

My Story with Mental Health

By Gary (Dusty) Miller

We talk about mental health a lot, or do we? Because to me, when we do, it is in hushed tones and viewed as a problem. Our collective silence only compounds the problem. By ignoring the issue we promote the unrealistic expectation that first responders must without question, be steadfast, brave and resilient. By refusing to speak openly about the issue it perpetuates the stigma most of us hold about mental health issues. The idea that depression, anxiety and thoughts of suicide are signs of weakness, embarrassment and failure. While we are all different, for me, a combination of my previous career, first responder work related and personal stress became so overwhelming that I could no longer cope.

I have led a fortunate life, I have had the honour and privilege of serving my Country for over two decades. I have been fortunate to have deployed on operations 8 times, during those deployments I have been very lucky. I have survived 2 road side improvised explosive devices (IED), 1 mine strike, a 7.62mm round hitting me in the front chest plate as well as a major helicopter crash. Sadly I have had two close friends and a young soldier die in my arms while trying to save their lives. The guilt and remorse still haunts me to this very day for failing them, since leaving the military I have had the honour of serving in the Calgary Police Service for ten years.

The first people to see a change in me was my wife of 36 years, who knows me better than I know myself and our youngest daughter. This happened over a long period of time so it was not glaringly obvious. I was becoming short and abrupt with them, snapping at them for no reason, it got to the stage where they were worried when I got home as to who was going to walk through the door. By now I knew something was wrong. I knew I was letting things that normally would not bother me had started to annoy me. But I didn't know why, this made me even more confused and angry with myself.

I wasn't sleeping very well, my mind would not stop racing and when I did sleep nightmares were haunting me so much that I was afraid to go to sleep. When my nightmares woke me I would lay there and listen to my wife's breathing and would not be able to stop crying. I withdrew from my team mates and friends I didn't want to go for coffee. I would be in so early before shift that I was changed and in the parking lot before everyone else got in so I did not have to talk to anyone. I waited until everyone was walking out at the end of shift to pull back into the lot, again, to avoid team mates.

There were times at work that I would go somewhere isolated, because I was so emotionally upset that I could not stop crying or shaking, until I calmed down. I didn't know why I felt like this. I couldn't understand why I could not control me feelings or emotions. I was very ashamed and embarrassed with myself for not being able to

stop those emotions and control myself. On days off I did not want to go out I would lay on the couch and try and cat nap. On a few occasions I would lay on the floor in our walk in closet with the door closed in total darkness in case someone came to the door.

Even while at work my memories would be so vivid that I could close my eyes and the sights, sounds and other things were so real that I was back living the situation. All I wanted to do was go to work as it gave me something to focus on rather than the problems I was having. Things came to a head when I was leaving home to start night shift. As I said good bye to my wife she said "When you come home please bring my real husband home". On the way into work, I am ashamed to say the dam finally broke. As I pulled to the office parking lot the tears started and I couldn't stop them. I tried to talk to the 01. However I was a complete mess and all I could say was that I could not do this anymore and that I was going home. It took a while to get home. I had to keep stopping as I was shaking so much. When I finally got home I went to bed as I was so emotionally drained and slept. The best sleep that I had in a long while. The district phoned and asked my wife if I was home and could they speak to me she said "No he's asleep and I am not waking him up". I must admit when she told me the next day I expected a knock at the door and someone from the district would be asking for my gun. I was surprised when that did not happen although, to be honest, I had never thought of taking my own life. I went to our psychological services and rightly, or wrongly, I felt that I didn't get much help at all. My wife was not allowed to come with me they said it was my safe place, but I wanted her there. I still didn't know why I was feeling the way I was or how to try and control my emotions. During the time I was off work I felt very isolated and alone. No one senior from the district contacted me to see how I was. Team mates did call and ask if I wanted to join them for breakfast, which was good. However I still felt alone and that no one cared how I was doing. After around 3 months I started to get back to work and was ok for a couple of years. November, last year I started to see the signs that I was spiraling down again. I was taking risks that I would not normally take. I was driving way too fast to calls when there was no real need to. All I wanted was to go to the high risk calls and be the first out. So again I reached out for help and was referred out to another psychologist. In December last year and in January I attended three major calls. All fatality's, over three sets and I could not get the images from the incidents out of my head. These brought back the nightmares from my past and the emotional overload started all over again.

My psychologist took time to explain to me why I was feeling like I was. She gave me tools to help deal with and reduce the emotional over load. My wife was encouraged to attend my meetings with the psychologist, I really wanted her there. I wanted her to hear what I had done and what I was going through. I was not willing or able to talk to her about my past I was very worried that she would not see me as the man she had fallen in love with and married. I feared that she would see me as someone else and would not like what she saw now. The rollercoaster of emotions was way

worse this time around but having my wife and best friend by my side, seeing me at my very worst, listening to my worst nightmares helped us both. If it was not for her I don't know where I would be now. I have been very lucky this year, my team mates were very supportive with me and kept in touch for coffees, beer or just a text or call to see if I was ok. I am starting back to work again now but at a much slower and more integrated rate. I still have bad days where I don't want to speak to everyone or anyone! Coming into work and putting on my uniform and body armour is still quite hard and sitting in the office it sometime seems like the walls are closing in on me. I will get back to normal at some point, I hope, and back to doing what I love most being on the street.

