

Armed Forces Day 2023

Charlotte's Story

I was first diagnosed with PTSD in 2006 after my first operational tour as a combat medic. Subsequently, I underwent various treatment methods under DCMH and deployed on a further four operational tours of Iraq and Afghanistan.

During this time, I battled with my personal demons and found it very difficult to discuss my feelings with anyone connected to the military because of the stigma attached to mental health and the supposed weakness that was connected to mental health conditions.

In 2013, whilst working in a recruitment role, I sought further help from DCMH and was placed on sick leave. In 2014, I got married to my husband who is still serving. Due to the medication that I was taking, my wedding day wasn't the fairytale that I had imagined but was devoid of emotion and feeling.

A few months later, a medical board deemed me to be unfit for further service and recommended that I be medically discharged from the Army, which happened in mid-2015. In the run up to my discharge I was offered one last round of EMDR. I was also pregnant with my first child. Throughout the first six months of the pregnancy, I was on medication for PTSD. I was assured by a military doctor that the medication was safe during pregnancy.

Whilst pregnant I had become quite unwell mentally and was having thoughts of harming myself. My husband was away multiple times during this time, causing me to spiral further into my depression. I eventually found myself as an in-patient at a mental health hospital where I was removed from my medication cold turkey.

In 2016, my husband was posted to Cornwall where I couldn't have been any further from my support network. When we first arrived, my son was 6 months old and we were housed in the middle of nowhere. This didn't help with the PND (later diagnosed) or the PTSD.

As soon as we arrived and unpacked my husband was sent away for 6 weeks leaving me alone in a new place with our young son with no support or help from the military. Whilst in Cornwall I had approached the GP for help with my mental health. I was told just take these pills and you will be ok. I walked out of the GP a little confused. I knew the services were out there but was being given meds and sent on my way. I spoke with the welfare team at the unit voicing my concerns about my mental health. I was told to leave my husband and go live up North. He can come home once a month. I approached the GP again because I didn't want to leave my husband or take medication, and the Doctor told me if I didn't take them he couldn't refer me to the specialists that I needed help from.

In 2018, the thoughts of suicide started to creep back. I was functioning well outside the home at work and holding it together for the outside world but the minute I walked back through the doors at home fell apart completely. Trying desperately hard to stay alive for my son, I didn't want to die. I wanted the darkness, the nightmares and the guilt to stop. My husband told me to speak with a welfare officer. I messaged them on social media whilst watching my son play at a soft play centre. We were moved 8 weeks later, but in the process they had responded, asking if I wanted help and if she could refer me to a veterans mental health service. I was very grateful for any help I could get. I am still in touch with them to this day.

We moved to Catterick and that is where I met Rebecca from Humber Teaching NHS Foundation Trust.

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She became a solid part of our lives for 3 years. Together, we worked closely on my goals and what I wanted to achieve. I just wanted to be better and happy without meds. We met monthly to begin with, each time Rebecca gave me homework to work on. I was evaluated for EMDR treatment again mid-2019. This was until I found out I was pregnant again with my daughter.

Rebecca helped me access help and support for the pregnancy related mental health, which I was very anxious about due to issues I had experienced with my son. We began to meet more regularly, building up my coping mechanisms for upcoming anniversaries and challenging dates such as bonfire night and remembrance. Rebecca instructed me not to hide away from fireworks, but to embrace them. So, we went all out and went to an organised display. I personally thought she was crazy for suggesting this as did my husband. It worked though. There were no flashbacks. I cried silent tears that night watching the fireworks. It caused me to remember my fallen friends rather than fall to the ground in fear or cause weeks of nightmares and flashbacks. Watching my son enjoy them and me being able to enjoy fireworks with my son and my husband had seemed like an unlikely event. Yet there I was in a field with hundreds of other people giving it ooooooo aaaaaaaa at all the colours.

Rebecca told me that I didn't need to attend any remembrance parades and I should remember my colleagues how I wanted to rather than how society and the forces and ex-forces community expected me to remember them. This relieved the pressures that November usually brought with it. Soon there were the details of the birth of my daughter to deal with. Rebecca helped with smoothing out the wrinkles in my very strict birth plan. Helping me put rules in place to allow me to feel in control. She helped me learn to advocate for myself. She attended perinatal meetings in regards to my mental health during my pregnancy and birth.

Just before I was due to give birth to my daughter the country closed. We were locked in our houses and only allowed out for essentials. My daughter was born 5 days into a global pandemic and a national lockdown. I was home-schooling my son with a new-born.

I received continued support from Rebecca through weekly phone calls for the first couple of months. She had become able to read the tone in my voice and was able to tell when I was doing well and when I wasn't. When the world started opening up again, I received at home, socially distanced visits fortnightly and phone calls on the weeks I didn't have a visit.

It had been arranged that I would start EMDR treatment with the perinatal team in September 2020; this was done online. This was done at a time my husband had been sent away somewhere for weeks. I was left at home with two children trying to sort my mental health without my biggest supporter. I didn't have any childcare for my daughter due to me not being a key worker or being able to afford childcare on my maternity pay. To enable the treatment to take place while my husband was away, a friend had to come stay in the garden with my daughter. This continued until December. When my husband wasn't away, he was unable to be home to look after our daughter whilst I went through the EMDR because of his work commitments. On the rare occasion he was able to get home, he was usually late, by which time I had called my friend to have her looked after. My EMDR treatment finished at the start of December, and we were moving again in January 2021 for another posting.

Rebecca had always been at the end of the phone throughout my treatment. She visited us in our new home, much closer to where she was based, right up until September 2021. Being a constant in our lives and helping me overcome the little hurdles I would encounter. They would seem small and minimal to regular people, however, there was part of my brain that would blow them up much bigger than they were. Rebecca had always encouraged me to follow my hopes and dreams. Nothing was impossible. I had come too far to give up. I

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applied to university not long after moving and I was offered a place on the degree that will lead me to the job I have dreamed of for 10 years.

I am going to be an Operating Department Practitioner and I am now coming to the end of the second year of my degree. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't been referred to Humber's TILS. I am forever grateful that TILS and Rebecca came into our lives when they did.

I am proof that PTSD doesn't define who you are or a label that needs to be worn. Scars show where you have been, they do not dictate your future.

About Charlotte's experience with Humber Teaching NHS Foundation Trust

Whilst on my first operational tour of Iraq, I was written up to receive a Queens Commendation for Valuable Service. I was presented a huge picture frame with my citation, the commendation, a copy of the London Gazette I was named in and a small ribbon with the Oak leaf on. This used to hang in my mum's hallway. She was immensely proud of it. I wasn't. It just reminded me of my failings as a medic. I had failed to bring 3 guys home safe. They were returning to the UK in boxes.

When I got married my mum thought we should have it. For years it moved with us moving between every quarter. I didn't want it to be up, but my husband insisted. He would hang it. I would take it down.

After treatment with Rebecca, the picture frame and its contents hang proudly by our front door. It is the last thing I see before I head upstairs in an evening, reminding me what I have been through and what I have overcome to be at the point I am at now.

Find out more about Armed Forces Day and [how you can get involved here](#).