Shoshana Johnson

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El Paso, Texas

Living With Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

I'm from an army family and I became the U.S. armed forces' first African-American female prisoner of war. My dad did 20 years in the service, and my sister was in the military. She was in the army when I joined, so I knew that a soldier basically trained for war. But they'd also have a secondary job as either a cook or work in supplies or be a medic. But I knew that the basic effort of being in the armed forces was to train for war.

My daughter knows that Mommy was in the army, that she went to war, that I got captured, I got shot, then I was rescued and I was able to come home. She's 9 years old now, but as she gets older, she asks more detailed questions. When she does, I give her honest answers. [Editor's note: Shoshana Johnson was captured along with other members of the 507th Maintenance Company including Jessica Lynch, near the Iraqi-held town of Nasiriyah.]

When Jessica Lynch was rescued, there was a lot of hoopla about her being freed because the army didn't know if they would find the rest of us. The whole thing became a situation where the army pumped up this good thing (of rescuing Jessica) because they didn't know if they were going to get another opportunity like that. By the time we came home, we were the last ones from our company to come home alive. That was good, but there were seven of us soldiers, so our homecoming wasn't as pumped up as the original rescue.

After I came home, the army people asked certain questions about my health, and, of course, I denied there were any problems. It was one of my family members, my aunt, who's a registered nurse, who recognized that I did have a problem. She'd noticed my startled reactions to loud noises and that I wasn't sleeping. I had a quick temper, and there were times when I would go into a serious depression. So she went to my doctors and said, "Yes, there is a problem."

I think that women soldiers put a lot of stress on themselves trying to fit into some mold in our heads as to what we should be like when we come home from war. As a female soldier, we think that we can go to war and then return to the United States and revert back to that oh-so-cuddly mommy, and we can't do that. It's not that easy.

My family has always been supportive. They were right behind my aunt when she said that there

was something wrong and that I needed to go see a psychiatrist. They felt I needed to do it, and they pushed too.

For me, I didn't want to be jumpy, angry and depressed. It took me a long time to accept I was suffering from PTSD.

I was discharged from the army in December 2003. Then, about two months after I came home, I began to receive treatment. Since I'm considered a military retiree, the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) came up when it was time to get benefits. The doctors were denying that I had PTSD.

Once you ask for medical retirement, there are a series of tests and doctors reports that go forward to a medical board, called a physical evaluation board, or PEB. My files got sent to this board, and they evaluated all the medical records and assigned a percentage to each of my issues. They assign you as either fit for duty or unfit for duty, and then they assign you a percentage for each medical issue that you have. The paperwork is sent to Washington, DC, to process.

The PEB didn't want to give me a percentage (of benefits) for PTSD, and when paperwork came back, they gave me zero percentage for it. They said, "Your condition is not that bad," even though I was in treatment and taking three medications at the time to control the issue. That was the main fight with them. They recognized the issues with my legs and my back, but getting a percentage of benefits for the PTSD was a big fight.

In the end, the percentage didn't make that much of a difference. I think it ended up being 75 bucks a month, which isn't much. But for me, getting the benefit was an acknowledgement that my condition was traumatic and that they were responsible for my care after what had happened.

When I started therapy, I saw a psychiatrist once each week. But now, I see the psychiatrist once each month. When I tried to go off my medication after six months, my family noticed the difference. I was feeling good, but after about a week, my family looked at me and asked, "Are you taking your medication?" When the people who are around me can spot the differences, then I know that I need to go to therapy and I need to take my medication, because they can see the improvements, and they can see the backsliding.

There were days that I didn't leave my home. Now I actively go out in public and am active in my community.

I am still in treatment and take medication; I have therapy sessions and I see a psychologist and a psychiatrist. I think that I have gotten better. Would I call myself normal? No, but I've gotten better from the time I got home until now.



Shoshana Johnson

Author, with M.L. Doyle, of the book I’m Still Standing From Captive U.S. Soldier to Free Citizen—My Journey Home

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