

The War At Home: One Family's Fight Against PTSD



By Shawn Gourley
A real life account of a Military Spouse's
fight to save her husband and family from
PTSD.

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The War At Home

My children and I did not volunteer to go to war.

How could you not warn me the war was coming straight into our home?

I had no warning or instruction as to what to watch out for.

The soldier returned home and not my husband.

I got a little pamphlet explaining that most soldiers may have to readjust to being home.

I believed you and trusted you when you said that the readjustment period may take a few months but they should experience a successful transition back into the home.

Months turned into years and every time I would call for help I was brushed away.

I called for help because my home had turned into a battlefield.

Guns were being drawn and my children and I became the enemy.

We lived our life walking on eggshells out of fear.

For almost 5 years we lived in hell.

I had to use every ounce of strength I had to keep this family together.

My husband proudly served this country, and would gladly do it again if asked.

But when his family needed help, you allowed them to suffer for years.

We did not want money. We wanted to have a normal life.

We would have had a chance if you would have been truthful. If you would have told these soldiers families what to watch out for.

You should have told us about PTSD!

Preface

When your soldier returns home to you it should be a happy and joyful time. You are glad they are safe and sound and back home. You can't wait to get your life going with them and everything should be great.

But what if the homecoming is anything but great? What if suddenly you and your soldier cannot connect, or you feel worlds apart?

What if they are no longer interested in going out or being around other people?

Maybe they are not sleeping well, or worse, becoming violent in their sleep.

They may not be reconnecting with the kids. They may seem uninterested in any new additions to the family.

What if they get angry at small things or worse yet get violent? What do you do?

Do you ignore it and keep thinking it will get better if you give it more time?

My husband Justin returned home from his first tour in the Middle East February 2003, where his ship was deployed to assist Operation Enduring Freedom, and from his second tour at the end of his military career in June 2004. For the next 4 ½ years our relationship was very difficult, and at times, downright scary for me and my children.

It was not until January 2009 that my husband was able to get treatment, and was finally diagnosed with PTSD in August 2009.

But I am getting way ahead of myself. To be able to understand how to deal with PTSD, I am telling our story so you understand what was going on and what I went through to save my family.

"Never Say Goodbye"

The war is not over, and it has been going on for longer than most people know.

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The Beginning

Justin and I met when he was six and I was ten. He played on my brother's basketball team, and then I became his babysitter. Go ahead and laugh, it's alright. So Justin and I have known each other since we were kids. And we stayed in contact until I went to high school. We didn't resume contact until Justin was already in the Navy.

Justin entered the Navy in June 2000. He attended boot camp in Chicago and then received orders to the aircraft carrier U.S.S. George Washington, CVN-73, as a machinist mate or fireman.

Justin's first year in the military was uneventful until the attacks on the United States September 11, 2001.

He had cross rated to an operation specialist, which meant he watched the radar for anything and everything on the water surface.

When the attacks happened on September 11, 2001, he was in the control room of the USS George Washington. He heard everything that was going on and what orders were being given at that time. The USS George Washington remained in New York City's harbor for about a week before returning back to Norfolk Virginia to continue maintenance on the ship.

Justin came home for Christmas break December of 2001, and while shopping with his brothers for Christmas gifts he came to TGI Friday's where I was a waitress. It was funny to see Justin all grown up, but it didn't take me long to realize that it was the same old Justin. From that point on we were inseparable.

We talked every chance we got, we would e-mail, and he would come home whenever he could swing a few days off. Justin was great with my daughter, he treated me with the utmost respect, and he was just a fun guy to be around.

In June 2002, the USS George Washington was deployed to support Operation Enduring Freedom in the Middle East and Arabian Gulf. Right before deployment Justin was assigned to the military police. Justin thought he'd finally found his home. He really enjoyed his position and excelled at being a Military Police Officer.

Justin would e-mail me every chance he got, but for the most part we had to resort to snail mail. Our relationship continued growing it and it wasn't long before we were discussing our future plans together.

His first tour nothing really happened. His ship saw no action, but they were treated to a concert by *3 Doors Down* on the way home. Justin called that one of the high points of his military career.

On February 4, 2003, while running carrier qualifications back home, the USS George Washington responded to a distress call from the Coast Guard. Four survivors were rescued and one was deceased. The small fishing vessel they were on had caught fire. Justin was responsible for tagging and bagging the body of the deceased while the other four were treated on board the USS George Washington. This was the first time Justin had ever handled a dead body.

Justin came home for Valentine's Day in 2003 and, of course, that's when he proposed to me. There was nothing that could bring us down that week. We started planning our wedding which was going to be in September 2003. When it was time for him to leave we decided that I would take a vacation in March and come visit him in Norfolk, Virginia.

In March 2003 Justin had to attend an Anti-Terrorism training course for one week where he learned different types of terrorist tactics, ran mock terrorist drills, and was certified on many different weapons.

I arrived in Virginia right after this training course was completed. Justin told me that our September wedding was not possible because they were unsure when they were going to be deployed again. This left us only two options: elope or wait until Justin was out of the military. So of course we eloped.

While in Virginia, I knew something was wrong with Justin but I couldn't figure out what. He just didn't seem to be himself. He was very tense, distant, and very serious. I asked him what the hell had happened in that training course. His reply was, "Nothing, I just have a lot more stress in my position now."

I was not content with that answer, so I kept asking him, "what did you learn, what did you do, what did you see". Justin told me about how in the classroom, they talked a lot about what happened to the USS Cole and watched a lot of videos showing the aftermath. They taught them about how terrorists use children as bombs and how easy it is for terrorists to sneak bombs into just about anywhere.

He talked about his weapon qualifications and how well he'd done on the sniper test. And he also told me that he got promoted to the rapid response team leader.

Sitting there talking to him gave me the chills. There was no emotion in his voice and his eyes were black as the night. The fun loving Justin I knew my whole life, had been transformed into a well-trained highly skilled machine that could kill without thinking twice.

