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Getting Unstuck After Military Sexual Trauma – Living A Life You Love Even After Trauma

Posted by Sarah Plummer on 15 August in Semper Sarah | Tags: inspiration, Marine Corps Veteran, Military Sexual Trauma, Motivation, Overcoming Obstacles, Rape, Service Women's Action Network, Sexual Assault, Women Veterans



On 1 August 2012, I was honored to be a guest on the [Dr. Laura Ciel](#) radio show, On the Edge of Exceptional. You can listen to [segments 1](#) and [2](#) of the show and/or see more on my press page at <http://www.SemperSarah.com/media>.

Below, you can read a bit of our “Q&A” session. These were not my answers verbatim, but the ones Laura posed to me ahead of time. Her questions were thought-provoking and intelligent, spurring me to re-think through some aspects of my experience with being raped by a fellow Marine nine years ago.



What does the word “trauma” mean to you? A jarring, violent, or disruptive event – this can be literal/physical or emotional.

How has trauma played a role in your life? It has done more than play a role; it has been a constant presence in my life. Even from a young age, whether it was the abusive household in which I grew up, broken bones I suffered, or constantly moving, from events in my adulthood such as more physical injuries, assault, rape, illness, and combat.

After the rape, was there a moment when you realized that you needed to take action? Describe what that moment was like for you? What did you decide to do? Yes. It was months after the assault, when I sat in The Basic School orientation brief and heard the JAG (the Military Legal Officer) describe other incidents of rape and sexual assault that had occurred in that training environment. I hadn't reported the rape right after it happened because I was so confused. I

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couldn't decipher up from down, and on top of it was simply trying to take my finals, finish up school, graduate, and get commissioned. I told myself to push it down – “suck it up” – and focus on school, moving, getting married, and beginning my career in the Marines. I went to my Marine Officer Instructor at school the day after the rape, with the intent of telling him what had happened, but I didn't. All I could do was cry. (see [story here](#)) Anyway, my then-fiancé and I (thought we) worked through things, got married, and began our Marine Corps careers. So several months later, there I found myself at The Basic School, listening to a JAG talk about Marines raping Marines. Although she belittled the victims and told the stories sarcastically, a lot of the stories sounded a lot like mine. And it hit me. *What if the guy who raped me comes here and does that to someone else? I will never be able to live with myself.* I knew the military was notorious for mishandling rape cases, so I didn't dare think anything good would come of reporting the rape. My husband already knew about it, my family knew about it, my closest friends knew. It wasn't a matter of sharing it for the first time in the hopes of getting anything out of it, but rather reporting it to the Marine Corps in the hopes that they would take appropriate action. I simply felt like it was a duty to report it to protect any potential future victims. So, I reported it to the JAG and it was all downhill from there for a while.

Can you describe your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and fears about life after your rape? I suppose you could say I was hyper vigilant for a little while. And I was definitely angry for a long time. Angry at my “friend” who did it, angry at the other “friends” who seemed to simply retreat when things got difficult, and really angry at my new husband who I felt effectively abandoned me after the rape. Then, after reporting, I was deeply disappointed with and utterly wounded by the institution which not only let me down, but continued to punish me in one way or another for years afterwards for having reported the rape. A lot of people talk about losing trust in others after a rape, but thank God, for some reason, I don't feel like I ever really lost *trust*. I just felt disenchanted in people and institutions from which I expected support but which provided none. If anything I felt *sad*, and made mental notes to myself to learn from the failures of others.

Do you remember a moment when you realized that you had a choice about how you could respond, live, act? Yes, because I definitely didn't feel that power of choice for a couple years after my experience reporting rape in the military. Granted, I was ensconced in an institution (the Marine Corps) that paralyzed my ability to choose most things, but I began to see beyond it. I've had a series of epiphanies when dealing with the PTSD from the rape, but the most poignant one came when I was in Iraq the second time and one morning I realized that yoga was saving my life. The days I got on the mat, I could actually breathe. Even if it was only for a few minutes at a time it was a life-saver, because the rest of the time I literally felt suffocated. I was also blessed with a few very important and perfectly, God-placed people in my life at that time (two Navy doctors and a best friend), which no doubt was key to my survival as well.

In the beginning, what were your biggest obstacles to moving forward? The divorce that resulted from the rape colored my relationships for years. I carried all of it around like baggage for a long time. Now it seems silly to me that I ever did that, but I sure did! I also battled with depression off and on for years which, of course, colored my perception of everything.

Do you believe it is possible to experience trauma and move forward to embrace joy, love and happiness in life? Yes, of course! 😊 This is the philosophy by which I live my life and serve my clients when I speak, write, or coach. No one wants to be in a relationship – personally or professionally – with someone who is angry or bitter. Heck, you don't want to be in a relationship with your *self* when you're in that state of mind and state of heart. I don't say this to make light of my own or others' traumas, but it really does boil down to choice insofar as how you will live your life. Some say courage isn't the absence of fear but action despite that fear. Living a full happy life after trauma is sort of like that. To me, choosing to live out of love instead of fear or anger is not due to an absence of trauma, but *in spite* of it.

What strengths of yours most helped you move from this EDGE (this moment)? What most helped you to start healing? Faith, resiliency, creativity/curiosity, and health.

