

Therapy

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I just answered one of those calls that I get from the Vet Center the day before I go in for an appointment with my counselor. One of the nice things about having been in a war is that I get a free shrink for the rest of my foreseeable future.

I remember seeing Dr. Sydney Freedman on M*A*S*H when I was a kid. There was an episode where Hawk-Eye was sick with a cold, that was psychosomatic because a friend had thrown him out of a boat when he was a kid. Sydney's intelligent care and kindness in these scenes made me wish for my own soul whisperer. I blush to admit that this was one of the reasons I joined the army.

Inside the real army, my first engagement with a real mental health professional was much different. I had been referred to a psychiatrist after having been questioned by an investigator for my security clearance. I was still in basic training, and several of us were marched to our appointment. I waited in a lobby until a balding older man in a brown suit invited me into a clinic room. I sat on a paper covered exam table in a tiny medical exam room. He sat on a little rolling stool.

"Why are you here?" he asked and I nodded at the clipboard in his hands.

"Do you want out of the army?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Tell me about your childhood," he said, and I did.

"Do you want out of the army?" he asked again.

"No," I said.

"You're imagining all of this. You couldn't have remembered things from when you were three or four years old," he said.

"But, I do remember," I said. All of this had taken place in five or ten minutes.

"No, no, you don't. It's all made up. Now, we're done here," he said as he stood up. He swatted me on the butt as we walked out of the tiny room.

I went out to the lobby and cried. Anger, confusion and doubt paralyzed every action except crying. Private Birmingham had come to the clinic with me, and he said, "Go up to the window and say you want to talk to someone else. Tell them that there has been some mistake." His kindness pulled me out of my swirl raw crying.

"No. I don't want to get kicked out of the army," I said.

Months later when I was in training at Fort Huachuca, Drill Sargent Rodriguez began questioning me with concern. He sent me to a chaplain.

"I'm sorry, but while you are in training, it's not a good idea to be seen by a counselor. Once you are at a permanent party, you're golden because you are valuable to the army. Then you can talk to a Chaplain or a therapist, but if you see one now you will be kicked out because they will think you are a nuisance," he advised me.

Once in permanent party, I went to church and forgot about wanting a therapist. The churches I was drawn to had an unfavorable view of psychology.

I was in a unit with a man who regularly went to a therapist. He was pushed out of the army, but maybe he needed to be. After a divorce, he slammed a screwdriver through his hand. Four times he found himself in the psychiatric ward at Darnell Hospital because he had threatened to kill himself. This was only a few months after we had come back from Iraq, where his wife had been deployed with him and wasn't faithful to him. I remember him asking to talk to a therapist many times while we were deployed. Our Chief Warrant Officer offered to talk to him, saying "I can fix a truck, I can fix you. Why can't you just talk to me?" There were many reasons why. Our Chief was a very brash and critical person. However, he was having marital problems of his own, so maybe they could have helped each other.

After getting out of the Army, I worked as a mechanic for a government contractor. I had passed the period of grace in a young woman's life, where not having a boyfriend or husband can be seen as a normal thing. Texas is not a nice place to be considered a lesbian, or for a woman to be in a masculine trade. I began suffering mentally and socially, in many of the same ways homeless people are afflicted. However, I had a good job and could pay for counseling.

My therapist was from the upper peninsula of Michigan. She reminds me of Pam, the HR

representative for ISIS on Archer. Mostly, she wanted to talk about boys, and I'm critically weak in that department. However, she was helpful.

After I had left Texas, I didn't plan to go to therapy again. My uncle, a Vietnam veteran took me and introduced me to the Vet Center. After having most of the military therapists that I met threaten my livelihood, and enter my visit into a database for my corrupt and frightening government to see, I wasn't interested in utilizing such a therapist. Dr. Sydney Freedman is fictional. My distrust took the time to heal, but I've found a lot of support, healing, and help from the Portland Vet Center's team of therapists. They are kind people.