

Understanding Anger in Veterans: Tips and Strategies to Support Veterans Struggling with Anger

Darren's story

Darren (DOB 1989), the younger son of Bev and Tony, grew up in Adelaide. He was a well-adjusted popular kid; a good student achieving above average grades. He excelled at sport, particularly athletics. Unlike his peers and older brother, he was not a risk taker, sailing through his teenage years unscathed. For as long as he could remember, he had always wanted to be an electrician. He was thrilled when his uncle offered him an electrical apprenticeship at the end of Year 11. The apprenticeship experience surpassed his expectations.

When his mother died suddenly in June 2009, he *'went off the rails a bit'* binge drinking with his brother and mates. Until then, Darren had only been a moderate drinker. He didn't like how alcohol interfered with his weight lifting which he started during his apprenticeship, and which now occupied most of his *'down time'*. After Bev died, he found solace in his brother's company which necessitated, due to his brother's favourite pastime, long sessions at the pub. Darren struggled with the late nights and early work starts. Despite his uncle giving him a couple of warnings, he was shocked and disappointed in himself, when his apprenticeship was terminated.

He had inherited a small amount of money from his mother and for the next couple of months he was unemployed and drinking heavily. *'I was kinda numb, not really thinking about anything, but I got a wake up call when I noticed how I couldn't lift the weights I used to'*. In 2010, somewhat impulsively, he made a decision to move to Darwin, purchase a small house and join the Australian Defence Force. *'It was more to help me get my drinking in line...I never wanted to follow in my brother's footsteps who drinks*

way too much but little did I know it would be the best decision of my life'.

Upon entry to the Australian Defence Force, Darren trained as an engineer and was surprised at how easily he took to it; enjoying it more than being an electrician. In fact, he valued everything about being in the army and living in Darwin. He had given up drinking, had joined a gym and was dating Tanya who worked in administration on the barracks. *'I was stoked how, after joining the army, everything just came together. I felt proud of who I was and what I was doing.'*

Over the next six years, Darren undertook two tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan respectively, where due to his engineering training he was responsible for bomb and Improvised Explosive Device disposal. In both tours he had multiple contacts and was involved in exchanges of fire. The first tour went relatively well. Darren trusted his skills and performed well in his work. He enjoyed the camaraderie, getting on well with his team mates who looked out for him, aware that this was his first deployment.

In the second tour of duty he did well in his tasks, but he found this deployment much harder. Darren felt his unit was sent on missions at very short notice, with little information about the location or nature of the task. On one occasion Darren was blamed, unfairly so he thought, for the unit bringing the wrong equipment. He became increasingly angry at what he felt were communication failures by his commanders. Then something awful happened. One of Darren's team members, a young guy with whom Darren had formed a close alliance, was seriously injured in combat.

Darren's immediate and overriding reaction to the situation was how unfair it was. He felt the unit could have been briefed better. He became disillusioned about the army and about what was expected of the troops. *'Skilled, tough focused guys we are, we could cope with danger and anything that war would throw at us, if only ...'*

Darren couldn't shake these feelings and over time he started to feel it was affecting his communication with his superiors.

For the first couple of months after returning from this second tour of duty, Darren felt an unfamiliar tension. He was unsettled and jumpy, quick to flare up, often about trivial things. If his meal wasn't hot enough or if one of his mates was playing music too loud. He'd gotten himself into a few fights and had started drinking again, so it didn't really surprise him when he punched one of his sergeants, after the sergeant intervened in a verbal stoush Darren was having by telling him to settle down. He was surprised when he was issued with administrative discharge shortly afterwards. He was so irritated he didn't bother to pay too much attention to the reasons.

Tanya and Darren were now living together, Tanya having moved in three years ago. Initially, after his discharge she was sympathetic and encouraged Darren to *'take it easy, be kind to yourself, take some time out before you decide what you are going to do next'*. Darren spent more time at the gym, but something had shifted for him and he couldn't focus on the weights like he used to. It felt like a different gym. He was constantly distracted and irritated; other members weren't cleaning the equipment after use, were taking too long, not taking it seriously, the music was too loud, not loud enough, or the air conditioning was up too high. He niggled with and occasionally would confront other members. On other occasions when Darren felt too jumpy he'd leave and go home, but by the time Tanya came home, he'd have got himself into such a state that they'd inevitably have an argument. So instead, he started going to the pub and having a beer or two to calm himself down.

One day there was a woman at the gym who wasn't using the equipment properly and Darren just lost it, *'I really yelled at her, used some pretty filthy language and that was*

it, they didn't care how long and loyal my membership had been, they banned me.'

Darren now divided his time between the pub and home. Mindful of controlling his drinking he'd limit his beers to four per day. The rest of the day *'was spent at home, watching telly'*. He started to get headaches and almost every other day he found himself *'eating a couple of Panadols'*. Most days by the time Tanya got home he'd be so irritated with his day that he'd verbally lash out at her. He never thought she'd annoy him, had always thought she *'was perfect for him'*, but more and more he'd be impatient with and frustrated by her. Soon the arguments escalated and Darren would take his frustrations out on the walls. He became increasingly frightened of his anger. He was fearful of his own strength and what would happen if he ever really hit someone, especially Tanya. However, she never gave him the chance because after a few weeks Tanya moved out.

Darren struggled on his own and found himself reacting to the slightest things. People in the street who looked at him the *'wrong way'* or walked too slowly, anyone really was at risk. Risky it was, because Darren had no doubt of his strength, and how quickly his anger could appear like a flash out of nowhere. He was terrified that the two made a deadly combination.

Nowadays he feels constantly tense. His headaches persist and are now a daily occurrence. Panadol no longer works. Darren wonders if he could just ease that pain he'd be in a better position to *'get my old life back, or at least start lifting weights again and get back with Tanya'*. He makes an appointment with his GP to discuss what stronger meds might be available.