Even though you are in a good place now, is there anything you're still afraid of? Complacency: in relationships, education, health, EVERYTHING. In the Marines, we say “complacency kills;” and we mean that in a combat zone, if you're not aware all the time, you could get shot in the back of the head or step on an IED. Interestingly, it's not framed in the yogic sense of deeper *awareness*, but as I've deepened my yoga practice and become a teacher, I get it now on another whole level. Being aware means consciously *choosing* everything you feel, say and do.

What would you say to someone who has experienced a similar trauma in his/her life? I promise you that your life is not over. More than that – it's not ruined. You can still have the amazing life you want to have, and more than that - see it as an opportunity to grow and inspire others through your example of LIVING.

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What was the most unexpected outcome of this experience? The joy it's brought me now. The joy I get out of being able to help others, sometimes through simply sharing my stories, other times more deliberately with coaching and instructing. And selfishly, I appreciate the resiliency I've built within myself as well as the depth the trauma took me to with my faith and my relationship with the Divine.

Ironically, because of my disabilities, the physical and mental injuries I suffered while in the Marines, I'm now equipped to help others. Ironic or divine?? 😊

When you look back on your life, does this experience inform you on which direction to go/what your mission is? Yes, all my experiences do. I have two incredible mentors, Lainie and Daniel Allen, who basically workshopped my life with me a few years ago and it was impossible NOT to see God's hand in everything. Not that He wants horrible things to happen to his kiddos, but even through – *especially through* – the hardships, He was crafting my gifts, building me for something – this mission I'm on now.

What is your mission? What is the one thing you want listeners to hear from you today? Ultimately my mission is to inspire and empower survivors of any kind of trauma to get "unstuck" after a difficult life event so that they can go from victim to victor, turn tragedies into triumphs, and move from survivor mode to thrival mode (I know "thrival" isn't a word, but I love it! 😊) in order to create the life of their dreams! People often get *stuck* for weeks, months, or *years* after a trauma, and that breaks my heart to see. I help show people that they REALLY can turn obstacles into opportunities so they can create the beautiful life they want and deserve – and I have a *lot* of different ways to do so. 😊 Bigger picture, I see trauma and assault as a *leadership* issue. Therefore, my message has evolved to be not just about sexual assault and MST in general, but about how sexual assault and date rape are the hidden thieves of our girls' and women's self-esteem, and how that effectively threatens to rob us of our next greatest generation of female leaders. This leadership piece is especially applicable within the military as women's careers are unjustly cut short by such a tragic event and then usually worsened by the (mis)handling of the crime afterwards. Part two of my message is to emphasize the power of choice, to remind survivors that they really CAN move to the level of life where they are building the one for which they were created. Thirdly, I incorporate the health and wellness piece (yoga, nutrition, relationships, and fitness) because in order to transform in a significant and lasting way, one must be healthy in order to heal. Simply put, I am on a MISSION to prevent the sexual assault and date rape of our young women, as well as empower girls to whom it has already happened to move beyond survival mode into to thrival mode. Also, I am driven to change the culture away from rape acceptance and victim-blaming to accountability for those who perpetrate such crimes.

Can you describe what drives and motivates you now? *Total* health for myself and others. I was so unhealthy for so long. I was this incredibly active person who ate well and had lots of friends, an active faith life, boyfriends, and was by all accounts very healthy. Then, I became mysteriously sick all the time from IBS to tumors to even having a mini-stroke...it was all about stress. So for me, being healthy means living calmly. Being outdoors, doing yoga, playing sports, and being active is HUGE for me. Equally huge is doing my best to have peace with all the people in my life. Of course, like any journey, there are good days and bad days, but I am happier now than I was even two years ago and certainly happier than I was when I was still in the Marines. I feel like I get happier every day...and most people would say I was a pretty happy person to begin with! 😊 One more thing 😊 ... I believe the primary element of health is relationships, and I care about those above all else: relationships with God, my family, my friends, my teammates, my audience, my students, and myself.

If you had the power to change one thing in the world, what would it be? The obsession that many people have with outdoing one another. That ego drive is what controls most of us and it's a shame...I think that root insecurity is the cause for a lot of pain people inflict on one another. If everyone was at peace with themselves and where they were, there'd be a lot less fighting on the micro and macro level. If there was a heck of a lot more *acceptance* in the world, things would be a lot calmer, less violent, and less stressful. So, I guess I wish for world peace! Haha.

How can listeners learn more about your work? I have a website www.SemperSarah.com and a Facebook page www.Facebook.com/SemperSarah as well as a forthcoming series of books this year the first of which has a working title of *Just Roll With It. From Victim to Victor: How To Live a Happy, Healthy, Kick-Ass Life After Sexual Assault*. The message is really "It's your life to live and you get to decide how to live it. Be brave. Look at the light side of survival! 😊" Also, I understand that the specific topic of sexual assault is better suited for older, and veteran, audiences. I do have wonderful programs for younger girls about good decision making, leadership, teamwork as well.

"Most of the time you don't have to make any special effort to 'do' anything, because simply living authentically is inspiring in and of itself."

-Sarah Plummer

View article directly on Service Women's Action Network's page [here](#)

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Cindy Winther · Owner at A Blissful Body

ABsolutely riveting. You are an inspiration on so many levels. thank you for sharing.

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