

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):**

**MR. HUNTER'S STORY**

Jimmy and I grew up in the same neighborhood, rode the school bus together to school, and played on the same baseball team. We lived in a small community. Our parents became very close friends because Jimmy and I were like brothers. We took turns spending the night at each other's houses. We got into trouble together and got spanked together. We shared many great moments and memories. I remember one day at age seven, I was riding my bike down a steep hill like a typical seven year old. I lost control and was thrown off the bike. I hit my head on the concrete and became unconscious. Thanks to Jimmy, who ran to get help, I survived, but I might have died if help was not sought immediately. I was rushed to the hospital, and it took me a while to recover. I could tell so many stories of good and bad times with Jimmy.

After high school, we both decided to enroll in the army. Jimmy came from a family of servicemen; his father, both grandfathers, and uncles were all in the military. We had both wanted to serve our country since we were little. Our decision to serve was not a surprise to both of our families. Another added advantage was that the military had a lot of great benefits and also helped with the tuition payments for higher education. Both of our parents would not have been able to send us to college unless we took a loan.

A year after our enrollment in the military, we found ourselves on the way to the battlefield. Jimmy and I narrowly escaped many close encounters with death, until this fateful day. The enemies opened fire on us, and Jimmy was killed, a short distance from me. When the sound of the gunshots stopped, I moved next to Jimmy and shook him. He was covered with blood, and I looked at my hands—they were covered with Jimmy's blood. I kept shaking him, but he was dead. I had seen many

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dead bodies on the battlefield, but it never crossed my mind that I would be kneeling down next to Jimmy's dead body one day. I wished I could have saved him the way he had saved my life when I had a wreck on the bike at age seven. I wished I had the magic to wake him up, but he was gone forever. I walked around lifeless like a zombie for days after Jimmy's death; there was no time to mourn any loss because we saw dead bodies everywhere, and you could not be sure if you would be the next. I was shot in the thigh shortly after Jimmy's death and sustained a very bad injury. I wished I could die too, just like Jimmy, but it was not my time to go.

I was sent back home to the military hospital. I had multiple surgeries and went through rehabilitation before I could walk again. I had an honorable discharge after my injury.

I went through a process of mourning over Jimmy's death after I left the military. For the first time I did not know what to do by myself or for myself without Jimmy. I realized then how lonely I was without my best friend. Everything in our little town reminded me of him; we had gone everywhere together. I started having nightmares about the war with people getting killed and dead bodies everywhere. I would wake up in the middle of the night in panic and sweat. I would dream and see Jimmy in the dream, crying for help, but I could not help him. I would see myself trying to touch Jimmy's hand and to pull him to safety, but I was never able to touch his hands in the dream. He always drifted away. I woke up many nights hyperventilating, struggling to breathe, scared, and in a panicked state. I spoke to my parents about my experiences, and my father advised me to try to settle down and have a family. My father thought if I had other things to occupy my mind, I would be able to get over my nightmares. I took my father's advice and married the girl I was dating at that time. I wished Jimmy were my best man or at least one of my groomsmen at the wedding. We observed a moment of silence in honor of Jimmy at my wedding.

My wife and I decided to start a family shortly after the wedding, and our first child was a boy. I was ecstatic at the birth of my son, and I named him Jimmy, in honor of my best friend. Despite my new life, new wife, and new baby, my nightmares still would not go away. My wife would still wake me up in the middle of the night on several occasions because I continued to scream and fight in my sleep as if I were still on the battlefield. She would say to me many times "Honey, you are at home, not on the battle field." The situation was getting worse, and I was almost getting scared of going to sleep at night.

By the time I knew what was going on with me, I had turned heavily to alcohol to cope. Initially, I drank in moderation, usually with friends, and nothing out of control. As time went on, I found myself drinking heavily, especially at night with

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the hope that I would be able to sleep better. I started going to bars and found myself picking fights at the bar when I was drunk. I was gradually losing control of my life, and becoming more and more irresponsible.

Two years after our first child, we had another son, and I was too drunk to witness his birth. My wife said she called me on the phone to come to the hospital when she was in labor, and I told her I was on my way. I have no recollection of my conversation with my wife. I must have been too drunk and probably blacked out when she talked to me. I became physically and verbally abusive to my wife, and I could not be a father to my children anymore. I was getting multiple tickets for driving under the influence of alcohol, and I was getting locked up in jail on and off. I was getting into public fights more and more and had several bruises from the fights. Despite my heavy drinking, the nightmares and the flashbacks would still not go away.

