

After deployment: dealing with the memories

Cameron*, a 35-year-old peacekeeper, is proud of his service in East Timor but feels a bit ashamed about his discharge. He knows it's not his fault, but he still feels as if somehow, he didn't quite cut it. His mates don't seem to be as affected by what happened over there.

Before he started getting treatment, Cameron found it easier to drink to drown the memories of his experiences in East Timor, rather than deal with the pain that came from talking about them. He still struggles with the grog, but knows that it will only make things worse in the long term.

As much as he loves them, he hasn't felt close to his family and friends for ages. His mum and sister, in particular, tried to reach him when he got home, but he just felt numb. This feeling's eased a little since he started seeing a psychologist, but it will be a while before he feels connected again. Cameron still flies off the handle at the smallest thing, often frightening himself with the power of his anger. Each day he wakes up, determined to cope. But there seems to be so much to 'fix' he sometimes feels like he's getting nowhere.

But Cameron is actually getting somewhere. He recognised he had a problem and is a willing partner in his treatment, as difficult as it can sometimes be. Talking about and reliving traumatic memories can be very distressing. The psychologist has explained to Cameron that he may feel worse before he starts to feel better. And Cameron knows that treatment for psychological problems like depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can take a long time.

Thankfully, most people, including servicemen and women, recover from a life-threatening experience with the help of family and friends. But for those who do not, like Cameron, specialist and effective treatment is available.

Nobody can 'snap out' of psychological problems like depression, anxiety or PTSD. Talking to your doctor is a good place to start is to talk to your doctor. Mental health professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers can also help.

Australian veterans of all conflicts and peacekeeping operations can contact VVCS—Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service for specialised, free confidential service: call 1800 011 046 or visit www.dva.gov.au/health/vvcs.

Serving members can also contact their local Psychology Support Unit, local Medical Centre or the Mental Health Strategy All-hours Support Line on 1800 628 036 (Freecall within Australia) or 6 12 9425 3878 (outside Australia).

While the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health does not provide clinical care, further information about getting help and looking after yourself is available on our website: <http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au/resources/resources-mentalhealthandwellbeinginformation.html>

**not his real name*