

Overcoming PTSD: The Experience of a 9/11 First Responder

Anonymous

Editors note: The following article was written by a gentleman who suffered PTSD as a result of being a first responder at Ground Zero on 9/11. The article is mostly in its original form, although some items have been deleted and the names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved in underground psychedelic therapy.

SHORTLY BEFORE I met James and Janet, the therapists who were to help me with my PTSD, I was feeling horribly disconnected. I was heading back to a place of despair & self-loathing. Although I was surrounded by people, I felt myself getting further and further away from them. I indulged in an excess of alcohol and drugs in order to make me believe my life was okay. This had been my tendency throughout much of my life, but it was certainly more pronounced after leaving New York after 9/11. That is, until I decided to enter alcohol and drug treatment last spring.

While in drug treatment I began to see clearly and to face the wreckage of my past; to forgive myself for many things. I was determined to live a more, healthy, happy, and full life. This was going great until, in the weeks after I left alcohol and drug treatment, hurt and loss came my way again. I picked up the alcohol and the drugs again and I convinced myself, not really believing deep inside, it was okay.

After a three-day binge, I had the good fortune of meeting James. James told me about psychedelic therapy and I was instantly intrigued. Admittedly, at first, maybe it was the notion of some “drug” experience to continue down the path I was on. However, as we began to talk more, I felt a kindness, gentleness, and a genuine concern in James’ words. When I learned that people had successfully dealt with PTSD using MDMA-assisted psychotherapy I opened up about my experience as a first-responder at Ground Zero.

Although the night sweats and nightmares had gone down in number over the years since 9/11, the sensory triggers were as strong as ever. The triggers would show up indiscriminately and grip me with pain, fear, and guilt. It was unpredictable as to when a swell of emotions, similar to those that appear when I discuss the events of 9/11, would randomly strike. I realized with James’ help that I was ready to face this thing in a new light.

Everything began to change in the days leading up to my MDMA therapy session. I was overwhelmed with emotions. I couldn’t believe that it was really going to happen. As I prepared for the therapy I realized I had the power to control my experience—knowing that gave me a

synchronized sense of calm and anxiety. I wondered, “Why was I being offered this help?” The question of self-worth was indicative of the self-loathing I had been experiencing for nearly seven years.

During the days leading up to the therapy I was gripped by fear. The fear of my pending experience, projections and expectations of what it would look like, and recollections of those at Ground Zero that were beyond my help all made me feel like pulling out. I remembered the deep sadness I felt down there. The torment I had suppressed for so long was bubbling to the surface. The guilt I had for surviving, for leaving New York, abandoning my home, my people, and, as much as we tried, the inability to rescue anyone. The futility of searching for survivors in that hell, and the sadness of war, weighed on my spirit.

I prepared myself to be in a mental space where I could extract the most value from the healing opportunity. When I entered the space set aside for the therapeutic work, I felt and realized the dedication of James and his co-therapist Janet. This was real. What was to come would be a surprise. I brought with me a running for so long, I walked bravely toward my past.

I lay down on a pad with a pillow and blanket. As the session began I presumed

that I was supposed to be this shell-shocked, emotional wreck in a fetal position. Maybe that's how I felt deep inside. I also felt that I was like some case-study in PTSD.

Contrary to my presumptions, during the therapy I was okay—there were no tears, no fears. Everything was put into a different perspective. I just sort of shrugged internally when I thought about the irony of it all. At first I felt I wasn't a good enough example of PTSD, a therapeutic let-down of sorts. I now realize that is just another self-worth doubt fed by expectations and fears. My pain is just as valid as any one's pain—not more, not less.

As the session continued and the medicine took effect, I felt that I had greater access to painful memories, without the customary obstacles of fear, panic, guilt, anger, or grief. There was a sense of calm—a peace within. There was a heightened sense of readiness to face difficult situations I've had in life without the usual reactions, thus creating an opportunity for insight, clarity, and new perspective.

With this new perspective, as well as some loving guidance, I was able to walk calmly through those memories in a state of heightened comfort. There was general acceptance, but more importantly, a realized self-acceptance. I could, with guidance and insight, extract things that were positive experiences, which could now overshadow or shine-over the haunting images of 9/11.

It helped me realize that at the core there was a pearl of internal peace for me to feel. I could then in turn choose to make this the center of my experience regarding 9/11, leaving all other experiences at the periphery of that core. More importantly, understanding that dynamic helped me relate my other life struggles to that core, insofar as identifying a point of focus around the trauma. The medicinal therapy helped me recognize what that identity was and how I could relate it to the rest of my life, so that I could begin to move on.

Coming out of the therapy taught me that choosing to identify with a particular aspect of a difficult emotional experience can shape my feelings about the past. I feel empowered knowing that although I cannot control the past or future right now I have a choice of how I shape those

experiences. There was, and continues to be, profound moments of realization for me as a result of this therapy.

On the day of 9/11 I experienced an unusual sense of peace, because I knew what I had to do. It was my job to help, to find survivors, and to save lives. However, that calm morphed into the stifling PTSD that I have suffered from ever since. The MDMA therapy was also one of the strongest, most peaceful moments in my life. Like at Ground Zero, I did not question myself unnecessarily. I realized that I do not need to question so many other moments of my life.

Essentially what happened is the MDMA therapy connected me to that moment of peace. It caused me to look at why that moment was meaningful amongst all that chaos. I know now. It was my purpose at that moment; I was at Ground Zero because that was exactly where I was supposed to be. The therapy session shifted between past and present moments of dissatisfaction and unhappiness in my life, and helped me realize the source of so much unhappiness. NO PURPOSE. I came to the realization that without purpose I had no peace—without peace, no happiness.

As I write, I am feeling incredibly joyous about the possibilities in life. I feel strengthened internally, connected externally, grateful, and loving, toward others and myself. I am hopeful and released from the shackles of self-loathing, guilt, fear, and pain. I am FREE! I have begun to evolve and am embracing a new identity that can begin to engage in life's fear-based situations. I continue along the path of learning to love, and I forgive myself. More importantly, I now realize I am deserving and worthy of love and forgiveness.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and thanks, to James and Janet. I admire and respect the work they are doing, and the work that MAPS is doing; the work of caring for others. I realized I was doing the same at Ground Zero. What I once viewed as a very difficult and disconnected moment has transformed into a sense of deep connectedness to others. I cannot ignore the call to help others any longer.

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