

Andrew's Story – Living with Depression

I experienced my first bout of depression almost 15 years ago after I had left the Army for the first time. My wife and I had purchased a business, however, within six months I wanted to sell up, I disliked it intensely and felt totally trapped because the opportunities to earn a comparable salary where we had settled were limited. From the outside looking in it would have appeared I had everything – a stable marriage, three amazing children, a beautiful home that we had built with a swimming pool, a business and several vehicles. However, life for me was grey and all these things brought no joy. I had started contemplating how I could end my life without it being obvious as I didn't want my children to live with the stigma of having a dad who had committed suicide.

I thank God for a supportive wife and my faith. She encouraged me to see a doctor, who placed me on anti-depressant medication. Almost immediately my outlook on life started to improve and over the next three years I recovered to the point where I could come off the medication.

I had the opportunity to return to the Army fulltime, and reconnect with the culture and work environment I had missed. All was going well until I was deployed to Afghanistan where I experienced a second bout of depression. I had expected to be constantly busy as I had been during my first two deployments, however, this was a very different role and most people had lots of down time – but I deliberately filled every day with what I considered were essential tasks. Towards the end of my nine month tour the workload increased as I prepared for a major event. This additional responsibility and workload was the 'straw that broke the camel's back' and my mental state deteriorated rapidly. Thankfully, this time I recognised what was happening to me and I sought help from the MO, he had helped many others in my situation and proved to be a great support. I remember presenting with a mouth full of ulcers, the inability to sleep and very low mood – life was particularly bleak from my perspective. The MO supported me through the remainder of the tour and I made an appointment with a doctor in NZ on my way home. I was again placed on medication and also referred for counselling which I found very helpful. I was aware that being placed on medication would result in a medical downgrade but for me this was a small price to pay when compared to my long-term mental wellbeing.

I have tried to come off the anti-depressant medication on two occasions over the last six years as I didn't want to remain downgraded. Unfortunately on both occasions I deteriorated rapidly so in consultation with the MO we have agreed that the best course of action for me and my family is to remain on medication. I can still deploy – I just have to apply for a waiver, which if I remain stable is largely a formality.

My take outs and advice to others are that sometimes people get depressed, just as some people get diabetes or arthritis. But the very nature of depression and the impact it has on how we think and feel, can make those first steps reaching out for a helping hand very difficult. Doing so though is critical, sometimes we can't go it alone.

Over time I have learned to live with depression and from my experience it really only impacts me when I am under significant pressure at home or at work over an extended period of time. Exercise, diet and sleep all are all critical factors that help me cope. I may get another bout of depression in my life, but I now know the early warning signs and that the first step is to ask for help.