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Veteran finds path to a safe place

After suffering a nearly fatal brain injury from a roadside bombing in Iraq, Jessica Clements, 31, uses hypnosis to cope with seizures, panic attacks

By Jim Carney

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Jessica Clements, who suffered a near fatal brain injury in May 2004 in Iraq, where she was serving as a U.S. Army staff sergeant, demonstrates the relaxation technique she uses to ward off seizures, and panic attacks and the effects of lingering post-traumatic syndrom on Feb. 6, 2008, at the Polsky Buiding at the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio. (Ed Suba Jr./Akron Beacon Journal)

Near Starbucks at the food court in the Polsky Building on the University of Akron campus, Jessica Clements sits at a small table and closes her eyes. In 10 seconds, she takes herself from the busy scene of a college campus to a place of comfort, calm and serenity.

As students zoom past to classes and talk loudly at tables nearby over coffee and sodas, Clements' eyes remain closed until her left arm lifts up and her hand begins to slightly wave. A few seconds later, she opens her eyes again.

"That's it," she says with a smile.

The 31-year-old Iraq war veteran, who suffered a nearly fatal brain injury in May 2004 in Iraq, was demonstrating how she uses self-hypnosis to ward off seizures, and panic attacks and the effects of lingering post-traumatic stress disorder to calm herself and relax.

Every morning upon waking and every evening at bedtime, Clements hypnotizes herself as part of her recovery from the critical injury she suffered from a roadside bombing May 5, 2004.

Beating the odds

At the time, Clements, a 1995 Green High School graduate, was serving in Iraq with the U.S. Army Reserve's 706th Transportation Company as a staff sergeant. She was given a 2 percent

chance of survival. The explosion damaged the right side of her brain and she suffered shrapnel wounds in her lower back, hip and head.

A portion of her skull was removed and placed in her abdomen while the brain swelling subsided. The piece of skull was replaced three months after she was wounded.

According to the U.S. Department of Defense Deployment Health Clinical Center Web site, "the rate of combat-related brain injuries in service members returning from the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan appears to be higher than in previous conflicts."

The agency said "nearly 30 percent of all patients with combat-related injuries seen at Walter Reed Army Medical Center from 2003 to 2005 sustained a TBI," or traumatic brain injury. Blasts are a significant cause of such injuries, the agency said.

Clements, who lives in Plain Township, was hospitalized from May 2004 until March 2005, when she returned to Ohio. She is now a junior at UA, majoring in social work, and expects to graduate in about 18 months. After that, she hopes to go directly to graduate school for a master's in social work.

Undergoing treatment

A year ago, Clements had to drop out of school because of a bout with seizures and she was unable to drive for several months. Last June and July, she was treated at Walter Reed, where she underwent therapy from Dr. Harold Wain, the hospital's Psychiatry Consultation and Liaison Service chief.

Clements said Wain conducted tests and determined that her seizures were not epileptic in nature but were known as psychogenic, and were related to the trauma she experienced when she was wounded and to the post-traumatic stress disorder that continues to haunt her.

At first, he used hypnosis to treat her and later taught Clements how to hypnotize herself to control the seizures. She said when her family and friends notice that she may be about to have a seizure, they say to her, "Jessica, gain control."

With those words, Clements said, she closes her eyes, begins a deep-breathing technique and counts slowly to 10. Then, she said, she begins to count backward from 10 and her hand lifts involuntarily, she waves and in a few seconds it is over. She said she is not sure how it happens, but it works.

The waving, she said, is to symbolize waving goodbye to the seizure. The procedure has greatly helped to eliminate seizures from her life, Clements said. But even with the new relaxation technique, she still has regular dull headaches. And she still has nightmares.

Last week, when rare winter thunderstorms rolled across Northeast Ohio, she woke up screaming in the middle of another nightmare.

"I thought I was surrounded," she said. "I was being bombed. Attacked." Later, she spoke more about the nightmare. "My house was under attack by Iraqis and I was getting mortar attacked and I was looking for my gun," she said.

School life

Clements sees old Army buddies and old friends but really can't discuss the post-traumatic stress disorder with most of the young people at school who have no military background.

"I can't tell them I killed somebody in my dream," she said. "They are gonna think I'm crazy. They don't understand. I was protecting myself."

Clements said her world is focused on school now. She works out at the school's Recreation and Wellness Center a few times a week.

She records lectures because she has problems with her short-term memory. She uses a notebook to write down her entire schedule so she doesn't forget anything. And she is grateful for how far she has come in recent months. She said without hesitation that coming so close to death was a good thing for her.

"Absolutely," she said. "It made me a better person in so many different ways. I don't take things for granted."

Encouraging others

At Walter Reed last summer, she took a set of photographs of herself with her and visited a few soldiers who were in the beginning stages of recovery from injuries similar to what she went through.

"I said: 'Look, I was in the same shoes. You are going to be OK.'" She showed the soldiers her photographs and encouraged them. "There is hope," she said. "You will be fine."

Now, Clements is looking forward to the day when she can be a social worker full time, helping other veterans. "I can't wait for that day," she said. "That is what I really want to do."

Hopefully, she said, with her level of understanding, she can help others.

Her message, she said, will be this:

"I am a survivor and I know you can survive, too."

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