

Hello, thank you for allowing me to share my story. My name is Brendan O'Byrne. I served in the military from 2002-2008. In May of 2007, I was deployed to the Korengal Valley, Afghanistan and completed a 15 month tour as a Sergeant/Team Leader with the Airborne Infantry. When my unit and I redeployed back home I did not expect to have any issues from the deployment but I was wrong. I began to have various symptoms of PTSD upon returning from combat. When I was honorably discharged in December 2008, I began to seek help from the VA to deal with the PTSD I had. At the time, I was unemployable, barely able to function in a healthy way so I applied for PTSD disability. After a 4 year back and forth with the VA, I was given a 70% disability rating.

Almost immediately I was told by other veterans and even some workers at the VA that I should fight for my 100%. Now, I don't know if they saw something that I didn't but in my eyes, I was not 100% disabled and told them that. The common response was, "You deserve 100%. You earned it." I take offense to these two statements because I fail to see how I "deserve" or "earned" a disability rating. I have PTSD, a treatable disorder. I did not lose a limb or sustain any permanent physical damage. A PTSD disability rating is not a hand out, it is a tool.

I used the money as a tool, I did not have to worry about my rent or bills, and I could focus squarely on the PTSD symptoms and fix them. I did the work, working through the crippling anxiety, blinding anger, and a slurry of other symptoms. Because of that hard work, today I know I am no longer 70% disabled. Recently, I have been working on the steps to lower my rating. Surprisingly, I have received a lot of pushback. The pushback has come from well-intentioned VA workers, other veterans, family, and friends, all singing the same chorus, "You deserve it, you earned it." What I have to ask is this, if our goal is not to get veterans off disability and to become active, contributing members of society then what is our goal? To me, being an active member of society is the ultimate sign of healing from combat and we should all be striving for it.

On my journey back home, I have tried all forms of treatment, from VA counseling to a service dog. My first concentrated effort was through the VA, signing myself into a 45 day in-patient PTSD treatment facility 8 months after separating from the army. While there I learned many of the mechanics of PTSD, like the triggers of PTSD symptoms and ways to deal with them or avoid them. Every day we would have group counseling sessions. Sometimes I would hear varying stories of trauma, from combat in Vietnam jungles to the streets of Iraq. But more than those traumatic stories, I heard stories that sounded a lot like a bad day rather than a traumatic moment. As weeks went by, I realized the sad truth about a portion of the veterans there, they were scammers, seeking a higher rating without a real trauma. This was proven when I overheard one vet say to another that he had to "pay the bills" and how he "was hoping this in-patient was enough for a 100% rating". I vowed never to participate in group counseling through the VA again.

When there is money to gain, there will be fraud. The VA is no different. Veterans are no different. In the noble efforts to help veterans and clear the backlog of VA claims, we allowed a lot of fraud into the system and it is pushing away the veterans with real trauma and real PTSD.

Since returning home in 2008, I have given speeches all across the country about my struggles with PTSD and talked to thousands of veterans seeking the answers about healing from combat. The trend I have seen among the combat veterans, the most traumatized group, stay away from the VA, or at the very least, the group counseling settings. They have no patience for the fraudulent veterans scamming the

system to get a pay check and they are definitely not going to open up about their worst days to those who know nothing about them.

The problem is this, when we talk about healing from PTSD, I consider the most effective form of therapy peer to peer counseling, especially older vets mixed with younger vets. An easy way to understand the power of peer to peer counseling is looking at Alcoholics Anonymous. In AA, there is no clinicians, no experts, and no money to gain by going to meetings. The only reward is getting sober. Being an alcoholic myself, I did not turn to the doctors or psychologists to stop drinking. I turned to AA, the people who understood my plight through their own experiences, and I am close to 4 years sober now.

Veterans are the same in that we know how to take care of one another. But with the fraudulent PTSD claims and the clinical setting of the VA, it is hard for veterans to really open up about the worst days of their life. Where to go then if not the VA?

Last year, I was a co-facilitator of "From Troy to Baghdad", a program run and funded by New Hampshire Humanities. With a group of 8 veterans, 4 Vietnam, 4 Iraq and Afghanistan, we read and discussed The Odyssey by Homer. We met once a week for two hours for 12 weeks. During those 12 weeks, I witnessed something I consider holy. Old veterans and young veterans hashing out the experience of war and homecoming. The old teaching the young and vice versa. The amount of healing that was accomplished in that room is hard to describe. We talked about God, about death, about life, about the feeling of returning to a country you no longer recognized as home. We talked about suicide, about anger, about hate. We talked about fate, bravery in combat, and at home. And in those 12 weeks, I learned more about war and homecoming than I had in all the VA counseling I had received in the years of being home. These are the conversations that bring veterans home and they desperately need to be fostered in the ways that promote the conversations to happen organically.

Around the country small non-profits designed to serve veterans are springing up. Some of these non-profits have done an immense amount to heal vets. Some that I think are doing great work are Outward Bound for Veterans, Heroes and Horses, Team Rubicon, and Team Red, White, and Blue. Though each of these non-profits are vastly different from one another, the one universal is that these groups empower veterans. They show veterans that they are not broken, that they can heal from these experiences, and do great things in the world after war.

When I come back to the question I asked in the beginning, what is our goal for our veteran's futures, programs like the ones just mentioned are helping reincorporate veterans to be active members of society. I encourage more support for these programs.