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Mental Health Matters

A Manager's Personal Story

Say PTSD out loud. What does it make you think of? Soldiers? Officers of the law? Paramedics?

Those thoughts make sense, and I'm glad you have them. Our first responders need our awareness and our empathy. But when you said PTSD out loud, and here we are talking about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, did any one of you think about property managers? I have been in the property management industry for 20 years, and I am an RCM and OLCM. I live with Complex PTSD, and this is my story.

When I started in this industry, I had somewhat of an idea of what to expect. However, I didn't expect to get tested by suicides in the buildings, having a gun brandished towards me, threats, and verbal and physical abuse.

When these things occurred, I dealt with the situation as best I could, but I

didn't deal with myself. What does that mean? I didn't seek support for my anxiety or my depression. Instead, I turned to the bottle to cope. I denied my own mental health. During a three-year hiatus, I sought treatment. I now have a service dog. I have beaten my addictions (and getting better every day) and found a way to love my work again.

I write this article hoping that you can recognize existing issues and find your potential and healthier way to cope than I did. What we do is essential, but WE, as humans, are more important.

Dealing with Crisis

I live with Complex PTSD, which is compounded trauma, some of which stems from my career as a property manager. I was managing an extensive portfolio, including a high rise, and

while doing site inspection and going about my day, I suddenly heard a scream. I looked up, and there was a body coming down. I witnessed a suicide; a jumper from the nineteenth floor.

To this day, I still have nightmares of that moment. One can never un-see that. At that time, I was in control of the situation. I did what I had to do and felt I had done my job. So for the moment, I thought it had gone alright (if that makes sense?). The situation itself didn't feel like anything at the time. I was the manager and focused on keeping calm and controlling the scene.

When I got home, I was quiet. I didn't acknowledge my family; I didn't say anything. I kept it inside. When asked how my day was, I just said it was fine. I had a few drinks to cope – numbed myself and let it go. I never talked about my job at home. My wife knows about the inci-



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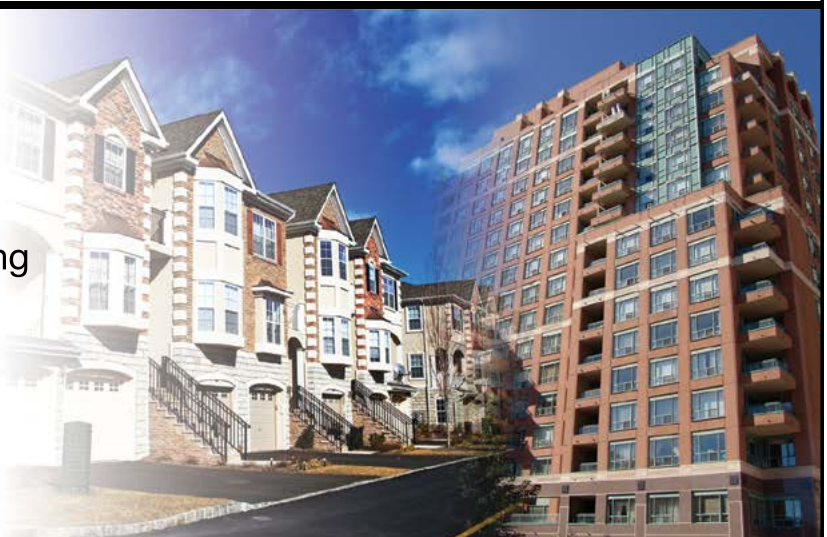


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dences, but I didn't open up. That was a critical mistake. To keep a healthy mental being, you need to talk. Whether with a therapist, your spouse or another peer in the industry, unloading that weight is vital.

I was enforcing an occupancy violation at a commercial condominium during another situation. It was a routine site visit to let the occupants know they weren't allowed sublets – part of my job. I went to leave and was confronted at my car. With a gun held in his hand, I was told that under no circumstances should I return.

He didn't point the gun directly at me. He just brandished it, and it looked heavy.

It's hard to describe when it happens in real life – when it isn't a movie – when your life is in someone else's hand. I was so afraid that I didn't do any of the right things. I didn't report it to others at my work. I didn't call the police. I told nobody. I drank.

A few years later, I attended a unit inspection and needed to get into a room. The tenant was home and refused me entry. I reiterated that I needed to

get in to check for mould and other things. I knew why he didn't want me in; I could smell marijuana and tried to explain that it didn't matter. He began to curse me out and picked up a pistol. Again, my life was in another person's hands, and I was blocked in a hallway this time. Now, I always need to have my back against a wall to plan my way out. I'm always aware of that moment in time, how I felt, and how quickly everything can change.

At a later date, the authorities raided the unit. Interestingly enough, there was a good reason I was stopped from entering that room – and a good thing I didn't get in. Again, I didn't tell anyone. I went to a bar, drank, and drove home.

You Are Not Alone

I'm human; I'll admit it. It took me reaching a precipice to make a change. And I'm ashamed and proud to say that it was entirely my wife's fault. My drinking reached the point where she would not accept it anymore. But she would not refuse me, and she chose to fight for me. My wife saved me by kicking my butt with love. She supported me in the change that I needed. Managers out there may not know the potential dangers they face in this job and the support they may one day require.

I want you to know that you don't have to be afraid or ashamed. Supports exist, and the people are ready to give you the help you need. Most companies have an EAP program; use the programs available to you. Ensure there is a balance between work and life. Love yourself.

We are all human. We can face crises that can affect how we live and manage ourselves. And just as we do our properties and clients, I recommend you give yourself a little TLC. Don't hold it in. I am available to any of you at anthony@modern-appeal.com ■

Anthony Irwin, RCM, OLCM, has been in the property management industry for 20 years. He has spoken at various CCI and ACMO conferences on several topics. As a result of previous trauma and trauma experienced in the industry, Anthony lives with complex PTSD and now has a service dog to provide support when in public. He has become a strong mental health advocate. modern-appeal.com



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