I have a different perspective on life now. I try and stop judging people and instead look to why they have changed. Over the past couple of years I have reached out to lots of members. I don't need to be able to solve their problems, but I do need to let them know that I am there for them at any time. The signs are always there. The withdrawal from everyone. Taking more risks. Being snappy with everyone. Sometimes they are very small signs but they are there! Never be afraid to reach out to someone. If you think they are struggling then they probably are. I didn't ask for help until it was too late because I did not know how to or where to go to get it and only blame myself for that.

I am telling my story for a couple of reasons, firstly to let people know its ok not to be ok, that you cannot help the way that you feel, you are not weak or a frailer and most of all you are not broken. Secondly out of all this if only one person reaches out and gets the help that they need before things spiral out of control and the very worst happens I will be thankful.

I am very sad and ashamed to say that through all this the people I hurt most were the ones I cared about most my family, friends and my brother and sisters at work. I know I was judgmental, rude and unforgiving, for that I am truly sorry. My only excuse was that I was not myself and my demons had got the better of me.

So when your demons come and haunt you, you can call me and I will come and fight them with you.

Living with Stress as a Partner.

By Katherine Miller

What was I going to come home to? Screaming matches between my husband & daughter, nothing I do ever being right, a sleeping husband, a request from either our daughter or my husband to be the go-between communicator or just a resemblance of normalcy? Was it a sigh of relief or a sigh of frustration for me?

Before my husband was first diagnosed with stress (PTSD or OSI) these were a selection of any number of scenarios I could expect after my working day. I am presenting a candid view of a family that has strong, loving, bonds which were pushed to their very limits. But neither of us saw it coming or realised what we were dealing with.

It culminated one evening, as my husband was leaving for night shift, in my asking him to bring home my real husband at the end of shift.

Looking back I can see some characteristic behaviour that is typical in someone suffering from stress. It was the little things that individually meant very little but when combined created someone I really didn't recognise and though I love the bones of this guy I really didn't like who he had become. I also didn't understand why he was behaving in this manner.

I noticed he would make comments about the way I was driving (he would choose to do this manoeuvre a different way) or that our daughter was dumping her snack boxes in the sink instead of the dish washer, or her bedroom was untidy etc. He would sigh rather loudly if I had forgotten to remake the bed, before bedtime, after washing the sheets. It seemed everything had to be his way for us and yet it was ok if he had a different way. How can a happy home be established or maintained when the goal posts are constantly moving or expectations were different for individuals.

There were days on end where he didn't seem to do anything but sleep. We are habitually early to bed early to rise kind of people yet 8-10 hours of sleep didn't seem enough for days on end. It was almost as though he could cope with being awake & professional when on shift but those days in-between were catch up on sleep days. Most of the day! In all honesty there were times when I actually relished him sleeping through his days off because, although nothing was ever done on a personal admin level, it meant peace within our house. Sigh of relief if I'm honest.

For a man who was once always personable, fun & relaxed with his family and friends he also became exceedingly short tempered and negative. Everything was someone else's fault. I had no idea how to deal with a situation when it arose. If I answered back it created an argument of immense proportions. If I stayed silent I was blamed for having that 'Look' on my face and received verbal grief for it. I felt I was in a no win situation almost all of the time. I felt helpless, I felt as though I was no longer valued (even though I knew my hubby was deeply in love with me). I honestly thought this was just one of those bumps in the road that couples went through on their life-long journey together. How naive was I?

To add to this seemingly hostile environment were his insecurities. He was in constant need of reassurance about our relationship. Did I still love him? He would tell me upwards of a dozen times a day that he loved me. I did still love him, I was

and remain in love with him despite the difficulties. He seemed worried that I would be packing my bags and leaving. He was constantly apologising for his behaviour. It was a whirlwind of emotions, arguments, inconsistencies that just never seemed to stop. But as I said before, I love the bones of this man and I am so very proud of his achievements. He stood up for his country, for those too weak to stand up for themselves. He has put strangers before his own needs. He has won medals & honours for his courageous behaviour. He is in his second front line career and I for one am exceedingly proud to call myself his wife.

The cost? Well he has suffered, we as a couple have suffered & also as a family. We are much more emotional than ever before. Thankfully, we have always been strong.

But the most courage I have witnessed is now. He is not ashamed to tell people he has suffered an occupational stress injury (formerly PTSD). I am full of pride knowing that if his story, our story can help just one person or family member to recognise symptoms of stress, to start talking about their feelings, to seek help, then, it has all been worth opening up to strangers.

Following a regular regime of therapy I am starting to see a little of the sparkle in my husband. Relief for sure on my part. Some of the fun elements, that I once found annoying, are beginning to return. He recognises when he is on a spiral into those negative feelings and has strategies to deal with them. Some normality and peace coverts our home once again. I feel calmer too. I have some understanding now about what caused this man that I love, to behave the way he did. If he had broken a hip everyone would see a physical injury and empathise to a degree. My hubby has a hidden injury, but an injury none the less. Time & further therapy helps the healing but it is unlikely he will ever be completely the man I fell in love with. His experiences have drastically changed him. There will always be a scar, albeit hidden. We have tools now to help him deal with his injury.

If you resonate on any level with my story then open up to someone and seek help. It is out there you just have to have a little courage to ask for it. You already have courage taking on a career where you run towards danger when all of your instincts are screaming at you to do exactly the opposite. The first step, recognition, is the hardest.