Before I left he assured me that things would get better once he got used to the new position. And for about six months things were better.

On September 11, 2003, during an F/18 arrested landing, the arresting gear snapped back across the deck of the USS George Washington injuring several crew members.

Justin had to secure the area where the injured crew members would be treated and assist in keeping them calm. He emailed me and let me know what happened and we talked about it. I could tell he was pretty shaken up from the whole ordeal. It was all he talked about for days.

Then in November 2003, Airman David Kelly was killed while working on an airplane. Justin, once again, had to secure the body and the area until the investigation was complete, and then bag and tag the body before his return to United States.

Shortly after that, I found out I was pregnant and thought Justin would be so excited that he was going to be a Dad. Boy was I ever wrong. I thought if I gave it time, he would come around. When he came home for Christmas, I thought we'd do things to get ready for the baby, but instead we spent most of the time fighting.

I hated that we were fighting like this, especially since he was getting ready to be deployed again. So when I drove Justin back to Norfolk I tried to make the best of the long drive and not do or say anything that might upset him again. But then he really surprised me and started to talk to me about why he was so stressed.

He explained to me that in his position, he couldn't relax and that things had to be run in a particular order. As security on the USS George Washington, he couldn't let his guard down for one moment. I acknowledged what he was saying, but tried to explain to him that our home was not the ship. He then flew into a rage, going on about the USS Cole and how the ship's safety was his responsibility and that his training was not a light switch that could be turned on and off. The last thing I said to him when he got out of my car was, "I can't wait until you're out of the military so I can have the man I married back."

In January 2004, the USS George Washington was again sent to the Middle East and Arabian Gulf in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. This would be Justin's last deployment and his military career would end in June 2004.

Returning Home

Justin returned home June 29, 2004. I was so excited to have him home. Our baby was due within the next two weeks, and I was ready to settle down into married life. Little did I know this was the beginning of what would be a five year nightmare.

I expected it to take a little time for Justin to get used to not being in the military and to readjust to civilian life. I mean he went from someone telling him what to do and where to be, to having a wife, a stepdaughter, and a baby due any time.

I guess the first thing I noticed was that any form of intimacy was nonexistent. Just holding hands or giving me a kiss almost always would turn into a fight. I was left feeling very alone and confused. We had not seen each other in 6 months and he was not interested at all in having sex.

A week after his return home our daughter was born. I remember his face and for a brief few days thought I had my husband back. He was such a proud dad and a very good father. But that, too, would disappear very quickly.

Once we were back home and getting settled in, I started to unpack Justin's bags. He flipped out. I didn't understand what was going on and kept telling him that this was his home and he didn't have to live out of his bag any more. It would be two months before I was able to fully unpack his bags.

Justin started having nightmares shortly after our daughter was born. He would start yelling in his sleep and kicking and hitting things. I made the mistake one night of grabbing his arm trying to wake him up. He raised his head up and pointed to his arm and said, "You see this? I will kill you with it." Well needless to say that completely freaked me out. I could barely sleep the rest of the night. The next morning I was so scared that I did everything I could to avoid Justin.

Well, it didn't take him long to wonder what was going on. I told him that he scared me to death and told him what he had done. He didn't have a clue what I was talking about. I couldn't believe that he didn't remember telling me that he would kill me with his arm, but by the look on his face I could tell he was telling the truth.

Over the next few months the nightmares continued, we fought a lot, and I started to notice some other things that Justin was doing. For starters, Justin would not answer the phone. He would go to great lengths to not have to say hello. It did not matter what I was doing, he would run with the phone and give it to me to answer. It drove me nuts.

I could be in the shower, and if the phone would ring here would come Justin, running across the house and as soon as he got in the bathroom he would push the talk button and shove the phone in the shower with me.

Something else came up one night while we were watching a movie. I casually asked him if we were in a hostage situation like in the movie, what would he do? He looked at me and with no emotion whatsoever and said, "I'd shoot you." Don't ask me what made me ask that, but I did. I started in on him with, "I am your wife and you would shoot me? Without hesitation, you would just shoot me?" Justin looked at me like I was crazy and said, "Yes I would shoot you if you were in between the person with the gun and my shot."

I tried to get him to understand that his answer was not a normal one. If the roles were reversed I could not and would not shoot him. "When you love someone, you do everything you can to protect them from harm. Not put their life in jeopardy by shooting them." I could feel the lump forming in my throat. I blinked my eyes to fight back the tears. I sat there for a moment hoping he would say something, anything. But Justin just sat there staring at me.

I slowly closed my eyes and swallowed trying not to get choked up. I looked back up at Justin and said "But you would try to get me away first, right? You would do something right?" And then I smiled slightly because I knew in my heart that he was going to say yes. "No", he replied. My mouth dropped and I got butterflies in my stomach. Who was this heartless man? But once again I thought, he will be OK, he is just having a hard time adjusting to being home. It will be all right soon.

Justin was also starting to become very reckless behind the wheel. One time he was flying off the handle and driving like a madman. I was scared to death and told him to let me out of the car. When he refused I started telling him to pull the car over immediately. He started yelling at me and then all of the sudden slammed on the brakes on one of the busiest streets in our city, sending me headfirst into the dashboard. I jumped out of the car and started walking. About five minutes later he came to me apologizing and begging me to get back in the car. Fortunately for me he never pulled that stunt again but the road rage didn't get any better. If he was in a car and got mad you had better believe it was the pedal to the metal as he is screaming at the vehicle he feels is in the wrong.

In the fall of 2004 Justin had to work two part-time jobs to make ends meet. He never thought it would be so difficult to find a job coming out of the military. Justin worked second and third shift and I worked first, so that didn't leave us much time to see each other. With Justin's schedule our daughter had to go to daycare while I was at work and that meant I had all the responsibility of taking care of the baby while he worked.

