

In a world that is riddled with mental illness, and the majority of people just write it off as people wanting to get attention, how do you explain to someone what it's like to live with PTSD? How do you get them to understand the anguish that you go through on a day-to-day basis? How do you describe to someone what a flash-back is like, what night terrors truly are, and living with images and sounds in your head that no matter what you do, you cannot get rid of them? How do you answer the question "are you okay" without having to lie almost every time you say "I'm fine"? What happens if you finally just give up?

I have been asking myself these questions for a couple of years now. Hannah has been worried for much longer about my mental health. She had said for a couple of years before I walked away from the fire service that she thought I was suffering from PTSD. I just told her she was crazy. Having your wife tell you that she is worried about you is not an easy thing to hear. It makes you stop and wonder why? After enough times of hearing it, you either start to believe it, or you start to ignore it completely. I did the latter. I started to ignore Hannah when she would ask me if something was wrong. I just thought she was wanting to pick a fight. Don't ask me why, I couldn't tell you why. But it was easier to turn that harmless and concerned question into a fight just to not have to think about what was really going on. It is truly amazing at what you will say and/or do to not have to think about a simple answer. Then one Sunday, after a long drawn out fight, your wife looks at you and asks why are you mean to me? Why do you yell at every little thing? Then, you pause. The look on your face changes from anger, to confusion, to worry, and then to scared. You feel your own face change. You feel a heaviness come over you. You then watch the look from your wife change. From hurt to worry, and then to fear. The look of fear comes with a somber question, "are you having thoughts of suicide?" I stood there at the end of our island in the kitchen empty, heavy and frozen when Hannah asked me that question. I had no way to answer her. There was no lie that I could tell her that she would believe. A simple, low toned, heavy "Yes" left my mouth. I did not know until that day that there was more than one facial expression for fear. The look on Hannah's face told me everything that I had been ignoring for who knows how long. I knew then that I was in serious trouble.

Suicide. Suicide to me was always the coward's way out. Suicide is the permanent solution for a temporary problem. When a person chooses to take their own life, it can be and is commonly seen as a selfish act, because it leaves the family and loved ones with all the pain of having to deal with the sudden loss and the internal mess it makes of things. But when it comes to our veterans and first responders that end up taking their own lives it almost makes sense. Which is what scares me. Knowing that suicide makes sense is a very uneasy feeling. Having been called to two in my career, that thought has always held true. But, it becomes real to me when the images and sounds that are in my head won't stop. At that point, all I want is them to go away, and I can understand why some see it as an option. 22, 22 is the number of veterans that take their own lives every day due to living with PTSD. PTSD has become more accepted for our military as the years and studies have come to show the truth of what our minds can store. PTSD among firefighters is still a stigma that cannot be talked about. Since 2014, more firefighters have died each year from taking their own lives versus that of line of duty deaths (<https://www.delmarvanow.com/story/life/2019/09/23/firefighter-suicide-mental-health-culture-maryland-delaware-virginia-salisbury/1300515001/>). Having suicidal thoughts is not a place you want to be. Hannah and the boys are always a good pull back for me. The times that I have dreamed that I took my own life are what I use to remind myself that suicide will not fix the problem that I am living with. It will only add problems to Hannah, the boys and my family. The fear of suicide that plays out in my dreams is that William is the one who finds me. That within itself gives me true fear. Knowing what that would do to him, and having to deal with that for the rest of his life would be me putting him through the exact same thing that I have to deal with and live with. Why would I willingly put this suffering on someone, especially my own son?

