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Military Sexual Assault Survivors Find Healing In Therapy, Education and Service

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by Allison Loy

According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, one in four women in the military report being sexually assaulted during their service. The numbers are even higher when unreported cases are considered. Life after Military Sexual Trauma, known as MST, can be challenging, but as Veteran Voices reporter and Wright State student veteran Allison Loy discovered, healing can come from finding ways to help others.

Ashlie Hawes and I have a lot in common. We’re both veterans, she served in the Marine Corps; I served in the Air Force. We both got out of the military in 2013. We both decided to go to school full time, and we both are suffering from PTSD. It can be anywhere from frustrating to completely unnerving when attending a class that triggers a memory or anxiety attack. Another thing Ashlie and I have in common: we are both Military Sexual Trauma survivors. Ashlie entered the military in 2009 and within a month of arriving at her first duty station, she was assaulted.

“I didn’t really know if I should tell or what I should do,” she says of her assault. “So after a couple years just trying to like pretend it never happened I just broke down. You know, it started with small stuff like not being able to sleep well, and it was just like kind of turning the symptoms into what the problem was when in reality those were just symptoms of the main problem that I wasn’t willing to accept.”

I related with the concept of just dealing with the symptoms and treating those as the problems because I’ve been doing that for a very long time, which I think is making it really difficult now for me to really get down to how all these symptoms are connected back to that original trauma.

“You know, I still have feelings about it but eventually I just decided that I needed to focus on the main issue of the attacks,” says Ashlie.

To do this, Ashlie is getting ready to begin Cognitive Processing Therapy, the same therapy I started in January. But more than just seek treatment, Ashlie is also using school to help her focus on something else. She’s a majoring in Human Resources at Wright State University and says that her experience has definitely influenced her future career goals.

"I want to help people in situations or just preventing these situations from happening. Like maybe with training and development you get to create the programs that, maybe not so much focus on people protecting themselves from that happening but to stop someone that is a risk to do that to someone else.”
But Ashlie isn’t waiting until she graduates to find ways to make a positive impact.

“I tried a couple different things when I first moved here,” she says. "One big decision I made is to go through sorority recruitment. And it really helps, it’s, you know, a sense of acceptance and community just but with women instead of men so I felt like it was somewhat similar to the military in that sense. [Theta Phi Alpha] focuses on serving the community and I think that’s what I liked about that is that it was hands on and, you know, getting in there and actually doing things and not just raising money."

Ashlie says that her sorority’s community service in combination with her education helps her dealing with day to day life and the challenges that PTSD can present.

"It makes you feel good to help somebody. It just makes you feel, like, better."

For more information on services available to veterans, visit the resource page at the Wright State University Veteran and Military Center website.

Veterans Voices is part of Veterans Coming Home, a public media effort to support veterans, made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Photo:
caption: Marine Corps veteran Ashlie Hawes
credit: Allison Loy