You would think that not seeing each other, things wouldn't be too bad. But it seemed what little time we had together we spent fighting. The smallest things would send Justin into a rage. One time when he was upset about something, I went to a friend's house and stayed two nights. He never called or came looking for me. I started questioning then if Justin really loved me or not. When he was home he would be asleep, sit and watch TV by himself, or say he was running somewhere and be gone for hours.

It was at this point that I discovered he had a problem with pornography. I was completely crushed. I couldn't understand why he would rather watch that than be with me. But once again he had an excuse for that. He told me that with being in the Navy for so long he got used to that because it was against the rules to be with women on the ship. I told him I understood, but that he was home now and had a wife who was more than willing to take care of him.

At that point I started recommending counseling, telling him that I thought he was just having a hard time adjusting to being home.

In May of 2005 Justin got a job at Toyota and I remember thinking, "Finally, maybe he won't be so stressed all the time now." Well that was wishful thinking. It seemed like even though he had this dream job, things were only getting worse. We fought all the time, mostly because I had to work, get the baby to daycare, pick the baby up at the end of the day, take care of the baby while Justin was at work, and had all the responsibility of the house too. I might as well have been a single parent with a roommate that I never see, but that I have to clean up after every single day.

I decided this job was not for us. Yeah the money was real good, but I wanted my family. And that became the new theme for our fights. I didn't care about all the money we had. And Justin was always quick to spend it like he had something to prove. It was almost like he was trying to use material things to satisfy himself.

Finally I'd had enough. During one of our fights, I told Justin I didn't care about all the nice things we had. I told him I would rather live in a shack if it meant getting my husband back. That obviously didn't sit very well with him. He flew off the handle calling me ungrateful and any other name you can think of. Normally at this point I would go off by myself and cry and let him go to avoid a bigger conflict, but for some reason I decided to open my mouth. I told him that he was materialistic and that his toys meant more to him than his family.

The next thing I know he went back to our bedroom, got his gun, and brought it right back into the room that I was in. I took a step back not sure what he was going to do. I know he saw the horror on my face, but I had pushed him too far. He got right in my face, cocked the gun, and started waving it around yelling at me "What do you want me to shoot? I'll take it all out myself. There will be nothing left. I will shoot this whole fucking house up." I was terrified. I fell back on the couch not sure whether to look him in the eye or not. All the while thinking this is it, I am going to die. I let him yell and scream and I didn't say word. I didn't know if I might say something that would set him off and make him start shooting.

He stayed in his rage for what seemed like forever, until finally he put the gun down, looked at me and said, "Do what you want", and walked out the door to go work. I sat there after he left trying to figure out what just happened. I had never seen him so angry. It was like he snapped and had no control over his actions.

When I finally pulled myself together, I called the VA hospital to try and get him in to see someone. They told me at that time that he didn't qualify for any veteran's benefits, and he needed to find a psychiatrist to speak to. I was so mad at that point, before I hung up the phone I told them, "You broke him, now you need to fix him." Their reply was, "I hope you can find him help."

So it was either take him to someone that has no clue what he's been through or fix him myself. I decided I had enough love for both of us and I could help him adjust to not being in the military and be happy again. But making Justin change would not be an easy task so I decided the change had to start with me. If he was getting angry and yelling, I would agree with him. If he wanted to do something we did it. I did anything to make Justin happy.

By August 2005 I was pregnant with our son. My plan was somewhat working. For the most part it kept the peace around the house, and I really felt like we were starting to get back to a normal family. Well, as normal as can be for not seeing each other and me really not speaking when we were together.

But like always, feeling somewhat normal was just a temporary thing. And by November things were starting to unravel fast. I passed 70 kidney stones in 7 months. I spent 7 months in the hospital during my son's pregnancy. My girls were being bounced from place to place never knowing where they would go the next night. And all the while Justin is living a carefree life. He goes to work, comes up to the hospital after to get some sleep, and wakes up an hour before he has to go back to work.

I was a basket case missing my girls, but not seeing them for long periods of time did not bother Justin in the slightest bit. I know he cared about the kids and me, but it was almost like that was all. I started telling myself that Justin loves us as much as Justin possibly could love. I came to the realization that my husband was not passionately in love with me, and cared about our children as much as he could. I had to decide if I wanted to leave or continue living like this.

Looking back over the last two years there wasn't much reason to stay. But then I thought about our two beautiful kids, our first house, our marriage vows that I hold sacred in my heart, and the man I fell in love with. How could I walk away? This was my husband, and whether he knew it or not he needed me.

So after my son was born I decided to be a stay-at-home mom. I figured that way I would be able to see Justin a little bit more, the kids would be able to see their dad, and I would be able to fix Justin's issues. Staying at home was a big adjustment for me. Not to mention having a newborn and trying to get our daughter adjusted to being back home and having a baby brother. The first few weeks I don't think I got more than two hours of sleep a night, because my son had colic.

And then one night I found out my son would sleep with a vacuum cleaner running. Finally I was getting some sleep until Justin walked in the door to all the lights in the house on and the vacuum cleaner running.

As soon as he turned it off my eyes shot open and my son started screaming. I jumped up and quickly turned the vacuum cleaner back on. The sound must have startled Justin because he turned around and ripped the cord out of the wall. Once again he started yelling about how this stuff can't happen. I was in no mood to argue so I just said okay.

I really felt at this point so long as I continued to walk on egg shells and put up with his rants that things would get better and would continue in that same direction. But this is where it gets dangerously worse. A month after our son was born, Jesse was so freaked out by a storm that she kicked a candle off the table in a rage, and our house caught fire. So Justin took some time off work to help me with everything that needed to be done. For two weeks we lived in a hotel, and it was a nightmare with the two kids.

One-day Justin pulled one of his disappearing acts and left me stuck in the hotel with the kids for hours. When he got back I was mad and for the first time in a long time I spoke my mind. Justin started flying off the handle again and I told him to get out. When he told me no, I grabbed him by the shirt and tried to force him out the door. He turned around and grabbed me and slammed me back into the couch. It was the first time he ever put his hands on me in a rage.

