

## A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I am suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, an illness caused by traumatic incidents that have happened to me in my life and mainly during my military service in Northern Ireland. The result of this illness is that I had a complete mental breakdown and was discharged from the army in March 2003. The Army was not only a job to me but it was my life and career. I was discharged when I was 43 years old, when I could have stayed in the army & served until I was 55 years old, with the possibility of being promoted.

### Living in the past

I dream about the army. The dreams are so real and vivid that when I wake up its as if I'm in the past, as if I'm still in the army, as if I have no control over my life or decisions. It makes me feel as if I'm stuck in a part of my life that I fear because I know what it's like to be shot and hurt, what its like to bury comrades.

I was one of those people, my way is the right way, and I don't give a fuck how you feel, I'm sure that I tried to be fair to the soldiers but I also know that I treated some of them badly, without care and compassion. It's easy in hindsight to criticise your actions but soldiers are just like every one else-they have feelings and if you push them hard enough they'll crack. I had that power. I was able to make or break an individual and at times I did not care that I had a married man, a father, standing in front of me crying. Looking like a lost child in the middle of a shopping centre. I regret this but it was what the system wanted me to do and who was I to question the system. Shame on me.

### Nightmares

How do you describe your nightmares? What is a nightmare? How does it effect your sleep? Nightmares come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and at different times, and not only during the night, although these are by far the worst because you are more tired and because it's dark.

I have dreamt of many different things, like killing two baby girls and gutting them pulling out their insides and letting them spill on to the ground, to floating in a coffin through a mirror in my bed room, to hallucinating and seeing dead people in the room with me. These are frightening and disturbing and many have no real reason.

To give you some idea how real these things can be, imagine that your going to bed tired, getting undressed, turning the light off and lying down in bed, but every time that you put your head on the pillow, and it sinks into the soft comfortable material, you imagine that your being lowered in to a grave, you can see the sides of the grave and the light from the sky, and the people above the ground looking down on you in your grave. If you allow your eyes to close, your coffin in your grave is closed and sealed.

This scene will replay over and over again until you can take no more and exhaustion kicks in. These nightmares can last for days.

Every one has nightmares from time to time, but it's normally due to watching something on TV, or the wrong food before going to bed. It's not normal to have these sort of things permanently locked in your head.

### No self esteem

My self worth, my belief in my abilities to cope have gone, they do not exist. I used to be strong, a good leader, a proud man, now I believe that I do not contribute to my family of my own well being, at times I do not even look after my personal hygiene. I am so sad that I have allowed this illness to get on top of me. I feel like I'm drowning in self-pity.

### Disappointment

I'm not sure what I'm disappointed about, but I know that it is more than one thing, because I let things build up so much over the years. I should have asked for help, but I was afraid to in case I was put in an asylum. I'm disappointed in how slow recovery is and because I need help and couldn't do it on my own.

But mostly I'm disappointed with my self, because I didn't see it coming, I didn't read the combat indicators to warn me that a breakdown was coming. I'm disappointed that I can not fight the depression without medication. I'm disappointed that I don't recognise my self any more.

I'm disappointed that I have failed in some way, that I wasn't strong enough to fight back to stop this illness happening to me, that in some way I am weak and I have lost the good fight.

### Aggression

One of the most alarming things about not recognising myself is the amount of aggression that I have in me. As far as I can remember, I was all ways quick tempered, but now it's full blown aggression, combined with a lack of fear. It feels like there is a different person, a mad man, stuck inside me & he's trying to burst out.

It frightens me because I'm not really sure what I'm capable of. If I exercise regularly then I can control it. If I miss my training then I know that I could explode, its as if its not me and I'm looking at a stranger from across the room, a person that I don't like, almost a Jekyll and Hyde, the aggression is in me just simmering away ready to come to the boil.

## **Anger and annoyance**

My mood swings lead to frustration which leads to anger. I have had at times such a rage built up inside of me that I have felt like a bomb ready to explode.

I felt capable of hurting some one, any one, in such a way that I might even have killed them, beat them to death, just to get rid of my anger. My anger stems from what has happened to me in the past.

I am easily annoyed and do not hide my emotions, which can work both ways, I can show my frustration and annoyance but I can also be annoying, because I can be abrupt and tend to go on and on until I cause a reaction. I don't really know that I'm doing it and I only realise it when I see the other person's reaction.

This makes it really hard for the people who love me and whom I love, because I don't recognise this person or this part of my personality.

