

My name is Justin Miller. I am a veteran of the U.S. Army. I was medically retired after serving over 11 years in the military, and I am now serving our veterans and their loved ones as a civilian. I am the Deputy Executive Director and co-founder of the Objective Zero Foundation. We are a 501c3 that has created a free app that instantly and anonymously connects a Veteran, Service Member, their family members, and caregivers to one of almost a thousand of our trained suicide prevention ambassadors in a time of need.

I faced many challenges growing up as a child of divorced parents. I was exposed to many things at a young age that I shouldn't have been. I had several instances of childhood trauma that I knew weren't "normal" to most, but I hadn't realized the impact they had on my life until I became an adult and started seeking help to deal with my PTSD and depression.

In the fall of 2018, I went to a program called Save a Warrior, where they gave me the adverse childhood experience (ACE) test. It was then I remembered playing "doctor" with these girls as a kid. There were three sisters, who lived nearby me. The middle sister was old enough to be developing, but the youngest one was my age. The middle sister would have us get undressed and play doctor with each other at the age of 4. I was later threatened by their father when he found out and punished by my parents when they found out. Then other inappropriate moments with an adult came a couple years later. My best friend accidentally shot and killed himself when we were in 4th grade. I was supposed to be at his house that night. While doing group therapy in school, I mentioned that and how things could have been different. Someone then said it was my fault because I didn't go over to his house, and that always stuck with me. My dad went to prison for three years when I was 7. I would always get laughed at because my dad didn't make it to career day at school. When my dad finally did get out of prison, I would do anything to have that bond with him and gain his approval. At 11 years old, I was introduced to marijuana and alcohol in the same day by my dad. He wanted me to do the things he was doing with him, so that I wouldn't tell on him for doing them.

When I was in 7th grade, my 18 year old uncle hung himself in the basement of his house. I was a wreck. My teacher could tell something was wrong, and sent me to the office. I started to open up to my counselor, and told her what happened. She asked me if I could say one last thing to him, what would it be and how did I feel? I told her I didn't know what to feel. My dad always told me boys don't cry. That if I wanted to cry, he would give me something to cry about. Before I could even think about it, the lunch bell rang and she said, "well there's the lunch bell, so you should probably go eat.. think about what I said," and she walked me to the door. After my traumatic childhood, I tried to stay numb and intoxicated all the time. During SAW is when I realized I was repeating the cycle with my children, and then decided it was time to break that cycle.

I went to war for the first time at age 20. I spent a total of 27 months in Iraq between two deployments. During that time, I was involved in many explosions, causing back issues and traumatic brain injuries. I saw things one should never see, leaving me with nightmares, depression, and anxiety. I was also left behind in a house during a mission. This left me with trust and abandonment issues. Two deployments had me feeling completely broken, and like a piece of me will always be missing no matter how hard I try to put myself back together. One of the major events that sticks in my mind was when a young boy and his sister were killed in front of me. Not long before that day, they were playing in an alley and pulled my team and I in a different path from where we were heading, to save our lives. It has been torture knowing that I wasn't able to do the same for them in return. That specific incident changed things for me as a father for years to come. I believed that If I wasn't able to help those kids, how would I ever be a good father to my own.

For years, I tried to stay distant to my two young kids. I had a short fuse with them. When they would cry, it would trigger old memories from war, and I would become angry. I made myself believe that they would be better off without me. However, SAW taught me that the best way to help others is to help yourself. Once

you learn to process and understand that the childhood trauma wasn't your fault, you then begin the healing process. This healing process will affect seven generations in the past and the seven generations ahead. Once I realized it was okay to talk about what I've been through and started dealing with my PTSD, my relationship with my kids started to change. I now make an effort to make time for my children and connect with them over the things they are passionate about ie coaching their softball and baseball teams. I also make an effort to remind my children that they are enough, that I am proud of them, and that I fully support them in the paths they choose. I want them to know that they should never feel that they need to do anything in life to gain my approval. I make it a point to start conversations with them about random topics, so I can get insight on the people they are becoming. This also makes them more comfortable with sparking up future conversations with me in return.

My hope is for more veterans to open up about the struggles they are dealing with day to day, so we can end the suicide epidemic. My nonprofit, Objective Zero, was started after I almost took my own life. I felt like I had no one to talk to that would understand what I was going through at the time. Because of my darkest moment, we created an app to do just that. Nearly a thousand people have signed up to lend a non judgmental ear, and talk through the hard times with those who have dedicated their lives to this country. It is going to require a culture shift for us to see a difference. People need to quit feeling ashamed or embarrassed about their trauma. By not talking about our trauma, it gives that event power over you. The more we talk about these issues the more people will feel open to asking for help and talking about their struggles.

Respectfully,

Justin Miller