Once the work on the house was done and we moved back home, Justin returned to work. I was relieved that I would actually get some time every day that I wouldn't have to worry about upsetting him. But that relief quickly went away when Jesse started acting like Justin. She was destructive, would go into a rage when I didn't give her my undivided attention and she was physically violent.

I know you're probably thinking that it's a two year old. How bad could it be? It got so bad that I was afraid to go to sleep at night for fear of what she would do. She picked up a fork and tried to stab me with it in the back when I was changing the baby's diaper and hitting me in the face became an everyday thing. It didn't matter what I did, I could not regain control.

So now not only did I have my husband to deal with, I had an out of control toddler. And to make it worse, when she would act out, it would set Justin off. This quickly became a dangerous vicious cycle. One of the times I tried to stop Justin from being so hard on her, he flew into a rage and threw me across the kitchen. I grabbed the phone and called 911. Before the call went through he ripped the phone line out of the wall but neither of us realized it was a different phone cord.

The whole time he was screaming and kicking things, 911 was on the phone. I was begging him to just leave and telling him how bad he was scaring me and the kids, but he just kept coming at me until he had me backed up against the wall. He punched a hole in the wall, barely missing the side of my face. He kept screaming at me and did it again. By this time I was crying hysterically and scared out of my mind. Then he just turned around and left.

I picked up the phone and must hit the off button because within seconds 911 was calling our house. They asked if everything was okay and told me an officer was on his way. I hung up the phone and called Justin telling him to stay away because the police were on the phone and heard everything. When the officer arrived, I let them come in and told them everything was fine we just got in a fight.

Again they asked me what happened and again I told them that it was just a fight. After he left I was so upset that I kicked the stuff over and punched holes in the wall myself. Why I protected him I still don't really know. But Justin was so afraid that I was going to send him to jail that it scared him straight. That was the last time he ever touched me.

On the following Monday I called the VA clinic again asking for help. Once again I was told there was nothing they could do. I was lost and scared to death of what my family's future would hold.

With Jesse and Justin's behavior I had my hands full 24 hours a day seven days a week. Feeling completely hopeless I sunk into a deep depression.

When I thought things couldn't get any worse, Justin lost his job. Now I had Justin and Jesse back together 24 hours a day, which only made things worse. It seemed like anything I said would set Justin off, which would make Jesse destructive and even more physically aggressive. For six months Justin was without a job.

Things were so bad, family members were starting to notice. My mother tried to talk to me about how Justin was acting. She said she had never seen me cower like that before. She asked me what she could do because I was being abused. I blew her off and told her I was not being abused. I mean it wasn't like he was hitting me. I told her that I was not cowering, I just didn't want to start a scene in front of people.

Justin's dad and stepmom also tried to help. They took Jesse and tried to work with her, then would take Jaxson for a while so I could spend one-on-one time with Jesse. As long as it was just me and Jesse she did pretty well. But the minute anyone else came around she would turn back in to an evil child. And Justin could not deal with the way she acted.

His rages started turning towards the kids and I started questioning him punishing them when he was so mad. And to make things worse I was starting to notice bruises on Jaxson. Justin's stepmom questioned the bruises and I assured her that I would remove the kids if I thought they were caused by Justin. The last straw came when Justin stepped on a toy one night and completely snapped. He started yelling and slamming the toy into the wall until it broke. He turned around and started screaming and cursing at the kids.

When Jesse ran in her room he jerked her up by her arm and started spanking her. I started screaming for him to stop and he put her down and started yelling at me. I told him to get out of our house or I would call the police. As he stormed out he knocked Jaxson out of the way.

First thing the next morning, I called Justin's stepmom and told her what had happened and told her I needed her to take the kids for a while. She told me to also bring the gun so it was not accessible to Justin. I quickly got the kids and everything together and got them away from Justin for their own safety.

In a last-ditch effort I called the VA and begged them for help. They asked me if he was an OEF/OIF veteran and I told them yes. They transferred me to a caseworker who talked to me about what was going on. I told her about his rages, the gun, and how he kept going from job to job among many other things.

I told her that I felt like he could not adjust to civilian life, and how he was a totally different man since coming home. She asked me if I could get him down there quickly. I told her yes, but I still had questions. I could tell by the way she was talking that this was not new to her. It also struck me as odd that for years I could get no help, and now he could get help. So I asked her if a lot of veterans had these problems. Her response was a simple yes. I was pissed now and when I started trying to ask more questions she said, "I can answer all of your questions when you are here, but I need you to bring your husband down here as soon as possible."

I did not know how I would get him to agree to go down there and talk to someone, so she told me to tell him that he might be eligible for money compensation if this was due to his time in the service. I sat there for a few minutes after we got off the phone trying to figure out how to approach Justin. I don't ever remember crying that hard in my life. But I honestly could not tell you if it was tears of joy or intense fear. Once I got myself pulled together, I stood up, wiped my face off, and headed straight to the room my husband was asleep.

You would have thought I was 10 foot tall and bulletproof the way I was walking. But I was determined. I knew no matter what, I had to hold my ground.

When I got to the door I stopped, took a deep breath, and then walked in. I had to yell a few times to get Justin to wake up. I waited until he responded and then very bluntly said, "Get up we are going down to the VA. I don't want to hear any arguments. You either go, or I am leaving you." He didn't say anything and so I stood there for a second waiting for a response. Nothing so I repeated myself again.

This time he responded as he got out of bed, telling me that I needed to go to counseling not him. So I listened to his rant while he got in the shower expecting at any moment for him to say, "No I am not going." But he never did. I do not know if deep down he knew he needed to go.

As we were leaving, he asked about the kids. I was not going to open that can of worms alone, so I told him they were at his stepmom's until we were done.

Once at the VA clinic, we had to fill out some paperwork and, were taken back to an OEF/OIF case worker. She introduced herself and told us about what she did for veterans returning from war.

