

LCPL Mike's experience of depression

As a young soldier, I never understood what "depression" was, its impact on someone's life or more importantly, how someone "got it". As work started to become more stressful, returning from deployment, a failed relationship, a string of different injuries/medical downgrades and financial issues started arising, I slowly started to understand it.

I (mostly) managed it myself. Exercise, limiting alcohol, hunting all seemed to keep dark thoughts at bay. However, I was always cognisant of what seemed to be a "darkness" looming. The more I tried to fight it, the worse it got. Before I knew it, the feelings of loneliness, worthlessness and purposelessness all started to overtake what was normally a high level of motivation. I started to shift away from socialising, preferring to spend my time alone. My love for hunting was taken over by a need for alcohol. My passion for fitness was ripped away by lethargy and a sense of "what's the point". At this point I was too afraid to ask for help. I was fearful of what may become of my reputation as a "war-fighter" should I come forward with these feelings I had never understood previously.

At this point in my career, mental-health seemed taboo. I had seen the guys that had been downgraded for mental-health issues mocked and bullied. This wasn't something I was willing to face and decided this was just a phase and I would get over it. I was only 20. Maybe it was some kind of coming into adulthood that everyone goes through? Reflecting on this period of my life though, I was unhealthy. The clouded thoughts, the need to drink most nights so as not to feel sad, the inability to think straight in my waking hours and the vivid dreams I would have of my own death funeral. These feelings were quickly escalating into a contemplation of whether life was actually worth living or whether things would become easier if not.

The morning I decided to ask for help was the day after I decided that maybe things would be "easier if not". Watching my Mum and Dad weep over me the day after. A long journey of crying in front of Medical Officer's and my boss with no explanation as to "why?". A path of systematically destroying my own body with alcohol. My friends not understanding why their mate has turned into "a prick" for lack of a better term. Months of inconsolable sadness, anger and worthlessness. It was time to get better. Given that I feared for my reputation and career I reached out to a close friend/colleague who got me in touch with a few different resources. In the end though, I came to learn that time was really the best medicine. Time and the advice given by those who had been through it before.

It was a long slog back to wellness. It was hard. And at first it didn't seem to help. I am pretty confident in saying that the first few times I got back into chasing deer and getting back into my fitness is still to date one of the hardest things I have ever done. Mentally my brain refused to give me the motivation I desperately needed. But the more you push through it the better you start to feel.

My advice to those experiencing the "bite of the black dog"? It's called the bite because it hurts. It's painful. And with every bite, a scar will be left over. This scar might remind you of the time you were hurt. Reach out. Get help to heal your bite. It may take a while to heal, and the wound might reopen from time to time. You will heal though.

My advice to those that have recovered from their "bite"? Share your experience. Speak to those under your command, your peers and your family. Be unashamed of what you've been through. You might be talking to someone that might need to hear that they aren't alone or crazy for going through it all. You could be potentially saving someone's mum, dad, brother, son, sister, daughter before their own "bite" becomes too infected to save.