

| Chapter 1

It's hard to describe emotions that don't exist. It's hard to talk about feelings I no longer have. It's hard to look back at my last seven years and feel anything. And the worst part for me is that there is no one thing I can blame it on, no one thing that caused this. But I do know it's not who I am; it's not who I was—before going to Iraq at least. And while I may never be the man I once was, the true road to recovery is to start to feel, to allow those emotions to come, to allow myself to hurt, and to then start to heal.

No soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine is really prepared for what combat will do to his or her mind. We are persistently trained in survival; identifying, finding, and defeating the enemy; providing world-class logistics; and, persevering through pain and exhaustion. But no one is trained to cope with year-long (or more) tours to combat zones, working 12 to 18 hour days with barely a day off. This is regardless if we experienced death or violence day to day, just the mere knowledge that any moment could mean an explosion, mortar round, or bullet coming our way was enough to cause trauma.

We are all offered mental health screening as we return, as we return from combat, reunite with our loved ones and beloved country, and feel a general sense of safety and euphoria. But a few months later, as we realize we've shut off every good emotion in addition to the bad, it's really up to us to take the initiative to get help. And yes, it's readily available for those that are brave enough to admit they need it. Unfortunately, I was not one of them. I didn't allow myself to admit I had a problem because it all seemed so manageable. But I underestimated how much I had changed and how much it affected the ones I love.

I wasn't always unemotional and apathetic to the world around me. In fact, I was quite the opposite. As a college student, I would often be referred to as one of the happiest people on campus, always smiling and content. I found joy in the simplest of things. A few years later, as I was going through basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina—just a month after 9/11 changed America for our generation— it was me that my fellow soldiers came to for encouragement. In fact, one soldier specifically came to me and said, "This really, really sucks and I know you're probably the only person here that can actually find something encouraging about today, so can you please tell me what it is?" And I did... it was a beautiful fall day outside and we were crawling through mud and getting paid for it. I think of that often now when I'm stuck in a cubicle plugging away at a computer and it is seventy degrees and sunny outside.

But Iraq broke my spirit. One of the things that kept me from seeking counseling was believing that my experiences didn't warrant help. After all, I never once had to fire my rifle at the enemy. I never had to fight my way out of a lopsided battle. I didn't come face to face with dead, mutilated bodies, and I was fortunate to never have lost a close friend. So why would I warrant mental health

counseling when there were soldiers who really needed it more than me? Well it turns out that we are all wonderfully made and my brain did the only thing it could to cope—it denied there ever was trauma.

And our military training probably didn't help matters much. We are trained early on to be mentally tough, to work our bodies and minds beyond their limits. Soldiers are faced with scary, daunting obstacles throughout their careers, and I commend each and every one of them for their bravery and perseverance. So it's times like right now, where I encourage anyone that can relate to what I'm about to write about to be brave again, acknowledge that this is something out of your control, and get the help you need.

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