

**BY DAN NEWTH**  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

"I saw him do it. That guy really pisses me off."

I hear someone say just outside my window. I was just starting to doze off, but I'm awake now.

Another voice: "Some people deserve to die." I freeze in my bed, hearing footsteps. The front step clanks and the door handle rattles.

"Do you think he's in there?" I don't move and try not to breathe. With no knowledge of who they are, what their intentions are or what they're talking about, my panicked mind is spinning wild. My stress is through the roof and logic has fled. I'm certain I'm about to die.

Why don't I call the cops? That means finding the phone in the dark, a noisy proposition. I don't trust the police not to shoot me by mistake; police tend to target the least stable person at the scene.

Things go quiet. I strain to hear any voices or footsteps. Fifteen or 20 minutes go by with me on high alert. Maybe they've gone; maybe they are lying in wait. I find the courage to roll over and slowly lift one corner of the curtain as I peek out: still no noise and the narrow area I could see is empty. I slowly let the curtain down and move into a more comfortable position and wait. Eventually, I start to doze off again.

The trailer jerks suddenly. I feel the jolt and residual rocking, the metal hangers in the closet jangle and I hear the front door swing open. Panic, stress and absolute knowledge of impending doom. I see shadows moving, but can't hear the footsteps. Are they some kind of Special Ops?

Though terrified, I summon the courage to say, "What do you want?" in as stern a voice as I can muster. Silence, heavy with intent and hostility, holds me in a frozen panic. There is no answer — this isn't a negotiation, and I'm not worth talking to.

It is the surety of impending death that releases me from paralysis. Still terrified, I announce, "I'm not armed, and I'm getting dressed." Last time I almost died, the paramedics had dragged me off the toilet in nothing but my underwear, and I don't want to go out like that. With pants, shirt and socks on, I pull back the curtain separating the bed from the rest of the trailer.

The trailer is just as I left it earlier. I'm the only living thing there. No Special Ops, irate people, meth heads, vampires, werewolves, demons or evil spirits.

They must be hiding. I check the bathroom, under the kitchen table, closets, cabinets and even under the couch. Instead of relief, the new fear of insanity and doubt creeps in. Fear dominates my consciousness. The little processing my mind is capable of is spent trying to explain



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## A coward dies a thousand times

rather than to expel that entrenched fear.

This was the beginning of a 30-hour post-traumatic stress disorder episode. Coping tactics were ineffective at this point. The hallucinations of voices won't stop until I sleep. My PTSD episodes vary in length, but all prominently feature overpowering fear and lingering paranoia. I can't rely on my instincts or intuition. This makes me stupid. Fighting these false fears is difficult and necessary to cope with the lasting effects of PTSD.

This episode was the result of several experiences I had on location while selling Street Roots. Once a woman tying up her dog nearby told me not to feed her dog. I didn't, but she came out of the store and said, "If you ever feed my dog again, I will kill you." A few days later, a panhandler threatened to beat me up. I did the bravest thing I could and fled one block while he chased me. I stood in the middle of Killingsworth Street, aware that I was no match in a fight, that I didn't want the legal complications, and that I wanted witnesses to deter him. When he left, I was shaking for an hour and quit early from selling Street Roots.

The following Wednesday, with rent coming due, I felt the pressure to work longer. This can be a hazard for me. Complex PTSD and mild cognitive impairment limit the hours I can perform effectively and when I push my limits, my judgment, memory, presence of mind and sense of well-being evaporate. My mind can go wonky: hallucinating, hearing voices, paranoia and perceiving ill intent from others. Latent fears manifest themselves and my mind presents imminent warnings of events that happened a week, a year or decades ago. This experience is indistinguishable from reality. It is my reality.

To avoid these episodes I use several coping tactics. Sleep hygiene and avoiding exhaustion are the first line of defense. Most days I can safely work 4 to 6 hours depending on other stressors. Some days working one hour is out of the question and working a consistent schedule is impossible for me. When I don't respect my limits, trouble ensues.

Being aware of triggers that drain my brain and implementing coping tactics is part of my daily care. Mindfulness, grounding and having my presence reside in my belly are all good coping skills I practice when my brain is functioning well, so I have a better chance of using them under stress. I think of it as practicing for being human.

Earplugs and sunglasses can help in public or when my mind is in the chaos, but seem to work only intermittently. When my mind is in the chaos of fear, a companion I trust deeply telling me if the voices are real reduces the escalation. A companion animal would be nice, but I cannot afford the vet bills. Removing myself from threats is always a smart move. I can do this even when scared, unless I'm trapped inside somewhere like an apartment or home.

This latest episode prompted me to go back to the Department of Veterans Affairs. My former psychiatrist retired three years ago without my knowledge. He had put me on one medication after another, each with their own overwhelming set of complications. For PTSD, you need to calm the mind and for mild cognitive impairment, the brain needs stimulation. The meds worked at cross-purposes. It was too much to be homeless and deal with all that. I just quit showing up.

To re-engage at the VA I had to do another intake with another psychiatrist. This was intimidating and my expectations were not high. I spent two weeks calling

regularly, attempting to set up an appointment with no success. One Friday, Jim, a VA rep, stopped by New Seasons Concordia while I was selling Street Roots. I mentioned how hard it was to get an intake appointment at the VA mental health clinic. He offered to call. I was doubtful, but decided it was worth a shot.

Usually an intake appointment is scheduled 3 to 5 months out. However, just before Jim called someone cancelled and I got an appointment the following Wednesday, only one week after my last episode. Jim was a rock star and my hero that day. Engaging in treatment before going through additional trauma or starting to feel too well to engage makes a huge difference.

When I showed up for intake, I experienced another miracle. Dr. McCracken didn't push me into taking medication and recommended a slow-paced drop-in group. This is very important to me because my brain tends to run out of steam at about the 30- to 45-minute mark in groups. I stop understanding what is said and forget what the group discussed. It drains my brain for the rest of the day. When I attended the group the next day, the slow pace was enough to help me get through it, remember what was discussed and even sell Street Roots for a couple hours later that day.

Selling Street Roots is another thing I use to help me cope. Talking with strangers and familiar people helps me overcome paranoia. Telling jokes, getting people to laugh and smile and even building a positive atmosphere outside New Seasons Concordia has helped me develop a sense of belonging in the community. I try to be a net positive in this environment. People say they like how I explain the articles, though I have been told I "Dansplain" a bit too much: Just ask me about watermelons, abrupt climate chaos or politics. Best not to mention Trump unless you're up for a rant. Street Roots is my sole source of income and allows me to stop when I need to, even skip days when I'm really out of sorts.

These are my challenges balancing physical needs and the mental limitations of an overstressed primate brain. Though I present the sturdy independence of an old curmudgeon, I've been told I'm really a fragile sensitive person engaged with and dependent on the New Seasons Concordia community and Street Roots readers. Becoming part of the community is one of the greatest gifts of being a Street Roots vendor.

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