She looked at Justin and asked him what he did in the Military and why he thought we were there. Every time he answered, it always started with "I guess." "I guess I have anger issues, I guess I am having a hard time adjusting to civilian life, I guess I scare her and the kids." Everything was, I guess, I guess, I guess. So I sat there and waited until he was finished.

When he was done, the caseworker looked at me and asked what my concerns were. I had made a list of things so I would not leave anything out.

- Nightmares
- Choking me while asleep
- Saying he would kill me in his sleep
- Sleeping with his gun
- Won't answer phone
- Just wants to be alone
- Always has to be in control
- Up most of night and sleeps most of day
- Puts himself where he can see everything
- Threatening me with the gun
- Uncontrollable anger
- Road Rage
- Jumping from job to job
- Gets angry at little things
- Punches holes in things
- He did not want to do anything that involved crowds
- Our lack of sex life
- Avoided any military parades
- A kid speeding is no different than a terrorist in his eyes
- Justin loved me as much as he possibly could
- His kids bother him

When I was finished she explained that a lot of what Justin was experiencing was something that a lot of other soldiers were dealing with when they returned home.

And then she handed me a pamphlet for PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I was confused and had many questions as I read through the PTSD pamphlet. Things like, how did he get PTSD, since he was not in combat? And why was it that I was never told what to watch out for, or that this was even a possibility?

She answered everything the best she could and explained to Justin that he needed to go to counseling. But first he would need to talk to someone who would determine the best course of treatment. She also explained that if it was found that all of this was caused by his military career, that he would be compensated with money. I told her with tears rolling down my face, "I don't give a damn about the money. I just want the man I married back."

She nodded, as if to tell me she understood, and walked out of the room to find out what would happen next. Within 10 minutes she had us talking to a person who would decide what Justin needed.

He took us in a room and asked me first what was going on and why were we here. So once again I explained it all. Once I was finished, he looked at Justin and started talking to him. I quickly realized I was clueless as to the language they were speaking to one another. It was English, but some sort of military thing. He asked me if I would mind stepping outside so Justin and he could talk. I agreed and went outside to wait for Justin.

Justin came out about 30 minutes later and told me that he had to start seeing a counselor at something called the Vet Center the next day. I asked him if he was OK with all of this, and his response was, "I don't really have a choice do I." Not exactly the answer I was looking for, but at least he understood that he had to go. So I did not say anything else the rest of the day.

Once he left for work, I got on the phone with his stepmom and told her what had happened, what was going on and that I would call her the next day.

So the next day, we went to the Vet Center and met his new counselor. She was very nice and told us up front that she was an intern. She also had served in the military, and knew a lot about guns, so they had a common bond right there.

The first session was normal. As in a lot of tears, and telling her the same story that we had told the day before. We also talked about the kids, and I explained to both of them that I had moved them out of the home until I got Justin help and I saw improvement. That did not sit very well with Justin. He kept saying he couldn't have left bruises on Jaxson and he did not hurt him.

The counselor realized we had some serious issues and asked us to come back every day for the rest of the week. We agreed and left for the day. On day 2 of counseling we spent a lot of time talking about our daughter and the way she acted. We told her how she refused to listen, how destructive she was, and about how when she was 2 she picked up a fork and tried to stab me in the back with it while I was changing our newborn's diaper.

We all laughed as I told the counselor about when you hear stories of a parent being abused by their kids. People think the kid just needs some discipline or as some people would say "that kid needs a good ass whooping." But when it is happening to you, it is not so easy.

We talked about a few other things and then talked about our son's bruises again. Once again he denied hurting him in any way or giving him those bruises.

As soon as I got home, I called Justin's stepmom and told her what was going on. I told her how his story never changed, and how he stuck to denying that he had done anything harmful to our son. She sat there for a second and then said, "If Justin is not hurting him, then something else is wrong that would cause him to bruise like this all over." That really got me thinking.

So on Day 3 of counseling, I went in and told Justin that he had one last chance to tell me if he had hurt our son, because if not then something was wrong with him and I needed to take him to a doctor. But if I took him to the doctor and they said it was abuse, I could not help him and he would have to move out. Justin shocked me when he told me to please take him in. I was not expecting that at all. So we decided the next day I would take our son to the doctor and Justin would go to counseling alone. I woke up early and started getting ready. I called the doctor at 7:55 in the morning, and scheduled my son's appointment for 10:45.

I drove 45 minutes to pick up my son, and another 45 minutes back and arrived at the doctor's office at 10:20. I sat in my van for 15 minutes arguing with myself. I tried to think of other ways to handle this and be more supportive of my husband, but I could not think of a single one. So I quickly pulled myself together, got my son, and went in to face whatever was thrown our way.

They called us and took us to a room. When the doctor came in she asked what was going on, and I broke down in tears as I explained to her my concerns. I told her Justin was having some anger issues and my son was bruising a lot. I told her I honestly did not know if they came from Justin or maybe from something else. The doctor quickly ruled out abuse and started doing blood work to figure out what might be the cause of his bruises.

I called Justin at the Vet Center to let him and his counselor know it was not abuse. I asked him how things were going and he told me they were talking about guns and how relaxing it was to go shoot them. That bothered me because I had a real problem with Justin and guns, but I had other things to worry about.

Words could not express how bad I felt not trusting my husband and accusing him of child abuse. Every time I would try to say something, he would cut me off with a, "no big deal" or "don't worry about it." Which believe me, made me feel much worse.

It took one week to complete the tests which told us that our son had something called Von Willebrand disease, which is a hereditary bleeding disorder that results in easy bruising. It was a relief and it confirmed that my husband was not hurting the kids. With that information we moved the kids back into the house and focused on counseling. The first thing I wanted to address was Justin and his guns in the house.

I went to counseling expecting them to agree with me and tell Justin that the guns had to go. But shockingly they sat and talked to me about how relaxing it was for Justin to shoot his gun. What? Are you kidding me? I am scared to death of this gun, and they are trying to convince me that he needs this as a stress reliever.