The stigma of PTSD for first responders as a whole is that it does not exist, or, you are weak and can't cut it in the field if you try and talk about it. Why is PTSD looked at differently for military than for first responders? We let children, 17 years of age children, sign up to go to other countries around the world that do not have what the US has there, and submit them to sights and sounds that they will have to deal with for the rest of their lives. Then when they come home, some are completely screwed up because of

what the experienced, we as medical professionals just throw drugs at most of them and hope for the best. When our first responders, our EMS, Fire and Police come into some of the same situations, just in our own cities, see the things they see, hear the sounds, carry bodies of women and children and try, try like hell to save those lives, it gets ignored or we call them weak minded when they start to suffer from flashbacks and night terrors. PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the stress that is caused to the brain on an individual that is having to work or react in abnormal circumstances. When you suffer from PTSD, it is very easy to want to do anything that will make the images and sounds go away. Permanently. But help is not the same. The resources are not the same. The acceptance, is not the same. I, can personally understand why, someone suffering from an experience that they thought and believed was for the betterment, would be willing to do anything to make it stop. What has to happen to remove the stigma that first responders can't develop PTSD?

The images, they will haunt me probably for the better part of my life. When I started my career as a firefighter/ EMT, no one told me that PTSD was a possibility. Now, that would change nothing that I did for that period of my life. The people that I got to help and impact their lives for the better will always be what it was for. Helping others in *their* worst moment should be the true reason that anyone does that career. Almost every call I ran was not an emergency to me or my partner I was with, but for the person or people we were going to help, it was for them. In that moment, they were in the worst moment of their lives. I never thought that some of those calls would haunt me. It is easy to not let things bother you when you always have to ready for the next call, but when that next call never comes, what do you do? How do you learn to live with the things you did to serve a community are going to haunt you?

It is somewhat interesting when I choose to talk to someone for their first time and tell them what I am going through. The look in their eyes say a thousand words, and nothing at the same time. When I ask someone new if they have ever heard the sound of a child screaming in shire terror, and then let them know that those children burned to death and the only thing I could do was stand there listening and watching, I

get to see a look of disbelief followed by an empty stare, just because they do not know how to respond. And that's just the one that is with at this very moment. It makes it hard to talk to someone when I know what their expression will be before I even start talking. It is almost as if they don't believe me when I'm done. Which I honestly can't blame them. Some of the things that haunt me, when I say them out loud to someone, I find it hard to believe myself. Know what I have to live with, I don't want to put that burden on anyone else. It is a heavy feeling to know that this has become my new life. There are times that I even wonder if Hannah really believes what I have experienced. How do I explain to someone that has never had to hold a limp 4 month old that was a SID's baby how that feels? How do I explain to someone what it is like to help carry a burned body out of a house while neighbors stand around a watch? How do I explain how it feels to hold your finger in the neck of a 3 year old to keep him from bleeding out while you can hear his mom screaming from outside the ambulance to save her baby? How do you tell that to people that have never had to physically do those things. How do you explain to someone, so that they understand how it feels to be 20 years old, stand by the hospital bed of your best friend and be in the position that you, that 20 year old kid, has to tell the doctor that it is time to turn off his life support? How do you share those things? How can I expect these people that I talk to, to look at me the same and not like some crazy person?

Living with PTSD is not something that I ever planned on doing, but it is a choice that was made for me. Having to live with the images, sounds and smells of the things I experienced in my little less than 8 years, is now part of my life and who I am. I cannot change that. Every situation that I have been through, I know is for a reason. I know that something good will come out of this in some way. God has a plan for my life and suffering and trials are part of that plan. That is how we grow and become closer to God.

How do we change the stigma of PTSD in the firehouse? How do we get the same resources that is offered to our veterans for our first responders? I proudly stand with our military and everything that do for us, and they deserve all that we give them plus so much more. So how do we get that same for our men and women that serve at

home in their own communities? We have people that join our military, spend 4 years in, and stay state side for the duration of that time and when the discharge have insurance and other benefits and resources that will support them the rest of their lives. Then we have firefighter that serve for the same length of time or longer, and like myself, was always on call due to the size of the department, spent almost 8 years serving a home and have nothing to show for it except a screwed brain and no resources to help me learn to live with PTSD.