

Melissa, Captain (Retired)

23 July 2019

The Honourable Lawrence MacAuley
Minister of Veterans Affairs
Ottawa, ON, K1A 0P4

Sir,

This letter is to support the Traumatic Stress Recovery Program delivered by the Diversified Rehabilitation Group (DRG) in Kelowna, BC. I was fortunate to be approved by Veterans Affairs Canada to attend this program and since this significantly increased my quality of life, Derek Sienko, President and CEO of DRG, asked me to draft this testimonial. As such, I wish to share how this program helped me and how it literally saved my life.

I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in 2012, three years after my second tour to Kandahar, Afghanistan. After this mission and seeing many atrocities, I completely lost faith in humanity. For 8 months, I was one of the few women who lived on a Patrol Base which included Afghan interpreters, Afghan workers and Afghan Army soldiers. Living in constant fear and being hyper alert all the time even on my camp was detrimental to my mental health. Moreover, I lived with survivor's grief and intense guilt. Since 2009, I was never the same. Unfortunately, my condition got worse after my PTSD diagnosis and I was released from the Canadian Armed Forces in August 2018, mentally shattered and suicidal.

Since 2012, I have seen numerous social workers, psychologists, doctors, psychiatrists and I have had countless hours of therapy. I should add that I have a Bachelor of Psychology from the Royal Military College of Canada, I have conducted research and wrote a thesis on Resilience making me well informed on how to cope with stress. Technically, I had all the tools to get better. However, even with my knowledge and the help of mental health professionals, nothing worked and I just kept getting worse. I realized approximately two years before my release that I needed to attend a residential program. I needed a full mental reset and attending therapy a couple times a month was not enough. I asked the military medical system many times to send me to a treatment centre but I was always denied due to the fact that "I did not have an addiction problem". I was told that only military members who had PTSD and had addiction issues were sent to "Rehab Centres". I thought this was unfair but there was nothing I could do while I was still serving. All I could do was wait until my release in hopes that VAC would help me.

By the time I was released from the CAF in August 2018, I was diagnosed with Complex PTSD, Dissociative disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, Somatic Pain Disorder and I was suicidal. My life turned into a nightmare. I could barely move as I was exhausted all the time, I was completely numb and lost the ability to feel joy, hope, love or any positive emotions. The only thing I felt was fear, hopelessness, shame, guilt and that I was a burden on my family. I kept thinking of this woman I used to be, strong, fit and outspoken, who deployed on three missions including two to Afghanistan, who was selected under the University Training Plan for Non-Commissioned Members, who graduated from RMCC, who became an officer and who won numerous awards for Mentorship and Leadership. However, after living with PTSD for 10 years, I had a complete breakdown. Finally, in December 2018, I was admitted at a hospital as I was not going to survive the day. At this point, I had 10 panic attacks a day, I was dissociative for half the day staring at a wall, I was on nine different medications including an antipsychotic, I was agoraphobic, I had constant flashbacks, I couldn't eat or sleep, I was dying.

During my research for a rehabilitation program, I found that DRG offered a Traumatic Stress Recovery Program in Kelowna. I contacted my VAC Case Manager, informed her of this program and

asked for assistance. Getting the approval to attend was complicated since I am located in the East Coast and this program is in Kelowna BC. The VAC policy states that members must attend the Rehabilitation Centre closest to their residence, which makes perfect sense. That being said, I chose the TSRP in Kelowna because this program was the only one that perfectly suited my needs. Due to the hard work of my VAC Case Manager, my psychologist and the CEO of DRG, I was approved to attend the program and also to bring my spouse with me for the first week of the program. Overall, here are the reasons why I chose the TSRP in Kelowna:

- 1) This program does not include individuals who have addiction issues, it only focuses on ways to cope with PTSD which is exactly what I needed.
- 2) They offer a beautiful and safe residence while always providing a staff member to stay over with the clients to ensure everyone feels safe and well taken care of.
- 3) The days are spent at a state of the art clinic which is located in downtown Kelowna.
- 4) The groups will not exceed six people making the program more personal and allowing cohesion to form within the group.
- 5) The residence allows everyone to have their own rooms which was absolutely required for me to feel safe.
- 6) It is recommended that clients bring their spouses for the first two weeks of the program which was incredibly useful. Spouses who live with someone who suffers from PTSD, deal with a tremendous amount of stress. This component of the program taught my spouse valuable information on how to cope with his stress but also how to better support me.
- 7) This program offers a holistic approach using individual therapy, group therapy, biofeedback, art therapy, hot yoga, mindfulness and meditation classes, daily fitness activities, a nutritionist, clean/healthy foods menu and 24 hours a day assistance from highly trained mental health workers.
- 8) The program is two weeks in Kelowna, one week at home to practice the skills learned and then two more weeks back in Kelowna to refine the stress coping skills.
- 9) The location was perfect. Kelowna offers some of the best hiking trails in Canada and the scenery is amazing. While you are still in a city, it is not overwhelming. It is a great location to reintegrate into a city setting and surround yourself with crowds and people.

My spouse and I arrived in Kelowna on 7 April 2019. After an exhausting trip across the country, we arrived at the residence where Derek greeted us. Right away, all my fears and anxieties were gone. I knew I was at the right place and I knew I was safe. Derek took care of us and made us feel at home. Later on, three other clients arrived and we met the rest of Derek's team. I started to feel hope for the first time in years. The next five weeks turned out to be even better than what I expected. The first issue that we tackled was my lack of safety and my loss of faith in humanity. Being constantly surrounded by people who genuinely cared about my wellbeing made me to feel safe and also helped me notice the good in humanity again. I learned how to liberate myself from shame and guilt through acceptance and vulnerability. I learned to accept the past and who I have become. This new sense of safety allowed my nervous system to calm down which in turn helped increase my energy level. The nutrition and the fitness components were also essential. This part of the program brought my body back to life. As previously mentioned, I could not eat, I could not sleep and I had chronic pain. With the help of an outstanding nutritionist and fitness/yoga instructor, I was able to be comfortable in my body again. As a matter of fact, during my last weekend in Kelowna, I completed a challenging 14km mountain hike. Finally, the peer

support in this program was incredible. Myself and 3 others came from different backgrounds but we all shared the same symptoms. Spending time with these gentlemen in a non-judgemental environment helped me regain confidence in my social abilities again. I am disabled and I will live with PTSD for the rest of my life however, I learned how to accept my condition, cope with my disability and take better care of myself.

Overall, words can't express my gratitude for this program. I truly believe that Derek and his team save lives and I hope that other Veterans have the opportunity to attend this program. The hard truth is that I am still disabled and I am still diagnosed with my illnesses however I have learned how to cope and deal with them. I still have difficult days where I can barely leave the house however I know that it will pass and the next day will be better. I now accept that I have PTSD and I still have panic attacks, dissociative episodes, chronic pain and flashbacks. However, I am no longer suicidal and when the hard times comes, I am strong enough to fight back. The TSRP taught me how to feel safe, helped me overcome my shame and guilt and more importantly gave me hope in the future. Lastly, I hope that I can be a voice for other Veterans that are currently suffering. I strongly believe that the TSRP in Kelowna is a one of a kind program that strictly targets PTSD and can help other Veterans tremendously. Again, if one life can be saved, then investing in this program is absolutely worth it.

Respectfully,

Melissa