

Veteran, UT Dallas Senior Finds Tools to Battle PTSD

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From 2004 to 2007, Mike Rials was deployed three times to combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan and served more than 22 months overseas.

(Medical Xpress) -- There are 1.7 million veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, and at least a third of them suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, according to the National Center for PTSD.

UT Dallas senior Mike Rials is one of them.

Rials has participated in research at the Center for BrainHealth and also works there to raise awareness about research programs available to veterans. At BrainHealth, scientists are studying a cutting-edge treatment for PTSD, supported by a \$3 million grant from the Department of

Defense.

Rials, a psychology major scheduled to complete his degree in August, learned of the program during a [Veteran's](#) Day event on campus and decided to sign up as a participant.

“My past no longer haunts me, but instead is a part of me and has made me who I am today. I still have a long journey ahead, but BrainHealth taught me to see the ‘tall grass’ and gave me the tools to walk in it rather than the beaten path I was on before.”

From 2004 to 2007, Rials was deployed three times to combat zones in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#) and served almost two years overseas.

“The Marine Corps provided a camaraderie, a brotherhood, that I had never before experienced. Through blood, sweat and togetherness, each of us knew that someone was always going to be there for the other and that we were all going after the same common goal...to get everyone home alive,” Rials said.

On his last official operation in Afghanistan in September 2007, Mike's vehicle hit an improvised explosive device (IED).

“It was chaos. There was immediately fire everywhere. I couldn't open the door to escape and had to climb through the turret. In doing so, I noticed one of my Marines was unable to move in the back seat,” he said.

He and others worked to free their friend and comrade from the vehicle, but the Marine was badly burned and suffered internal bleeding.

“The world lost Travis on the helicopter in transit to the hospital that night,” Rials said. “My previous tours overseas left me feeling invincible.

Sure, I had some close calls, but that night, I realized how human I was. The flashes of memories from that night are branded in our minds.”

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can occur after a traumatic event. The most common symptoms include nightmares, overly emotional responses to events and re-experiencing old, frightening memories.

The Center for BrainHealth works with veterans diagnosed with PTSD and treats them with a combination of repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (rTMS) and Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), a behavioral training program designed to give individuals a new way to handle distressing thoughts.

“I underestimated the heavy toll my combat experience took on my heart and soul. I trained myself to circulate through the world by minimizing, suppressing and avoiding my thoughts and feelings towards my experiences during the Marine Corps. I felt numb, empty and hollow. I had never failed in the past and I was failing at being a civilian.”

Rials said he enrolled in UT Dallas to study [psychology](#), partially to understand what was going on in his own mind and to honor his friend, Travis. Rials now focuses on helping other veterans see that there is life after the service.

“As a Marine, we are trained to show no weakness and no pain,” Rials said. “So when service members return to civilian life after deployment many have trouble tapping into resources available to them and asking for help.”

Dr. John Hart, medical science director at the Center for BrainHealth, said the stigma related to treatment must be overcome.

“Our research team is dedicated to creating an integrated environment

where veterans can participate in promising, state-of-the-art research protocols to help one of this country's most important populations – our service members.”

During his participation in the research, Rials said he was taught to view traumas from a different vantage point, to see the good and the bad in what happened and how to incorporate them into his life in a healthier way.

“I learned techniques that have allowed me to live in the moment and experience all this world has to offer,” he said. “It has been a lifestyle change, and I feel like I have become a whole person after the training at BrainHealth. “

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

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