I looked at myself in the mirror one day after I was released from jail on a driving under the influence of alcohol arrest (DUI), and I was disappointed at the person I saw in the mirror. I did not even know this person anymore. I asked myself 'What happened to me? How did I come this far from a responsible person to an alcoholic?' I took a minute and reflected on my life: I was raised in a strict, religious family by two wonderful and responsible parents. We were not wealthy, but we did not lack anything that was needed for us to have a decent life. My siblings and I had clean clothes and food on the table, and we were able to participate in recreational activities. My parents were always there for us. We did not have any excess money to throw around, but we did not lack. We were a regular, happy, middle-class family. Here I was in front of the mirror, looking pitiful, a completely irresponsible alcoholic who could not take care of himself, not to mention his family. I decided at that point that enough was enough. I had been a disgrace to my parents, and nothing but a pain for my wife and my children. I decided to put an end to it all and end my life.

I went and got my gun, loaded it up and decided to kill myself. As I was about to pull the trigger, I decided to put the gun down to write a note of apology to my wife and my children and explain to them why I had to do this. I hoped that my children would be able to forgive me when they grew older and read the note. I was not expecting anybody at home at that time of the day. My wife's routine was to pick the children from the daycare after work and come home; it was unusual for her to be home at that time of the day. I had planned it in such a way that I would be dead for at least three hours before my wife could come home and find me.

Somehow, God was determined to save my life and to give me a second chance. I heard the door open as I was writing the note, and I stopped writing the

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note immediately. I wanted to pull the trigger before my wife could come inside the house; I did not want anything to stop me from killing myself. I suddenly heard the innocent voice of my older son calling ‘Daddy, Daddy, where are you?’ My hands went numb. I could not go through with the decision to pull the trigger, and I could not make myself do something so terrible around my family. I sat on the bed with the gun in my hand. My wife came to the room and found me with a loaded gun and an uncompleted note written to her and the children. She was terrified, and she carefully took the gun from me and called for help. My wife had come home at that time of the day because our younger son had a fever, and the daycare had called her to come take him home. She had left work, picked up both of our children because they were in the same day care, and gone to the pediatrician’s office. She came home early because the daycare would not take a sick child back. Their trip home was what saved my life.

I was taken to a local hospital, and later ended up in a mental hospital. Finally, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of my experience during the war, and especially from watching my best friend get killed close to me. I was also dealing with major depression. All along, I was using alcohol to treat my pain and the stress of re-living the war experience continuously in my dream. I was released from the hospital with a better understanding of what my problem was, and I started an intense psychotherapy and medication therapy in the hospital. I was discharged to an outpatient treatment program, and also attended a support group with other war veterans who had similar experiences. I was also placed on some medication for the treatment of my underlying depression and anxiety problems.

Whenever I think back on the pain I caused my family, I always feel like beating myself up. However, I try to look at the positive side. At least I am still here to make a change. I do not drink anymore, I have a decent job, and I am a better father and a loving husband. I always reflect on how long it took me to get help; if only I had known then what I know now. I know there are many people out in the world dealing with similar issues but not getting to the root of their problems. If your story or the story of someone you know sounds like mine, do not try to fix it on your own. Please get help. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is real; it is not all in your mind or is your imagination going crazy. You have been psychologically and mentally traumatized, and what you are experiencing is a result of the trauma. There is help out there. Sometimes, help will not come to you until you go to get the help.

## **Quotes of Encouragement...**

As the wind blows harder and Mr. Hunter's story sounds familiar to you, remember the following:

***“There are many truths, of which the full meaning cannot be realized until personal experience has brought it home.”***

*~ John Stuart Mill*

We sometimes find it difficult to understand why some people go through trauma and are unable to move on with their lives; when we have a similar experience, our perspectives quickly change, and we have a new appreciation for what the other person is going through; we owe it to each other to be considerate and sensitive when people around us have been traumatized. PTSD is a horrible experience, and we don't have to wait to know the personal hell the victim is living in before we help and extend kindness. (LB)

***“When something (an affliction) happens to you, you either let it defeat you or you defeat it...”***

*~ Rosalind Russell*

Trauma and hardship are all part of the challenges of living; sometimes they sneak in on us, and sometimes we see them coming. Working through these experiences is part of our credits toward graduation from the school of life, and what we make out of these experiences will determine if we sink or rise, drop out from this unique school of life or graduate. We need to have a mindset to work through the storm and to come out a winner, so that one day we can encourage others with our past experiences. (LB)

***“I have known it for a long time but I have only just experienced it. Now I know it not only with my intellect, but with my eyes, with my heart, with my stomach.”***

*~ Hermann Hesse*

No amount of explanation, textbook information, or education can make us understand a situation more than the person who experienced it. Living with PTSD takes over your entire being; the goal is to rise up to this elephant called fear and to be ready to defeat it. The battleground is in your mind, and the war must be won in your mind as well. (LB)