This went on for 2 weeks and then all of the sudden they started talking to Justin about getting an air gun. That way he could still have his stress reliever and I would feel safe because he could not kill me with it. It may hurt like hell, but I would not die if he shot me. I could not believe it when Justin agreed. I was sold at that point. These counselors knew what they were doing and I knew my family was going to be OK. It may not be perfect and we still had a long way to go, but it was the first glimpse of hope I had in years.

They also got Justin into the VA behavioral clinic. They started trying a few different medications and found that Wellbutrin worked the best for his anxiety. They also gave him a medication used for allergies to help him sleep. I started seeing positive improvements in Justin pretty quickly when we got the medication figured out.

We continued with counseling at the Vet Center and seeing the VA about once a month. At our next visit to the Vet Center, the counselor gave me a book called "Veterans and Families' Guide to Recovering from PTSD" by Stephanie Laite Lanham. She said you could get it free at any Vet Center or VA.

She asked me to read through it and make notes in each section of things I saw Justin doing. She also gave me a copy of the DSM Criteria for PTSD and told me to go through it and see where Justin fit. When I first looked at the criteria, it really meant nothing to me. So I started reading the book and hoped that it would give me some answers and would help the criteria make sense. It did. Here is what I put on the form:

DSM-IV DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR PTSD

- A. The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following were present:
- (1) The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others
 - (2) The person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.
- B. The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced in one (or more) of the following ways:
- (1) Recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions.
 - (2) Recurrent distressing dreams of the event.
 - (3) Acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur on awakening or when intoxicated.
 - (4) Intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.
 - (5) Physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.
- C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by three (or more) of the following:
- (1) Efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
 - (2) Efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
 - (3) Inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
 - (4) Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities
 - (5) Feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
 - (6) Restricted range of affect (e.g., unable to have loving feelings)
 - (7) Sense of a foreshortened future (e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span)
- D. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma), as indicated by two (or more) of the following:
- (1) Difficulty falling or staying asleep
 - (2) Irritability or outbursts of anger
 - (3) Difficulty concentrating
 - (4) Hyper vigilance
 - (5) Exaggerated startle response
- E. Duration of the disturbance (symptoms in Criteria B, C, and D) is more than 1 month.

DSM-IV DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR PTSD, continued

F. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Specify if:

Acute: if duration of symptoms is less than 3 months

Chronic: if duration of symptoms is 3 months or more

Specify if:

With Delayed Onset: if onset of symptoms is at least 6 months after the stressor.

Anger - The holes in the walls, snapping at everything. We had anger issues.

Anxiety - Irritability and sleep disturbance. We had Anxiety.

Chronic Pain - None.

Compulsion - Everything had to be a certain way.

Confusion - Combative Behavior, forgetting things. Check.

Crisis - Feel out of Control. With Justin everything is a Crisis.

Delusions - Flashbacks. None when awake, but in his sleep

Denial - I needed help; there was nothing wrong with him.

Dependence - I had to handle everything for Justin. I was the man and woman of the family.

Depression - This one was hard because Justin would say no he is not depressed. But agitation, anxiety, withdrawal, etc. are all symptoms. So I would say yes.

Disordered Eating - When Justin first came home he had a hard time with food. They all seemed to make him sick.

Flashbacks - No only Dreams.

Grief - Justin seemed like he didn't care about anything. He had walls built up. It was hard to tell anything.

Guilt - "Survivor's Guilt" I honestly could not answer that.

Isolation - Justin didn't want to do anything. He didn't go around friends, didn't want to go around people, and didn't want to do things we used to do.

Loneliness - Justin never could talk to me and said I wouldn't understand. He felt like he had no one.

Low Self-Esteem - Justin always had a cocky attitude. He did not have a problem with this.

Obsessions - His gun was his biggest obsession. Along with trying to structure our family lives to be like his military life.

Hyper vigilance - Justin was always on guard. Life was so serious.

Passive-Aggressive Behavior - Everything turned into an angry discussion. He could not reply without being angry or hostile.

Phobia - I did not think Justin had phobias. But he did avoid anything that had to do with Veterans.

Sexual Trauma - None

Sleep Disorders - Justin would not sleep at night and then crash during the day. And once he did get to sleep he would sleep 12-14 hours.

Substance Abuse - None

Suicidal Thoughts or Ideation - None

A Small Victim

By the time we went back to the next counseling session we had plenty to discuss. Out of all of these possible symptoms, Justin had quite a few of them. We talked about “triggers” or in other words what sets Justin off. We started trying to decide what compromises would need to be made to avoid setting Justin off. At first the focus was on getting Justin to open up and not be so angry and defensive.

But we also talked about Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The counselor explained to me that this is not recognized by doctors yet, but they are starting to see it more and more. Spouses, children, and/or caregivers of veterans with PTSD will sometimes start to exhibit some of the “common characteristics” of PTSD. She said it was because trauma has taught the veteran that at any moment safety could be destroyed, and the actions and reactions of the veteran can traumatize the people around them.

With our daughter Jesse it was like she was Justin made over. She grew up with her dad punching holes in walls, yelling and screaming about everything, and pretty much acting like he hated us so that was all she knew. She learned when things did not go right, dad yells, goes into rages, and becomes physically destructive, so she thought that is what you did to deal with things.

We talked a lot about how to deal with her. We knew we had a long way to go, but it would start with re-teaching her what was acceptable behavior and what was not. We also knew that Justin would have to change his behavior also. We decided that for the time being that we should focus on him and work with Jesse along the way.

Our Life is Changing

With counseling, our family was starting to change. Justin was really starting to open up in our sessions and I was learning to adapt to living with him having PTSD. But a lot stayed the same. Justin was still jumping from job to job since he had come back home, and I realized the job he was working now would probably not last much longer. He had been there a little less than a year, and he was starting to have problems with his boss.

