



PTSD: A soldier's story about finding a new purpose

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By Honora Gathings [CONNECT](#)

BIRMINGHAM - AL - They are trained to defend our freedom. But many veterans say they aren't taught how to return to civilian life. It leaves many struggling with their sense of purpose. ABC 33/40's coverage of mental health in Alabama continues with a look at how the VA is changing treatment for post traumatic stress disorder.

"Some of you may know me. Some of you may not," said a man standing in a NAMI support group.

Daniel Williams introduced himself. He's an Army veteran who was deployed to Iraq in the first invasion in 2003. His job was to find biological weapons. But along the way, he lost himself.

"The military taught us how to be a soldier. They don't teach us how to have emotions," said Williams,

Williams survived a stabbing, shooting and IED explosion. He came home with a Bronze Star, a Purple Heart and memories triggered by sights, smells and sounds.

"I would start twitching. I'd get anxious. My heart would start to beat really fast. I'd start sweating," he described.

Williams also returned with post traumatic stress disorder. He tried to get help at Fort Hood, Texas where he was stationed.

"It was a year long wait. They basically said, 'deal with it.' Me being a military person- I'll deal with it," he said. "I grabbed a bottle. At the time, it was Jack Daniels and I climbed into it."

Christmas Eve 2004- he said he had a fight with his then wife and barricaded himself in the bathroom with a gun. Barrick police were called.

"They broke open the door. When they did, I pulled the trigger," said Williams.

His weapon misfired. But he lost his first wife, his home and almost ended up on the streets.

Williams remarried. Through out our conversation, he kept touching seemingly seeking comfort in the wedding band.

"She cared for me. She got me," he said.

The VA estimates one-third of veterans have mental illness. The diagnosis is usually PTSD.

Suicide isn't uncommon either. NAMI says each day, 22 veterans take their lives.

There were two fatal shootings at Fort Hood in the past five years. The most recent one was in April. The shooter was a veteran suffering from mental illness who killed himself.

Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Sloan Gibson met with veterans in Birmingham last week. He said mental health was a priority. Four primary care teams of doctors, nurses and schedulers will be hired for Birmingham's VA hospital. Some of the doctors will be psychiatrists.

Gibson also discussed telemental health. He says more than 55 thousand veterans nationwide talk to doctors through the free video conferencing program.

"They love it because they get to stay at home. They talk to their regular provider. They don't have to come to some kind of clinic. They actually really like doing it. It is much more comfortable for them," said Gibson.

But Gibson says their mission isn't complete.

"I got to tell you, we have more work to do. We have more mental health professionals to hire. We can do more with telemental health," he said.

Gibson also wants more vets to become involved in the changes. He says many vets tell him they only got help because a fellow veteran told them to do it. That's actually why Williams got the VA hospital to add a new peer-to-peer position>

That's why Williams got the VA hospital to add a peer support specialist position.

"We've been in the ER bed before saying, 'I'm going to commit suicide.' The doctor has never been there before, so they don't know what it feels like to be in that bed," said Williams.

Williams now holds the post. He's also the chairman of the NAMI Veterans and Military Council.

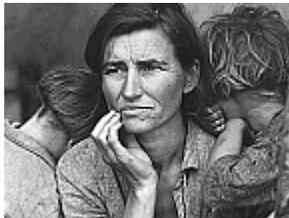
"I personally took the position so no veteran had to go through what I had to go through to better navigate the VA system," said Williams.

Once again, Williams says he's found his purpose.

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