

HOW SKYDIVING CHANGED MY LIFE

Do you have a story about how skydiving has changed your life that you would like considered for publication? If so, visit the Submissions tab at parachutistonline.com. Pieces should be 500 to 700 words in length and accompanied by two to four photos.



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I recently completed 40 minutes of continuous, non-stop freefall. Or at least that's what my brain experienced. My body was lying on a hospital bed, an IV plugged into my vein flowing a steady stream of ketamine, a drug with hallucinogenic side effects. The ketamine treatments were part of a clinical trial to treat post-traumatic stress disorder, better known as PTSD. I've suffered from PTSD for a long time due to military experiences, and I jumped at the chance to be part of this study. Most treatments don't work at all on PTSD. In fact, aside from ketamine, only one other thing has proven effective (for me at least): skydiving.

I learned to skydive through a charity called Operation Enduring Warrior. OEW is a non-profit with an all-volunteer staff, and you should stop reading right now and donate to them. I will wait.

Back? As you saw on the website, OEW has numerous programs that serve combat-disabled veterans. Its skydiving program takes warriors from their first jumps through their A licenses. While I can't tell you about the sense of freedom jumpers who use wheelchairs must feel when flying through the air or the sense of empowerment triple amputees must gain while doing such a skilled activity, what I can tell you is what skydiving did to a mind that never ceased to betray.

PTSD comes with a whole host of annoying symptoms. Often memories of the trauma pop up when you don't want them to. Worse than that are the flashbacks. A flashback isn't a memory, it's more like a whole-system hallucination. You feel with every sense that you are back in the traumatic event. It's a wild, terrifying experience that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. Then there's just the hyper-vigilance, a state of always being on guard for danger. As you can imagine, it is exhausting. Add to that constant depression, and you have a recipe for never leaving your couch.

Skydiving was a big push for me. Before, I didn't do anything, much less a dangerous activity that came with a social aspect. (Forgive me, I didn't know then that skydivers are a unique subset of society that don't engage in all the crap that makes most people jerks.)

I was more than apprehensive when sitting on the plane for the first time. My two amazing instructors, Nik Daniel and Brianne Thompson of AXIS Flight School, asked me to touch my handles and tell them over and over what we were about to do.

Near me on the plane was another OEW warrior, the triple amputee Todd Love, who would jump out right before me. As we stood up and made our way to the door, Todd pushed himself out, and I thought, "Well damn, if he can do it ..." I stood in the door and looked to my left. Nik nodded. I looked to my right. Brianne nodded. I took a deep breath and let go of the bar.

My very first thought was, "I can't believe I just did that." My second thought was, "This is scary as (expletive deleted)." My third thought was profound: "It's quiet."

Of course, freefall is not quiet. It's actually kind of loud. What was quiet, for the first time in years, was my mind. I completed my jump priorities: circle of awareness, practice touches, circle, lock on, wave, arch, pull. My canopy opened nice and pretty, and after I did my control checks I looked out at the desert landscape and mountains surrounding Eloy, Arizona. It was beautiful. When it was all over and I was safely on the ground back in the AXIS office getting debriefed, I had a thought: It was still quiet.

That silence didn't last forever. I never expected it to. What surprised me was that it lasted for a good 45 minutes to an hour. It does that, without tanking my kidneys and liver processing powerful drugs. It does that without exceptionally uncomfortable therapy sessions that are anything but therapeutic. It does that without self-medicating. Skydiving sends a powerful message to my brain: "Cut the crap and get out of the past; there's important things going on around you in the present." It's mindfulness at 120 miles per hour.

While I was freefalling in my ketamine-induced hallucination, people who have touched my skydiving life tracked in and out to join me. Nik, Brianne, Murv (who is so great she only needs one name), and so many others I couldn't possibly name them all. I didn't find it at all surprising that a treatment designed to take away the horrors of PTSD conjured up in my mind endless skydiving.

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