How Becoming an Entrepreneur Helped Me Overcome Suicidal Thoughts

Army veteran Steven Kuhn discusses his ongoing battle with Combat PTSD.

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The artillery was still dropping as I ran up to Sgt. Young Min Dillon's position. I heard he was hit and arrived just in time to share the last moments of his life. That was 1991 in Iraq. I feel fortunate to have been there and at the same time, it haunts me every day because it should have been me. At least that's how I feel and that is where my doc says "it" all started with my Combat PTSD.

Veterans are an interesting demographic. We volunteer to do things most people don't or won't. Once we enlist, we are told what to do and when to do it. The basics are taken care of so that we as soldiers, marines, airmen and seamen can hyper-focus on our one task at hand. We become part of a massive team effort. In the military, no one needs to say a word: who you are, what you have done, where you served, how long you served and what you accomplished is all seen on your uniform.

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But then when we leave the military, all of that falls away immediately. Many veterans have a very big problem dealing with this loss of identity and the lack of larger, selfless

purpose. Many veterans experience depression and a decline in self-worth. Add PTSD to the list and you have a real challenge for both the veteran and their loved ones.

This is where I'm going to get controversial: I believe that PTSD can be something that some veterans embrace as their new identity because it connects them to the past "glory days." They give up seeking a new purpose and cling to what they know. The constantly mention PTSD in social media posts, they mention it in most conversations – their prevailing attitude is, "I served and those who didn't and have a good life need to thank me and help me". I know this is a crass statement, but veteran entitlement is a huge issue within the community and is a bit of a divide.

I know all about the realities and horrors of PTSD firsthand. In 2008, I attempted suicide after leaving the military. At the time, I was staying in Germany where I was stationed. I attempted to grab a police officer's weapon to shoot myself and when that didn't work I grabbed a knife to finish the job. I came out the other side with a feeling of hopelessness I never thought I could overcome.

Veteran suicide statistics are not decreasing. According to the latest research from the Department of Veteran Affairs, on average 20 veterans commit suicide every day – that's 1.5 times greater than for Americans who never served in the military, says the *Military Times*. What do we do?

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After years of pushing away loved ones, ignoring help and trying to forget my past, I came to the realization that embracing Combat PTSD as a source of strength was my only way out. Sounds crazy, I know, but hear me out. It shows me that I went through war and survived. I saw my inner darkness and lived there, saw death by my own hand, and lived through it

all. Combat PTSD gives me the ability to do anything I want.

Everyone has different ways of dealing with and overcoming this disorder, and for me, the answer is “being an entrepreneur.” I have worked with over 200 veterans one-on-one in the past 14 months, and my experience suggests that being an entrepreneur is an option for therapy which must be researched.

As an entrepreneur, I can decide what is important. I do not have to deal with authority and, most importantly, it gives me purpose. I see every day as a chance to not only get better but to achieve more in my business, reach new benchmarks and, best of all, I can work with other veterans to show them the same.

Of the veterans I have worked with, those who have found the most success moving forward are entrepreneurs. Some were not successful in launching a business and have gone back to being an employee, but they feel accomplished for having tried and now have that experience under their belt. It has helped them create a new identity.

I spent some time working with Bunker Labs Raleigh-Durham, a veteran entrepreneur incubator, and the results were astonishing: I saw a metamorphosis in veterans who were previously not doing well and suffering, and thanks to entrepreneurship, found a new purpose and vision. They have their PTSD in check and use it as fuel to drive their business.

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Being an entrepreneur is a fantastic way to stretch the bounds of your reality, of finding how deep you must dig to make things happen. And it is vitally important to realize that successful entrepreneurs have learned to ask for help, and are always willing to help others. It is just like asking for help

to deal with PTSD and then helping others find relief when you find a way forward.

Asking for help is empowering when you realize that you can collapse time by doing so. Simply put: If you wish to be successful in a certain business, find someone who is there where you want to be and ask them for help, guidance or instruction. In an employee environment this can be seen as weak or detrimental, but as an entrepreneur, it is a massive strength.

When I hit a wall and my PTSD flares up, I start feeling depressed, aggressive and I just want to bury my head. I think back to that dark evening in 1991 on the battlefield and how Sgt. Dillon sacrificed his life so that I didn't have to. And in that darkness, I realize it is my duty to live the best possible version of myself in his honor. He is sitting somewhere watching me and saying, "Don't you dare consider not taking advantage of the possibilities in life!"

This drives me. My entrepreneurship allows me to deal with my PTSD and it gives me that purpose I once had as a soldier in the military. And I will continue to work to help others find their way out of the darkness.

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