## **Exhaustion**

My brain is working overtime non-stop. I suffer from adrenaline surges and sleep deprivation and I have to punch a punch bag to get rid of my aggression, all of these things lead to exhaustion, which is one of the most frustrating things about this illness.

I find myself falling to sleep on the settee most days which makes me feel lazy, which makes me annoyed with my self. The exhaustion also means that I am unable to think or concentrate for any length of time.

An example of this is that I had to stop driving, because of fatigue from lack of sleep. On the face of it, it doesn't seem such a big deal not being able to drive, you can always get a lift or walk or even use public transport. But when you have had to stop driving because of PTSD which has lead to exhaustion and means that you can not think properly, then it takes on a whole different meaning. What it means is that through no fault of your own you are now incapable of taking control of a car and taking it from A to B safely. So it's not so much the transport issue but the issue of losing even more self-control.

## **No inner strength**

When I had my mental break down, in June 2003, I used up all my physical and mental strength including my reserves, leaving me totally exhausted, to the extent that I had nothing left to fight with.

Prior to this I was both mentally & physically fit. I could think outside the box and had plenty of inner strength, a reserve of energy for emergencies, or to be used up when or if I needed it. Now I have nothing in reserve, once my mental attributes are used on menial tasks I have nothing to fall back on. If I become ill with some thing else I feel that I will surely die.

Because so far I have given every thing to survive.

## **Depression & suicide**

Hand in hand with PTSD comes severe to morbid depression, which is a fancy title for saying that my brain is lacking in a certain chemical or fluid, which makes the rest of my brain feel depressed.

As a tool to help me I have been on antidepressants - Fluoxetine more commonly known as Prozac! Since June 2003, I have had suicidal tendencies, I have seriously considered killing myself on more than one occasion and even rehearsed what I would do & where I would do it.

It is sad to think that some one could feel so low and depressed that they would go into the middle of a forest and look up at the sky into the sun, cut their wrists and end their life, but that person is me!

## **Adrenaline surges & headaches**

Again along with the PTSD comes the adrenalin surges, which make my whole body shake as if I'm having a fit. It was so bad at the start of this journey that I had to sleep on the settee in the living room. It caused me so much pain that I ended up with fluid in my knees resulting in me not being able to walk.

The surges also make me hyperactive and I tend to over react to certain situations. At the very least the adrenaline surges are embarrassing, as well as being stressful.

I wake up every morning with a headache and suffer from these during the day. I cannot stand or cope with glaring sun light bright lights or noise.

## **Mood swings**

I have had it explained to me on a number of occasions by experts in this field that my brain and indeed your brain has a pendulum which controls its mood swings.

In my case, because of the PTSD, my pendulum swings out of control from good mood to bad mood which has frightened me because there are times in the past when I haven't even recognised myself or even recognised what is happening to my mood. All this leads to confusion and depression which affects me and my family.

## **Helplessness.**

Have you ever been totally lost - not known where you were, known the feeling of fear and helplessness about how you are going to get home, what direction should you go in, feared that a particular direction might make the situation worse? You become taken over and trapped with helplessness, no one to help you, no one to guide you.

You can't even think for your self: you are sinking, drowning in a state of helplessness, can't breathe, can't move, you can feel your body, your brain closing in collapsing in on its self, it is with out doubt the worst feeling of all.

You can not help your self and you can not ask for help because you don't know what is wrong, why you're helpless.

It feels like you're being punished for every thing that you've done wrong in your life. You forget how to carry on breathing, how to function, how to think, and then you have the solution. Find it! Stop this overwhelming feeling that has engulfed you. It's like a heavy dark blanket that has been thrown over you to cover you from you head to your toes.

In your mind you think even a new born baby coming out of its mother's womb has more strength than you. What's the point in feeling like this, why suffer? Find it! Get rid of your demons. Your Helplessness, this is the worst feeling.

No one understands, even those who love you can not see how helpless you are, you are panicking so much inside that your brain is rushing from one point to an other, trying to make the right decision and you know inside your self that you are floating like a dead person face down in the water.

You are beyond help. Is it your brain, or are you being punished for being a bad person? Either way it doesn't really matter - you are helpless. It is better to die, be at peace, let others mourn for you, for the person that you were not the person that you've become.

### **Editor's Note**

The writer, who is now retired was an LE Capt, having been RSM of his battalion. The editor is immensely grateful to him for writing this piece.