

Willy's journey through PTSD and overcoming alcoholism

For over two decades, I have battled a relentless enemy. An enemy that had a profound grip on my physical and mental wellbeing. What began as a convenient way to cope, quickly spiralled into a dependence that consumed me.

Some of you reading may have memories of both my misadventures and an alcohol dependant culture. The theme of this article is share what alcoholism looked like for me and what worked for me to combat it.

At all times during my struggle I had a choice. What I didn't have until only recently, was the emotional intelligence to make that choice.

Origins

My struggle with alcohol was deeply rooted in my experience with service related PTSD. The trauma and moral injuries sustained from my service was not something I had capacity to process. This was due to maturity, organisational culture, but above all, Ego. Coming from high performing units, I had developed a solid and respected reputation. A reputation that I would detrimentally defend and fight to sustain.

Nights were particularly hard. Sleep often evaded me as memories replayed in my mind, leaving me emotionally fatigued. Alcohol seemed like the only way to escape, a temporary reprieve from the constant symptoms.

At first, it worked. A few drinks helped me fall asleep, dulled the edges of the memories. But as time went on, I needed more to achieve the same effect.

My relationships suffered, work was impacted, and I was losing myself in the process. The person I had been—disciplined, strong, and reliable—was replaced by someone I struggled to recognize.

Turning Point

The turning point came when I realized that nobody was coming to help me. I had disguised my feelings so well that even the closest people to me had no idea of the pain I was in. It became apparent that if I didn't share my problems that they would remain just that, my problems. As aircrew I was acutely aware of the perceived stigma and operational risk of been medically downgraded and unable to fly. It was difficult for me to put my own needs before the needs of my squadron and RNZAF.

Tired of the constant brain fog, negative thoughts, and hangovers I was faced with a choice: Continue down a path I knew had no end, a brick wall I was destined to forever bang my head against or, talk. Really talk.

The Road to Recovery

I rescheduled the appointment twice before I finally got the courage to go. I remember sitting in DHC waiting room considering how I would start the conversation (if at all) with the Doctor. I buried the lead in a list of minor physical ailments, this was not the Doctors first rodeo. After a couple of follow up questions, I finally whispered: "Sir, I'm not ok. I need your help".

Any reservations I had were quickly dissipated as I was encouraged and supported by multiple RNZAF and NZDF resources.

A significant breakthrough came in the form of an official PTSD diagnosis. This allowed me to 'put a pin' in what was the root cause of my addiction.

A switch was flicked. My enemy now had a name and I was going to defeat it.

The years of abuse had taken its toll on my body physically, I knew I had to get fit.

I met with a PTI to develop a regime, as well as educating myself about nutrition and weight loss techniques. I found a programme that was compatible with my lifestyle and set realistic time based goals.

Through Defence Health I was able to access an intense treatment programme, this was a 3 day residential course held at a private facility. Here in an isolated environment I would participate in various evidence-based components such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Prolonged Exposure Therapy, Therapeutic Movement, and Psycho-Education. The aim to effectively reduce PTSD symptoms.

It worked. Although the sessions were emotionally draining and extremely confronting, I was motivated to see it succeed.

Onward

At the writing of this article I am 93 days sober. That may not seem like a significant number to most, but for me it is everything. That is 93 days of my wife, sons, friends and colleagues getting the best of me.

Sobriety has encouraged me to practice emotional regulation which has improved my overall patience and resilience. Situations which ordinarily would trigger or upset me, are now able to be processed without incident.

My story is an all too familiar one within our community. However recovery is possible. There are people and resource available to you, at all times.

You just need to ask.....