back to my time in the Corps, I usually think about the people who I directly served with, the guys who followed and walked with me into combat. There will be no greater bond between a group of men who put their lives in each other's hands every time they step outside the wire. This is why I get the uneasy feeling of rejection from society. In combat, I know I can trust that the guys to my left and right will do everything in their power to ensure everyone is as safe as possible. As a civilian, I constantly have to keep in mind that the people I work with have no idea what that bond means. They have no clue what it means to walk around with 12 other men and not be particularly sure if your next step was going to be your last.

This is what separates veterans from civilians. Traumatizing events flash through my head daily. I remember every detail vividly. This can be problematic while sitting in a classroom full of students. The replay of events can be triggered by tangible things but often replay at any point throughout the day. Navigating around these thoughts without a change in emotion or behaviour is the hard part. With every replay of every memory, it seems only natural to feel the same emotions that were present at the time of the event. They can include anger, guilt, confusion and sadness.

Throughout my life I have learned to "stuff" emotions accordingly and deal with them later. I am in full understanding that is unhealthy. But it seems to be a default setting that turns on when I am in a situation where I cannot process information at that exact moment. Then I wonder why I am angry later that day.

Some solitude that I do find now is creating art. Being able to sit in front of a painting canvas or a drawing pad seems to channel my thoughts and allow me to focus more intently. This doesn't mean that memories don't come and go, but I find that, while I am focusing on a painting or drawing, my emotions are fixated on just that. Painting is also an outlet for me to express my emotions. While in combat, expressing emotion seems to get lost. After the loss of a good friend, we are expected to put our gear on and continue to do our jobs as early and as affectively as the next day. With no room to grieve, I feel like my emotions started to dissolve and all that was left was hatred for the enemy.



## About the author

Jake Powell struggled to find a passionate career and sense of self purpose after leaving school. At 19 years old, he decided to join the US Marine Corps, becoming an infantryman with 2nd Battalion 8th Marines. During his nine years of service, Jake deployed three times in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and fought valiantly for his country. He was then medically retired from the Marine Corps. Currently, Jake is a father of one and full-time student at Shoreline Community College. In pursuit of an Associates of Fine Art, Jake has found that drawing and painting provide a temporary relief to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

*A military mental-health helpline has been launched, and the defence secretary pledged £20million more in support services. Jake Powell's battle illustrates the need for them.*

Being a student of Fine Arts, I have begun to find the beauty in things again. As corny as that might sound, being able to learn and apply new skills to improve the emotion of my own work has given me another outlet to express suppressed emotion. Moreover, this outlet is much healthier than the outlet some of our less fortunate veterans have chosen.

PTSD plays a role in everything I do. From the place I choose to sit at a restaurant, to the ever-lasting bouts of depression, it is a part of who I am. As much as I wish I could flip the switch and be "normal" again, I have chosen to take a more accepting approach. I will never forget the horrors of combat. They will forever be sculpted into my memories. But these memories are the very reason I am able to speak on a topic that has been hidden away for many years. Without these memories, I wouldn't be who I am today – and I am damn proud of who I have become.

## Help for the disproportionately high addiction, mental illness and suicides among veterans:

- The [Forces In Mind Trust](#) awarded £157,384 to Kings College London, in partnership with the University of Liverpool, to compare the mental health of armed forces veterans and civilians, to evaluate if the treatment needs of veterans are being met. Findings are due later this year.
- Tom Harrison House in Liverpool supports military veterans, reservists and emergency services personnel experiencing problems with drugs or alcohol (<http://tomharrisonhouse.org.uk>).
- Help For Heroes also offers support (<https://www.helpforheroes.org.uk/get-support>).

## New military mental health helpline + £20million more for support services



The new support follow calls by campaigners, including Lord Dannatt, former head of the British Army, for more help for struggling soldiers. "Every hour of every day our safety, security and way of life are protected by our courageous Armed Forces personnel," defence secretary Gavin Williamson said. "Mental illnesses caused by life on the battlefield can have a devastating impact on our brave heroes and their families. I will personally work with all the service chiefs to make sure there isn't a single person in the forces who doesn't know where to turn in times of trouble."

The Military Mental Health Helpline can be called on 0800 323 4444. It will be funded by the Ministry of Defence and run with Combat Stress charity (<https://www.combatstress.org.uk>).

"This number will complement mental health services, including our Departments of Community Mental Health for our serving personnel. We must do all we can to provide easy access to the support available," surgeon general of the British Armed Forces Major General Martin Bricknell added.