We discussed his problems at counseling, and talked about what Justin really wanted to do. His response was simple: he wanted to become a police officer. He had an interview coming up with the sheriff's department, which is further than he had made it the other 4 times he had applied for a police job. So we were remaining hopeful that this time it would work out. But in my mind I was already concerned. So I started looking for a way to make some extra money on the side. Just in case he did not get the job as a sheriff or lost his current job.

I had no clue what to do, until one day when Justin fixed his broken Xbox 360. We started throwing around the idea of fixing broken Xbox 360. He was looking on EBay and was pretty confident it would be easy to fix the RROD. So I decided to buy 2 broken Xboxes and see what would happen. When they arrived Justin eagerly jumped in and started taking them apart.

Three hours later Justin was in a rage because he could not get them to work. He had pretty much decided that fixing Xbox 360s was not that easy and too frustrating for him. So I told him to explain the whole process to me. Tell me what the problem was, what he was supposed to do to fix it, and why he did not think it was working.

So when Justin left for work and I got the kids in bed that night, I jumped on the internet and started to do some research. I watched YouTube videos and bought an Xbox 360 repair guide. By the time Justin came home I had figured out that he could not fix them because he had nicked the motherboard when trying to take parts off. So I ordered 2 more broken Xbox 360s and decided to try it again. Through my research I also found out that the way Justin was planning on fixing these Xboxes was not the right way and ordered a hot air rework station like the one I had seen used in a YouTube video.

Once everything arrived we tried to repair the boxes with the new machine we had gotten. Within 2 hours we had repaired both broken Xbox 360s and put them up for sale on EBay. When they both sold within 24 hours, we had made \$50.00 profit on both Xboxes. So, the next day I ordered 10 more broken Xbox 360s.

The following Saturday Justin had his interview with the Sheriff Department. I waited at home until he got back to see how it went. He told me that they would send a letter in the next few weeks to let him know. While we waited to find out if he had gotten the job, we continued to go to counseling and work on Xboxes.

When the letter arrived Justin walked in the house and threw it at me. He had once again been rejected. He went to work that night and decided to work a half day. The problem was that he did not ask anyone and just left a note on the boss's desk. The next day when he went to work he got suspended for 3 days. When he called and told me I was dumbfounded. I could not believe he didn't ask his boss if he could use part of his personal day. So I called our counselor and told her what was going on. She told us to come in the next day.

When we got to counseling we started with me first. I was upset and could not believe that Justin had pulled a stunt like that. But talking to him we realized he did not think he had done anything wrong. His reasoning was the boss leaves all the time without telling anyone. He really didn't understand that when someone is a boss they have more freedom than employees do. He kept saying, "in the service," I threw up my hands at that point and told the counselor he doesn't get it. Then he started talking about not getting hired on as a police officer and how he was better trained for the position than all of the kids coming out of college.

She tried to explain to Justin at that point whether he realized it or not, his body language and the way he talked could be the reason he was not getting hired. She tried to get him to understand that others could tell he was time bomb waiting to go off and as a police officer that was dangerous. They started talking about his answers to questions in the interview. Listening to him, I just shook my head because even I could tell by his answers that he did not get hired because he was too programmed by the military. With Justin everything was black and white, right or wrong. There was no grey area in his mind.

I started thinking about him having a gun again and that made me really nervous. So I jumped in and started talking about how it was okay that he did not get the job and how we started a home business and that would make up the income that he would have gotten by being a sheriff. And if things kept going well with the business, maybe we could get to a point that he wouldn't have to have a job. I stressed that we were not to that point yet but we had a good thing going and we needed to concentrate on that so he could stay home. A lot of Justin's stress came from having to go to work and be around people.

For the next month we really focused on the Xbox 360 business. I worked with a wholesaler to get our Xboxes cheaper and did some work for him in trade for Xboxes. We got to a point where we were repairing 50 broken Xboxes every 10-14 days. The downside to that, was that it was taking a toll on us. Justin was still working full time, I had to watch the kids while Justin was at work, each box took about an hour to repair and after they were repaired we would have to play on them for an hour or two to make sure they would not break again. Because of that we were not getting much sleep and our stress level was starting to go sky high. Add the time it took me to list them on EBay, answer questions, ship them off, and handle any returns or complaints and it was becoming a nightmare.

Then Justin got laid off from his job. I thought it was okay because now we would be able to run the Xbox business better with both of us home. Working from home seemed to help Justin more than anything. He did not have the stress any longer of having to be around other people and there was no boss for Justin to argue with.

The only problem was that as our Xbox 360 repair business grew, it put stress back on Justin. I quickly realized that Justin could not handle the high demands our business was putting on us. So I was stuck. Having a job did not work for Justin, and neither did working from home. I dug back in and tried to figure out another way that he could work from home.

I realized people were making a lot of money by selling information products. So after some research I decided to write an [Xbox 360 DVD Repair Guide](#). There were no other guides like this out there. We thought we hit the jackpot!

But we quickly found out that writing a book was not enough. There was so much more involved when it came to marketing.

Over the next few months I learned so much about working online and through trial and error became very good at getting traffic where I wanted it. So I started teaching people how to work from home using social media marketing. It was great that we were finally starting to make some money and I had achieved my goal of Justin not having to work.

Jesse was doing much better and when we found out she needed glasses, her behavioral problems completely turned around. Jesse and Justin still have their issues and there are some times when she still acts like Justin, but she is no longer physically violent with me. With Jesse making drastic improvements, I kept thinking that Justin would start really turning around soon. I could not wait to get the man I married back.

We continued to go to counseling and I was expecting to start seeing some major changes. But after a few months of not much change and Justin still having good and bad days, I asked the counselor when my husband would be back to his old self. She looked at me and said, "This is your husband. He has suffered a traumatic event and it has changed him. The only thing we can do is help him deal with it". I did not know how to react or what to say. She was telling me in a way that the person that I fell in love with and married was gone and would never come back. All I could do was cry and in a sense, I guess, mourn. I had to accept who my husband was now and that it was not his fault that he had changed.

