

Responding to and Treating Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: What Works?

Rob's story

Rob is 36 years old, and the eldest of three children. His father died from liver failure when Rob was in his late teens. He *"...was a cop, a good one too, but he wasn't a good dad or husband. If he wasn't working he was boozing and starting fights left, right and centre; mainly with mum but really anyone who would get under his skin"*. Rob's mother is in supported accommodation with early onset dementia. Rob wonders if she has sustained a brain injury, given how many times *"...dad hit her around the head"*. His siblings are dispersed across the country and do not have a lot of contact with each other.

From a young age Rob vowed to never be addicted to anything. Despite not ever drinking or smoking, as a kid he always enjoyed the buzz from taking risks; that hit of adrenaline he got from driving fast, shoplifting, skateboarding, and any form of extreme sports.

Rob struggled academically and left school in Year 11 to work full-time in the group home for disabled teenagers, which was managed by his mother. As a support worker, he enjoyed the role, particularly helping the kids *"have a bit of fun, a laugh, like helping them do things they wouldn't normally do"*. He didn't like meetings or being part of a team, and would get frustrated easily over the administrative demands of the role.

Rob married Sophie when he was 20 and she was 19. They had only been together for a couple of months when Sophie became pregnant. Lachlan, their son, was born just before Rob's 21st birthday. Rob was not a hands-on father; he worked shifts, which meant he was often absent for Lachlan's significant rites of passage.

He was settled in the group home job for about six years, but was challenged when his mother retired due to health issues and a new manager was recruited. Eventually, after

a number of warnings for creating conflict within the team, he was fired.

Shortly after he was fired, Sophie announced she had met someone else and was taking Lachlan and moving interstate to be with her new partner. Despite being devastated, Rob managed to amicably negotiate ongoing child support and access arrangements.

Mindful that he needed stable employment, he joined the army; an idea he had toyed with since a young boy. He initially joined the infantry with the intent to become a medic and successfully undertook the relevant training to do so. He had a few deployments in Afghanistan working as a medic. He enjoyed the deployments; they satisfied his need for a *"thrill"* but also enabled him to use the skills he employed in the group home *"helping people who couldn't help themselves"*.

A couple of times on deployment, he questioned whether this was the right role for him. Sometimes the *"thrill"* was overwhelming. Once when his unit was attacked by the Taliban . . . *"I really thought I was going to die"*. He found it hard to throw this feeling. Then a couple of weeks later, he was in a vehicle driving in convoy. The vehicle in front drove over an improvised explosive device (I.E.D.). The occupants of the vehicle, as well as some civilians who had gathered on the road side to watch the convoy, were badly injured, some fatally. *"The impact! It was like a movie scene, just unreal. And then, when the dust settled, there were bodies everywhere. I didn't know where to start, who to look after. It was like everything stopped, including me. I froze. Who to help - the women, the children, my mates?"*

Rob couldn't settle after this incident. His relationships with his team mates had always been a bit feisty but now his short fuse was shorter than ever. A couple of months

following the I.E.D. incident, Rob was administratively discharged for punching a senior officer in the jaw who was reprimanding him for starting a fight with a team member.

Upon his discharge, Rob took a job as a first aid officer on a mine in Mount Isa. Although he liked the isolation, the first time he had to attend to a worker who was bleeding following a minor cut, he experienced severe flashbacks of his time in Afghanistan.

He only stayed in the job couple of weeks before quitting, and over the following five year period, drifted into a range of unskilled jobs such as storeman and packer, bicycle courier and labourer. Each job tended to end in the same way, the result of conflict with team members, customers or managers. Either Rob would fly off the handle and leave impulsively or he was sacked. *"It's hard to hold down a job when I'm just tired all the time. I mean, I wake up exhausted – every night it's the same nightmare over and over, on repeat. Do you know what it's like to wake up exhausted and then have to act normal?"*

For the past year, he has been in a relationship with Marion; they met when he joined a local abseiling group. Rob initially went abseiling with Marion and the group, but he now goes alone as he finds the group holds him back. *"Abseiling is the only time I feel half alive. I get that thrill, that rush. Nothing is the same since I've come home. It's like things have gone from colour to black and white".*

Since his discharge, Sophie was *"pretty understanding, happy to let child support payments slide, but as soon as she broke up with that boyfriend of hers she started hassling me to make payments I can't make"*. Rob can't help but feel the irony – over the years he has tried to maintain his relationship with his son but since becoming a teenager their relationship has become increasingly strained and distant.

Rob is currently unemployed. He knows he needs to find secure ongoing employment but he doubts his capacity to do so. He wouldn't say this out loud but thinks *"I blame myself; I couldn't help those people. I mean, I was a medic, but a useless one"*.

He knows he feels better when he isn't reminded of the war. Some things like loud noises or confronting images take him *"back there, in a flash"*. Marion has agreed to the ban on watching the news or bringing the newspaper home. Rob knows he has to calm down. He is trying – dabbling in yoga, natural therapies and other approaches

that calm him down but don't *"zonk me out so much that I can't do anything else"*.

One night they were driving to Marion's mother's house for dinner. He was speeding again and Marion had had enough; his speeding was often a trigger for an argument but this time she really got angry. *"STOP IT! Slow down. How many times do I have to tell you? Do you want to kill us both? You are just too toey, you've gotta calm down. You've tried this, you've tried that – acupuncture, myotherapy – you don't stick at anything. If something doesn't change, I'm leaving!"*

He doesn't want to lose Marion and, for this reason, Rob finds himself waiting in his GP's office. When the GP asks *"what seems to be the problem?"*, he doesn't know where to start.