

SECONDARY TRAUMATIZATION: MY STORY

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I left forensics five years ago and never looked back. Until now. Now, I'm ready to share my very personal experience with secondary Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

I worked as a Forensic Biologist in DNA from 1998 until 2008. As you would expect my cases consisted of murders and sexual assaults. Brutal acts of violence. They were the norm. So normal, in fact, that they all started to blend together. I considered this to be a good thing. I took the human out of very inhumane acts. I was fine. And then I wasn't.

For the last two and a half years of my career, I attended crime scenes, which I actually really enjoyed. I liked seeing the big picture and being involved in a case from the very beginning. But that was also when my safety bubble really started to burst. One of my coping mechanisms was to really separate myself from the victims. There is no way that could ever happen to me because my life was completely different from that of the victims. It's terrible, I know. But I needed to feel safe. When I started to go to crime scenes, I was faced with the realization that my circumstances and life wasn't all that different. I started to crumble inside.

What I believed were anxiety episodes came on slowly but soon became ingrained in my everyday life. I knew it was getting bad when, while stopped at a traffic light, I could no longer look at a driver next to me for fear that he or she would pull out a gun and shoot me. I knew it was irrational, but I couldn't stop the emotional or physical reaction that was happening. I was embarrassed and ashamed of my behavior. I felt that I was weak, just couldn't cut it. In 2007, after a particularly tough month of court appearances, I decided I needed out. I felt relief, but at the same time, I felt like a failure.

I started to heal after I quit my job, but I still needed help. Three years after I left the business I finally decided to seek professional counseling. It was amazing and incredible to have someone bring light to what was happening to me. But most importantly she validated what I was feeling and gave me the power I needed to move forward.

In my ten years working in forensics, not one training session, talk, or work group ever discussed taking care of yourself. As a group, no one talked about the emotional effects of dealing with gruesome and traumatic cases. Maybe, by sharing my experience, that conversation can begin for others.