Reflection

I found trying to accept Justin was a difficult task. I kept thinking about my dreams that I sacrificed and was bitter. With each passing day I felt the love I fought so hard to protect slipping away.

I remember growing up dreaming of what I thought my husband should be. A man who loved me more than anything, who was a good father and treated his family with respect. I had found the man of my dreams and now that man was gone. God was the first direction of my anger. I had stuck by my husband. I was faithful in my marriage. So why was this happening? Now I was supposed to live the rest of my life with someone who was nothing like the man I married? I didn't sign up for this. Why should I have to stay in this marriage? I was angry about what I had lost. Over the next few weeks, who I was angry at changed many times.

It started with Justin himself. I remember thinking, "Just deal with it already! It's part of life! It sucks, I know, but get over it!" I know that seems cruel, but I had to blame someone. I called the Vet Center and spoke to our counselor about how I felt. I asked her why he couldn't just get over it. We discussed that for a little while and then she finally asked, "Shawn knowing all he saw and went through, could you just get over it?" I told her I didn't know, because even though I understand what happened, I couldn't really grasp what the military life was really like because I wasn't there. She suggested I watch the movie *Full Metal Jacket*. She told me to think about myself being one of the characters. Then hopefully I would understand where Justin was. Before hanging up the phone she said, "Shawn, for almost 10 years you have had to deal with Justin's deployment and then him coming home a different person. You have fought so hard to save your family for years alone, that it's all you know. You have lost yourself through all of this. When we have talked in sessions it has always been about helping Justin. We have talked about how you feel with some of the things that have happened, but we have not really gotten into you having to deal with everything. What you are feeling right now is normal. And you are going to have to go through it before you will accept this. We are to the point now where Justin is okay. We can spend some time on Shawn. You are going to have to deal with your emotions now, the ones that you have not talked about because they are too painful. Like when Justin had pulled the gun on you at the house. Not that it wouldn't be scary for anyone it happened to, but it was even more traumatic for you because you knew Justin could do it. You knew his training and that he had been trained to kill and wouldn't hesitate for a second to do it. So go watch the movie and then we will start next week with you."

OK, I thought I had been dealing with things. I mean we had to get the gun out of the house so I was no longer scared. The problems were not with me, they were with Justin. But I trusted her and was willing to try whatever she suggested.

So I got the movie *Full Metal Jacket* and was set to watch it. Justin asked why I wanted to watch it, and I told him that the counselor thought I needed to watch it to understand what military life was like. He chuckled and said, "Oh you will see that for sure". I must have asked him 1,000 times throughout the movie, "Is that what it is really like?" Afterwards Justin and I sat and talked about the movie and his life in the military. I told him, "I was right. I said it was like you were brainwashed when you went to that anti-terrorism training course." Without realizing it, I was connecting with Justin on a level I never had before. I was beginning to have an understanding why he could not "just get over it."

Then I was angry with the military. It was like they reprogrammed his brain. They broke him down through fear until he stopped reacting with his emotions. They beat it into his head that if he let his guard down for a second, he could be killed. They knew what they were doing to get the results they wanted. When he left the training they had him so keyed up, that when all these things happened it fried his brain. Then without deprogramming him, they just shipped him back to me with no warning about what I would have to deal with.

Then I was angry with the government that would not help him after he served them. They used him for what they needed and then threw him aside. And as for spouses, I was nothing to them. When I called the VA for help they did not tell me about the Vet Centers. When Justin got a serious staph infection, they transferred him to a VA hospital 3 hours away from our home and wouldn't even let me stay in the room with him. They stuck me in a room with 6 other men. When I told them I wasn't comfortable with that, they said, "We are not here to make spouses comfortable, we are here to take care of the veteran."

Coping

When we walked into our next counseling session the first thing Justin said was, "She's losing it. I've seen this before, and it ain't good." I told the counselor how angry I became after watching *Full Metal Jacket*. We talked about the military and the VA for a while and then she wanted to talk about things from the beginning. I didn't really see how that was going to help and was resistant to talking about it. She asked about how I handled Justin's deployment. I told her I was fine. I missed him, but I dealt with things just fine.

I knew what was coming next, but I was not ready to talk about it. "How about when Justin came home?" she asked. What did she expect me to say? It was hard. She told me to dig deep and really just let it out. I once again avoided it by telling her, "We are here about Justin, not me."

We argued about talking about me for a few moments until she finally said, "Shawn, for years you have fought to save your marriage, don't stop now when it is so close. You are what is holding it back now. Until you face your emotions, this marriage will not be whole."

As resistant I was, I started to talk. But once I started, I could not stop. "I thought when Justin came home, we would be this happy family. But we weren't. I thought I could help him through things. But he shoved me away. I felt like he was not attracted to me. It's like he would rather be back in the military and not with his family. And what's worse, he has drug me into this war mindset with him. I play Call of Duty 4 and Gears of War, but I don't just play them, I really get into those stupid games."

"Okay, when you tried to help Justin through things and it did not work, how did you feel?" she asked.

"What do you mean how did I feel?" I said. "I felt worthless. I couldn't deal with it. I would have rather been dead than keep living the way we were going."

Finally, it was out. As I looked up at Justin with eyes full of tears, I told him, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't understand what you went through."

Acceptance

Little did I know, that from the time Justin came home, I had started the 5 steps of grieving. My denial started with thinking Justin was just having a hard time adjusting. The bargaining stage began when I started walking on eggshells. I was stalled at this point for years. Writing became my outlet, how I kept my own sanity. It also allowed me a way to open the lines of communication once we began counseling. Each day we would write about things that happened and then discuss them in counseling.

The last 3 stages in the grieving process came rather quickly once I allowed them to. Justin and I are still together and happy. Justin still has his good days and bad days, but that makes the good days that much better.

PTSD does not define us. I am no longer a victim. I have become a survivor of a survivor.