



Supporting the Families of Veterans: Understanding the Impact of Veterans' Mental Health on their Families

Joy's story

May 2011: our long awaited reunion with our husband and father was finally here. Despite being a seasoned military man of 25 years, I knew my husband had faced some difficulties whilst in Afghanistan. He had been hospitalised for Rhabdomyolysis and experienced numerous rocket attacks on the compound that resulted in several deaths. Adding to the stress was the effort to try to stay connected with our family whilst away.

The airport was unusually quiet, with only a few military families waiting to welcome their loved ones home. Walking from behind the partition, I immediately noticed his reserved demeanour, lack of enthusiasm and distracted gaze; his mind was elsewhere. We all instantly felt this chasm between us. But it's early days. It will get better.

There was much change for my husband to take in after being away for such a long time. In his absence a lot was different. We had relocated to Brisbane, after eight years in Canberra, arriving in Brisbane the weekend of the 2011 floods. We were now living in an unfamiliar house and our children had all grown and matured.

Having my husband home, in my eyes, meant an opportunity for us all to regroup and catch our breath. He would be physically available to help and impart some much needed support. In the previous three years, we had spent a total of eleven months together as a family, as pre-deployment training, deployments and post-deployments took a large amount of time away from us all.

Instantly, it was noticeable that he was not engaging with any of the family. He held back in conversation, would gaze

off into the distance and often removed himself from the dinner table quickly.

Before long, he was going away for training again. The familiar 'home for one week, gone for two' became our reality. Relationships began to become strained in our family, not only between my husband and me, but also between our children. During the floods, our teenage sons had stepped up in their father's absence to become the young men of the household. When their father left, they were young teenage boys, but now they were young men who really blossomed during the times of hardship. At this point, we sought counselling via Veterans and Veterans' Families Counselling Service (VVCS) and also saw the local Defence Community Organisation (DCO) counsellor.

One day whilst out shopping, I bumped into an old friend from a previous posting. Our husbands had worked together and it was great to see a familiar face. Our families got together for dinner, which highlighted even more concerns. My husband, usually a friendly outgoing man, was withdrawn, very clingy towards me, uninterested in conversation and wanted to get home quickly. This became a common occurrence if we ever did venture out or try to socialise. He began to wear his uniform at home, as he felt more comfortable in it. This behaviour became the norm.

Two short years in Brisbane before another posting. This time to Sydney. We had tried to remain in Queensland, asking for a compassionate posting, however, those requests were denied, and we moved to Penrith at the end of 2012.

My husband moved into a job where he did not have the prior three years training in the USA to prepare him for this position; he was thrown into the deep end.

Our second son had just finished year twelve and, as he and his father were not getting along, he decided to take a job on a station in far west Queensland. Our family was beginning to become fragmented.

Moving the rest of the family to Penrith meant our third son would be changing schools in his final year. To keep some continuity, I organised for distance education for him and also for my daughter who was to complete year ten. This would also give us an opportunity to catch our breath and process all that had occurred in the prior two years. It would be an opportunity for everyone to de-stress and reconnect.

My husband's new work environment was stressful as personalities became a dominant part of his day-to-day workload. The stress of work became increasingly noticeable, affecting his personality.

In April 2013, on our son's eighteenth birthday, my husband had his first breakdown. Seeing a GP at hospital, he was immediately placed on antidepressants and referred to a military GP and psychologist for treatment. We also learned that depression was an illness experienced by many of his relatives.

Their father's breakdown triggered a range of emotions in our children, with anger being at the forefront. The already strained relationships continued to become more disjointed.

For the duration of our time in Penrith, my husband saw his doctors regularly, made good progress and was taken off all medication by the end of 2014.

December 2015 saw another posting to Canberra, despite being promised a posting to Williamtown (NSW). At this point in our lives it was decided that I would move with the children to Tamworth to establish them in our home and to have a stable location, where we would commute to and from Canberra.

In January 2016, my husband relocated to Canberra. He began working in a high intensity position with a shortage of employees, resulting in an increased work load equivalent to that of three personnel. The long work hours, a boss with high expectations and living away from family began to take its toll. When he came home for weekends, he would sleep the entire time before returning to Canberra. He was withdrawing and withholding the struggles he faced, living unaccompanied in Canberra. He was not functioning at full capacity and was unable to take care of simple tasks at home, let alone take care of himself.

In October 2016, he admitted himself to hospital due to experiencing uncontrollable tremors and was unable to use his arms or hands whilst at work. This resulted in him taking immediate stress leave and, after lengthy investigation he has been diagnosed with PTSD, depression and anxiety. The team of professionals we have taking care of his needs works closely together to determine positive outcomes for my husband's future and, hopefully, a successful return to work.

It has been a process to discover the correct medication, find the right professionals who understand the complexity of his case and understanding what the future holds. It has been a steep learning curve for us as a family, as we try to understand mental health in the midst of processing our own unique and individual emotional rollercoaster.

There are a lot of unknowns and what the future holds is unclear. It is a day-by-day process, pondering what has happened, where we are, and the direction we are going.